

THE REVEREND

Jennie Johnson

and African Canadian History, 1868–1967



NINA REID-MARONEY

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and African Canadian
History, 1868–1967*

Nina Reid-Maroney



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Para mis queridos—John y Barrett

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The work has benefitted immeasurably from the support given by so many who shared the sense that Johnson deserved a fresh audience. The importance of the work comes from its subject; the shortcomings of the work are entirely mine. Literary scholar Hermione Lee has argued that life writing, like the experience that furnishes its materials, will always be “made up of contested objects—relics, testimonies, versions, correspondences, the unverifiable.” Until now, Jennie Johnson has been left so far out of the historical record that there is progress, surely, in the act of restoring her life story to the realm of things contested. My hope is that this book has effected such a restoration, without cracking open too many reliquaries along the way.

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Introduction

Jennie Johnson was an African Canadian Baptist preacher, by all accounts the first ordained woman in Canada called as a full-time minister, settling in her own church twenty-seven years before Lydia Gruchy of the United Church of Canada became the first woman ordained by a Canadian denomination. This book is about Johnson's life. Because the materials about Johnson that survive do not tell us the things we would most like to know about her, and because she avoided the spotlight, the work that follows cannot be called a full biography. Nonetheless, this study of a life known only through fragments, each connected to a deep history, gives cause to rethink North American black history and historiography. The story of Jennie Johnson calls us to reconsider the familiar terms in which we often cast the history of nineteenth-century black migration and settlement in Canada. It encourages us to recognize the bond between the culture of abolition in the nineteenth century and the movement for racial justice in the twentieth. It invites us to reorient a women's history of black Christianity in Canada to face both its conservative tendencies and its transformative power. In her own time, Johnson's ordination to the Christian ministry was a revolution nurtured in the straitlaced heart of Baptist orthodoxy; in our time, her ordination still holds the potential to overturn long-accepted assumptions about women, Christianity, and race in North American history.¹

In her ninety-nine years of life, Jennie Johnson did not seem to worry much about dying, but in her only surviving written work, she did pay attention to her historical legacy. How would the world to which she had borne witness for almost a century be remembered after her time? In his recent work on Harriet Tubman, Milton Sernett refers to this most recognized of names in African Canadian history as a "malleable icon," a woman whose prominence in historical memory is defined by the very "resilience and pliability" of the multiple stories made of her life and the Underground Railroad. Reverend Jennie Johnson bears a name as much unknown as Harriet Tubman's is known, but she, too, can be found where Sernett searches for Tubman—at the crowded intersection of public memory and history. Sernett's book on Tubman takes up the layers of myth made through creative acts of remembering. My work on Jennie Johnson begins with the myths made through acts of forgetting.²

The starting point for Johnson's own assessment of the meaning of history, both personal and political, was her sense of calling as a minister of the gospel.

Her personal history turned on the pivot of a moment—a late October evening in 1909 when she stood before a group of Free Will Baptist preachers in the tiny Michigan town of Goblesville, was received into ordained ministry, and sealed the welcome among her new colleagues by accepting the right hand of fellowship. As Johnson left her friends at the close of that October meeting and boarded the train for home, her travels, like other journeys she made between Michigan and Ontario and back again, recalled the North American community forged by refugees from slavery and free black abolitionists in the generation before she was born. The journey was familiar, but the experience this time was new. Reverend Jennie Johnson returned to the Prince Albert district of Chatham Township as the first ordained woman in Canada, “publicly consecrated to SACRED SERVICE . . . and authorized to preach the Gospel, administer its ordinances, assume its responsibilities and share the honors of the Christian Ministry.”³

Since her conversion and baptism at sixteen, Jennie Johnson had followed the call to preach, but the central event of her ordination did not come until midway through her long public career. In 1868, the year of her birth, the emancipation fires of jubilee still held the warmth of hope; in 1967, the year of her death, the fires of the Detroit riot seemed to consume a century of unfulfilled promise as they swept close to the convalescent home where Johnson spent her last summer. Spanning the century from the dawn of the first Reconstruction to the twilight of the second, Johnson’s story affords an extraordinary view across the history of race relations, women’s activism, and North American black culture. It is the tale of a New World diaspora that moves from the black abolitionist community in Ontario where Johnson’s family had lived since the 1840s, to the African Methodist Episcopal seminary at Wilberforce University, to her own church in Chatham Township, and to the founding of a downtown mission in Flint, Michigan. And while this narrative intersects with many themes in African American and African Canadian history—slavery, abolition, emancipation, religion, migration, and civil rights—Jennie Johnson’s path was hardly one well-traveled.

A small photograph and a brief notation on a commemorative poster from the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre at Amherstburg introduced me to Jennie Johnson, and thereby began a series of revelations. The first was the absence of any notice given to Jennie Johnson in historical scholarship, a fact that would have been less odd had she not been born in a place whose history of race relations has come to symbolize a kind of schizophrenic turn in the constructing of Canadian identity. In the mid-nineteenth century, the community in which Johnson was born, near Dresden, Ontario, was created by black abolitionists; by the mid-twentieth century, the town was internationally known as the “centre of Ontario’s most openly practiced color bar.”⁴ Yet despite this notoriety, the history of Dresden—focused on the bookends of nineteenth-century abolition and twentieth-century

segregation—has been silent on the intervening period, and deeply silent on the life of Jennie Johnson. Nor is her story found in any book on Canadian women's history or African Canadian history, apart from a brief mention in Hilda Dungy's history of her family, printed in 1977, and in Dorothy Shadd Shreve's study, *The AfriCanadian Church*.⁵ While many people from Johnson's community knew her well and still remember her, such recollections have yet to reach the separate streams of historical memory feeding the currents of scholarship on women, Christianity, and African Canadian history.

Indeed the very things that can help us connect Jennie Johnson's story to recent historiography have also conspired to make her invisible outside her own time. In a life spent defying what she once called "the coldness of man-made regulations," Johnson moved between and around and through the boundaries of race, gender roles, and nation, and she understood the carefully constructed categories of race, gender, and national identity to be interwoven. On this point, sometimes simply constrained by the limitations of the available evidence, historians have not always been able to follow her example. Scholars of women and Protestantism in Canada have written about white women. Scholars of the African Canadian experience have traced the lives of men.⁶ Work on black women preachers has been built around American examples. Emerging scholarship on the history of African Canadian women has started to shed light on the lives of individual women and on their role in creating communities, but even in this important and growing body of work, the focus has been on the abolitionist era. Jennie Johnson has yet to find a place, and the process has been made more difficult by the lack of materials and by the deep and protective silence that emanates from much of Johnson's own community as it draws her memory back to itself.⁷ The present study seeks to reach through those layers of silence and place the story of Jennie Johnson and her connections within a feminist synthesis of scholarship on North American black history, religion, and the history of women.

For Johnson, ordination to Christian ministry was important because it made an unwavering challenge to the intertwining of racial and gender oppression that ran through the history of North American slavery. In this respect, Johnson calls to mind the host of women across the span of Christendom whose marginal place pushed them to define their religious experience not in terms of those things that would bind them but of those things that would set them free.⁸ Jennie Johnson's ministry followed this pattern, made even more powerful in her case by the long tradition of resistance to racial oppression that framed her life story.⁹ Even when Johnson ought to have felt the constraints of prejudice most sorely, she used Christianity to turn the tables on the world. Like women before her time and since, she did so most effectively whenever those around her tried to use the same religious tradition to opposite effect. Her goal was the "perfect citizenship" of equality grounded in religious experience.¹⁰

Others have noted the importance of African Canadian churches as repositories of cultural identity, or “stabilizers” amidst the shifting tides of oppression.¹¹ Part of Johnson’s history supports the conclusion that African Canadian churches helped to build community and were sites of resistance dating back to their black abolitionist foundations. To a degree, Johnson’s pursuit of ordination was built on a strong sense of community, which the churches created and cherished. Nonetheless, a concentration on the churches as institutions can overshadow the fact that the creating of stability often relied on the imposing of a hierarchy of gender, particularly after the end of American slavery.¹² Johnson’s experience reveals that while African Canadian churches were politically engaged on matters of race, they could also be more conservative than their American counterparts when it came to defining the place of women in the church and, by extension, the place of women in the world. Racial equality was often conflated with women’s subordination—the more black women appeared to have power, the less black institutions would resemble white ones. Although the prescriptive language of women’s submission did not necessarily hold in the course of ordinary life, in churches—charged with the maintaining of order, weighted with the search for racial justice—the strange logic was relentlessly applied. At some point, the tension between the argument for racial equality and the framework of patriarchy would have to break. The theologically fearless African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) bishop Henry McNeal Turner recognized this when he paired his declaration that “God is a Negro” with the call to move forward with the ordination of women. Turner used Christianity to argue for liberation on both fronts. Following this tradition in the setting of rural nineteenth-century Ontario, Jennie Johnson surely subverted cultural expectations about women, rather than stabilizing them.

In laying claim to a radical spiritual authority despite the weight of institutions that sought to deny her claim on the grounds both of gender and of race, Jennie Johnson was a “womanist,” to use the term of our time rather than of hers. Her theology combined the feminist interrogation of the Christian tradition with an overarching commitment to racial justice. As Jacqueline Grant has argued in her discussion of womanist theology, it is black women, doubly oppressed, who are uniquely possessed of the moral authority to “transcend some of the oppressive tendencies” of Christianity itself.¹³ Thus had African American preaching women of the nineteenth century—in the model of Jarena Lee, Rebecca Jackson, and Sojourner Truth—boldly stepped around and over the restrictions applied to them, and, at least in part, Johnson belonged to their tradition. Similarly, Johnson was both linked to and yet separate from those women who accepted their own spiritual authority but who also accepted the containing of their piety and activism and hunger for racial justice (the “righteous discontent” of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s women in the black Baptist church) within roles outside the ordained ministry.¹⁴ Johnson’s was indeed a righteous discontent, but at some point she found the latitude she

needed to throw off the expectation that Christian womanhood meant discipleship without ordained leadership. Most significant, she did so even as similar paths were closed to African American women in the AME and black Baptist churches, and to white Canadian women before the ordination of Lydia Gruchy of the United Church of Canada in 1936.

In order to understand the way in which Johnson's Christianity addressed women's equality and racial justice at the same time, it is helpful to ask what it meant to be a child possessed of quickened moral sensibilities, raised in a community that was itself born of resistance against slavery and racial prejudice. The abolitionist community to which Johnson's grandparents were drawn in the 1840s was centered in a transatlantic debate about the political meaning of immigration to Canada West. In the middle of that debate, the black abolitionist Samuel Ringgold Ward used two opposing images to describe the Canada he had come to know in his travels. Canada was "the great moral lighthouse for the black people on this continent," but it was also home to what Ward called "Canadian Negro Hate . . . incomparably meaner than the American article."¹⁵ The interpretive grip of those two images—"Canadian Negro Hate" and "the great moral lighthouse"—has held since Ward's time. Historians of race in the United States have exposed the dangers of treating concepts of race, slavery, and freedom as though they were frozen in time; in the true North, ideas about race, slavery, and freedom have been just as solidly frozen, albeit in distinctive patterns embedded in the historiography of Canada and national identity.¹⁶ Once those categories begin to thaw, however, Ward's paradox of the moral lighthouse beset by Canadian Negro hate melts away, leaving in its place the complex African Canadian history lived and made by the women and men who well understood what Ward had in mind. As Sharon Hepburn points out in her study of the southwestern Ontario black settlement at Buxton, whether Canada could be best described in the abstract as Canaan or as "a freezing sort of hell," in practice emigrants to Canada shaped their own history.¹⁷

"The power of race," as historian Martha Hodes has argued, "lies within the very fact of malleability." Our recognition of fluidity in concepts of race clarifies the nature and source of its power within what Hodes calls "the capricious exercise of racial categorization in everyday life."¹⁸ At the same time, it is helpful to recognize that the resistance to the oppressive force of such categorization was also fluid. The work of the legal historian Constance Backhouse outlines the scope of Canada's history of creating and sustaining racial hierarchies, and yet even as she sets out to chronicle Canada's "colour-coded" past, Backhouse pauses to point out that the communities and individuals on whom such categories were imposed fought them with everything they had.¹⁹ While freedom did not fall to rest like a mantle across the lives of those who crossed the border to Canada, black Canadian communities developed a distinctive culture of liberation that becomes clear only in the light of comparison with the African American culture to which those communities were tied. Johnson's

is a cross-border life, one that fits into the historical literature on the “fluid border” between Ontario and Michigan. While national narratives on both sides shaped black Canadian experiences and identities, those narratives overlapped in ways that Johnson’s way of living can help to clarify.

Jennie Johnson would perhaps recognize our terms for strategies of resistance or a culture of liberation simply as the living of one’s full humanity, empowered by the concert between divine justice and human agency. In her hands, Christianity challenged both the “capricious exercise” of racial hierarchies and the restrictive definitions of womanhood so embedded in the Victorian world into which she was born. Johnson’s theology worked in two ways at once. It was a theology of transcendence, rising above the human constructs of race and gender. At the same time, it was a theology of engagement, designed to use a sense of transcendent authority to work for justice, and to weave freedom into the fabric of ordinary experience. In this, Johnson was part of a broad African American religious tradition that, as Charles Long has noted, combined a focus on higher things—“a structure of value that was not created by slaveholders and could not be determined by them”—with attention to practical concerns of justice in the here and now. Milton Sernett and other scholars of African American religion have drawn needed attention to the radical possibilities within African American Christianity, and to the long history of resistance and racial justice that flowed from it long before the connections came to public notice in the modern civil rights era.²⁰ Johnson’s life—for her theological commitments were lived more often than they were written—belongs to that tradition.

Viewing a shared African Canadian and African American history through the frame of Jennie Johnson’s life opens up a striking landscape. There are still elements of the familiar here. Her story and that of her Chatham Township community intersect with those of better-known figures who people the historical accounts of nineteenth-century Ontario and who shaped the variety of black Canadian experience. Rather than finding such figures standing alone, we see the complexity of a world made by all sorts of people tied together, and in some ways also divided, by their participation in the culture of abolition. Theirs was an evangelical culture, and it constituted a world so obvious to those who lived in it that to us it has become invisible. If we restore the context, a new picture is made clear. It is possible once more to see the foundation for social activism laid down stone by stone in the everyday world of interconnected communities built from the social and spiritual materials of abolition.

Other aspects of North American black history, from the history of slavery to modern political movements, have been explored in ways meant to re-create and reassert the importance of religious culture. As the debate over black liberation theology and the presidential campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 made clear, it would be hard to overestimate the wider political significance of African American religious traditions. Little has been made of this connection in African Canadian history, even though black migration to Canada lived and

breathed the hope of crossing to the Promised Land. In the nineteenth century, the language of deliverance and redemption in the Canadian Canaan was so highly charged with meaning that it required no explanation beyond itself. Since that time, however, it has passed into rough caricature, and the religious and ideological world at the heart of African Canadian settlement has all but disappeared in historical accounts that begin and end with the Underground Railroad. Such work is important, but it has its limits. One of the consequences of recovering Jennie Johnson's story is the restoration of a more complicated religious and intellectual history, in which the possibilities for radical egalitarianism within Christianity broke through the restraints of custom. I want to make plain the ways in which that egalitarianism provided strong sinews of connection between the abolitionist foundations of nineteenth-century Dresden and the conviction of one child who grew up living a liberation theology before that theology had a name.

The opening chapter considers the religious and cultural setting into which Johnson was born, turning to the powerful and largely unexplored legacy of black abolitionists in the community her parents and grandparents helped to build. Johnson was born on a farm in Chatham Township. Her rural home, just a few miles from the village of Dresden and an easy wagon ride from Chatham, was part of a pattern of widespread black agricultural settlement in Kent County, and draws our attention to the importance of land ownership and the life of farming—an aspect of black history often missed in the tendency to concentrate on particular places such as Dresden, Buxton, or Chatham without exploring the ways in which those settlements, both physically and ideologically, were connected. Black history in the county of Kent and in the region of Ontario known in Johnson's parents' time as the Western District was defined by a sweeping abolitionist culture, and Johnson's life cannot be understood apart from that culture, complete with its radicalism, its links to moral reform movements in Britain and in the United States, and its assumptions about the centrality of religion in the pursuit of social justice. The second chapter examines the development of activist culture as the backdrop for Johnson's childhood, focusing on the Anglican mission of Rev. Thomas Hughes between 1859 and 1876. Part of this community's story is well-known, but it needs to be both broadened and refined.

The next three chapters follow Johnson through her conversion and call, her education at Wilberforce Seminary, and her ordination by the Free Will Baptists. Among the elite of the African Methodist Episcopal Church at Wilberforce, Johnson was part of a bold renaissance in higher education and a long tradition of racial uplift. Among the Free Will Baptists, she found a supportive community well accustomed to recognize the claims of racial justice and the spiritual authority of women. The AME sense of mission and the Free Will Baptist acceptance of her call converged in her ordained ministry at Prince Albert Baptist Church in Chatham Township, a few miles from the farm where Johnson was born. Her efforts to minister to the people she loved were played out