

MOVING BEYOND BORDERS

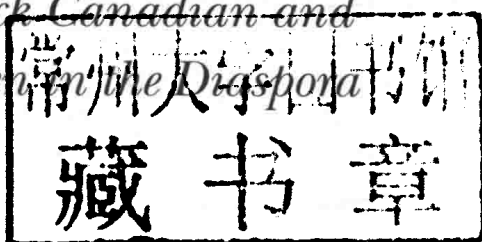
A History of Black Canadian
and Caribbean Women
in the Diaspora

KAREN FLYNN

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MOVING BEYOND BORDERS:

*A History of Black Canadian and
Caribbean Women in the Diaspora*



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MOVING BEYOND BORDERS

A History of Black Canadian and Caribbean Women in the Diaspora

Moving beyond Borders is the first book-length history of Black health care workers in Canada, delving into the experiences of thirty-five postwar-era nurses who were born in Canada or who immigrated from the Caribbean either through Britain or directly to Canada. Karen Flynn examines the shaping of these women's stories from their childhoods through to their roles as professionals and community activists.

Flynn interweaves oral histories with archival sources to show how these women's lives were shaped by their experiences of migration, professional training, and family life. Theoretical analyses from postcolonial, gender, and diasporic Black Studies serve to highlight the multiple subjectivities operating within these women's lives. By presenting a collective biography of identity formation, *Moving beyond Borders* reveals the extraordinary complexity of Black women's history.

(Studies in Gender and History)

KAREN FLYNN is an assistant professor in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies and the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois.

STUDIES IN GENDER AND HISTORY

General Editors: Franca Iacovetta and Karen Dubinsky

This book is dedicated to

My partner Will Mitchell and my son Marshal James Flynn-Mitchell; you both have brought such joy to my life

Vivienne Dickson for being a supportive mom!

To the best siblings anyone could ask for: Chris (Donovan); Kirk (Marlon) Simone, Shawna Flynn, George Mitchell, and Dwayne Reynolds

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Kathryn McPherson for seeing the best in me

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Although I have been influenced by many scholars, all mistakes, omissions, and errors are mine.

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A History of Black Canadian and Caribbean Women in the Diaspora

Introduction: Locating and Conceptualizing Black Women's Narratives

Inez had walked with her Aunt Daisy down the corridors of Savanna-La-Mar Hospital in the parish of Westmoreland in Jamaica ever since she could remember. At fifteen, she decided to follow in her aunt's footsteps and become a nurse. In 1955, nineteen-year-old Inez entered the nursing program at the University College Hospital of the West Indies (UCHWI),¹ where she completed the three years of training. Within months of completing it, she met Owen Mackenzie, who expressed a romantic interest in her. The two began dating, but the romance was cut short when Owen migrated to Canada to attend Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnic Institute, an educational opportunity unavailable to most of the island's inhabitants. Prior to his leaving Jamaica, the couple agreed they would correspond, and over time, according to Inez, 'we actually became serious, [writing] that we would get married.'² Marriage plans were placed on hold, however, as they focused on completing their studies in Jamaica and Canada.

In 1961, Inez also migrated to Canada, where she had no difficulty finding employment. In fact, Caribbean migrant nurses such as Inez proved instrumental in alleviating the post-Second World War nursing shortage in Canada. When Owen graduated in 1962, the couple married. Approximately one year later, they welcomed their first son into the family, and a second child was born in 1968, events which confirmed their desire to settle and make Ontario home. For almost fifty years Inez and Owen Mackenzie have lived in Ontario, working and raising their children, combining lessons they learned while growing up with new experiences gleaned from various sources to which they had access in Canada.

The lives of Caribbean- and Canadian-born Black professional women like Inez are the central focus of this research. Drawing on theoretical

analyses culled from postcolonial, feminist, and diasporic Black studies, in conjunction with insights from labour and nursing history, I argue that Black women's³ multiple subjectivities and identities were first forged within the context of childhood – in the family, church, and school – then shaped and reshaped by various transitions such as migration, professional training, and their roles as wives, mothers, single women, and community activists. Following Chris Weedon, I define *subjectivity* as the 'conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world.'⁴ Identity, on the other hand, involves the internal, external, and the subjective. Always being reconstituted, identity is a socially recognized and fluid position.⁵ At the heart of this book is a narrative that underscores Black women's multiple and contradictory subject positions as they have navigated the transition from childhood to adulthood. This narrative raises new and interdisciplinary questions about migration, education, work, activism, and family.

Intersectionality – the notion that race, gender, class, and sexuality operate as simultaneous and mutually constitutive forms of oppression and identity – is often the primary analytic tool used by scholars to theorize about Black women's lives. An intersectional analysis seeks to expose how power relations structure Black women's identity as racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized beings. In this book, however, I argue that race, class, gender, and sexuality are not the only vectors that contribute to identity and subjectivity formation. From childhood to adulthood, the critical importance of other markers in forming and reforming subjectivity and identity is evident. More specifically, we see how family of origin, religion, cultural values, hard work, education, family commitments, activism, and migration have also shaped these women's identities and subjectivities.

Scholars interested in questions concerning childhood, family, migration, reproductive responsibilities, and labour force participation have often considered these elements of Black women's lives as discrete phenomena. In the Canadian context, the richest area of scholarly focus is on Black women as domestic workers. But this single focus can result in a compartmentalization of Black women's subjectivities without much consideration of these women as wholly embodied and active subjects. To avoid this shortcoming, I use a life-course paradigm in conjunction with oral interviews to compare and contrast the material subjectivities of Caribbean- and Black Canadian-born women. *Life course* 'refers to the age-graded life patterns that are embedded in social institutions and

subject to historical change. These patterns are defined by *trajectories*, which extend across much of the life course, such as family and work, getting a full-time job, and marrying.⁶ Thus a life-course perspective, while attentive to social structures, allows us to see commonalities that the interviewees for this study share with women of other cultural and racial backgrounds. In tandem with an intersectional analysis, the life-course perspective allows a more nuanced and complicated portrait of Black women's lives by connecting over a lifetime common themes – such as work, family, and religion – that contribute to identity formation. In this vein, a life-course paradigm allows an exploration of themes critical to Black women's lives.

Postcolonial research into the formation of multilayered diasporic subjectivities tends to focus primarily on Black expressive culture. The implication is that texts such as literature, music, and theatre render the most complex and interesting constructions of identity formation and reformation.⁷ I posit that cultural analyses alone do not adequately uncover the material lived reality of people's lives. Consequently, my research grounds the theoretical debates over Black diasporic identities in empirical investigation, particularly through the use of oral history as a methodology. I also depart from the male-centred thrust of these studies to focus on Black Canadian and Caribbean professional women who trained as nurses as a way to explore multiple identity formation.

Why nurses as opposed to another occupational group? Until the late 1940s, Black women were excluded from nurses' training in Canada. In addition, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration placed restrictions on the number of Caribbean migrant nurses allowed to enter Canada. Some hospitals in Great Britain also denied Caribbean migrant women employment and training. Hence, those interviewees who began nurses' training in the late 1940s and 1950s were pioneers. These women integrated not only nursing schools but also hospitals in Canada, Britain, and the United States. Despite the initial barriers to nursing education, nursing has remained a particularly important skilled occupation for Black women over the past four decades.⁸ Indeed, the education, training, and credentials required of nurses engender questions around identity and professional status that are different from those pertaining to domestic workers. Unlike domestic workers, the experiences of Black female professionals remain an underexplored area in the Canadian literature. Although a substantial scholarly debate exists as to whether nursing and other white-collar occupations should be considered 'middle class,'⁹ there is no doubt that within Black communities registered