

A Daughter's Journey

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L'auteure réfléchit sur le procédé de placer des jalons pour explorer et documenter la vie des femmes noires. Elle utilise l'essai et surtout le film comme outils pour documenter leur

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histoire dans la diaspora au Canada. Tout au long de sa carrière filmique elle a envisagé les images pour créer un espace où la voix des femmes d'origine africaine serait entendue. Elle examine aussi ses rôles comme fille et comme mère dans des histoires à multiples facettes.

This article represents a moment in time wherein I reflect on my journey to explore, think about, and document the lives and experiences of some African-descended¹ women in Canada. It begins by calling forth an essay entitled “Our Mothers Grand and Great: Black Women of Nova Scotia” that I wrote more than twenty years ago for the special Multicultural issue of *Canadian Woman Studies/le cahiers des femme*.² A broad survey, it became a personal map, the contours and geography of which I continue to examine in text and in film. During this period I, a daughter, became a mother. This additional identity fueled my interest and desire to dig deeper into this work to search for meaning and understanding that I could pass on to my daughter. I walk through this period, stopping along the way to look at the markers—the signposts I have placed along my path, signposts that I hope will keep the path somewhat illuminated for those that may follow.

“Our Mothers Grand and Great: Black Women of Nova Scotia”

To remember our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and

die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone on before. (Walker 1)

This essay (Hamilton 1982) grew out of research I was doing at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia and within the Black community in Nova Scotia. In 1975 I was editing a special issue of *Grasp*, a newspaper published by the Black United Front of Nova Scotia, a province-wide advocacy organization. The focus of the issue was the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, an umbrella organization for all African Baptist Churches in Nova Scotia. I moved between the stacks at the Archives and oral interviews, matching and comparing information, and in the process, uncovering layers of information previously unknown to me. Some of what I found made its way into the essay.

The text was a rather swift walk through Black women's history in Nova Scotia. At the time there was scant research or writing on this theme. I touched on the early history, including the period of enslavement, and wrote about contemporary women such as Portia White, Viola Desmond, Edith Clayton, Carrie Best, and Pearleen Oliver. In closing, I drew inspiration from writer Mary Helen Washington's introduction to her book *Midnight Birds*, in which she spoke of the process whereby Black women recover and rename their past.³ I ended with these words:

As research and exploration into the lives of Black women in Nova Scotia continues, a fuller view, one with dimension and perspective, will emerge. We will know then where to erect our monuments. Now there are only signposts pointing the way. (Hamilton 1982: 37)

Looking back, I realize that over the following 20 years, I began erecting some of those signposts. I was preoccupied with learning about and understanding the lives of the women who immediately preceded me—my mother's generation, and then reaching further back, to the earlier generations—Black refugee women, Black Loyalist women, and enslaved African women. I needed to think about them as individuals with names, with specific lives and challenges. I needed to know how I was connected to them. I assumed I was by virtue of my birthright, my

family, and my community genealogy. What could I learn that would help me interpret and navigate my own life? What of it could I tell others? At the time I did not realize that the essay in and of itself was a signpost, and the broad strokes and themes outlined therein would provide me with a rich trove of material to contemplate, and with a map for further exploration and excavation.

Historians of African women's lives and experiences, both on the African continent and in the Diaspora, have been examining the multiple roles Black women play throughout their lives. A number of striking similarities may be found in the analysis of the centrality of women's work and roles in diverse communities of African people, wherever they are found. Historian Filomina Chioma Steady, in her collection titled *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, notes that:

Black women have consistently had to ensure not only their economic, political, and social survival, but their physical survival as well. Because of poverty, social and sexual discrimination and a generally low status in society, most black women are constantly exposed to health hazards (and) in the black woman's experience, it is crystal clear that survival and liberation are synonymous, and that she must be the main activist in the struggle to ensure both. (20)

How have we learned about this struggle for the survival of a people and their cultures? The most fundamental way we have learned has been through the intergenerational transmission of values, goals, and experiences through life examples and story telling. In seeking a framework within which to conceptualize my work, I have sought out a variety of women writers and scholars of African descent who have spent considerable and considered time forging new frameworks that provide guides for interpreting the lives of African descended women. Writing about what she terms the "Black woman griot-historian," Barbara Omolade says:

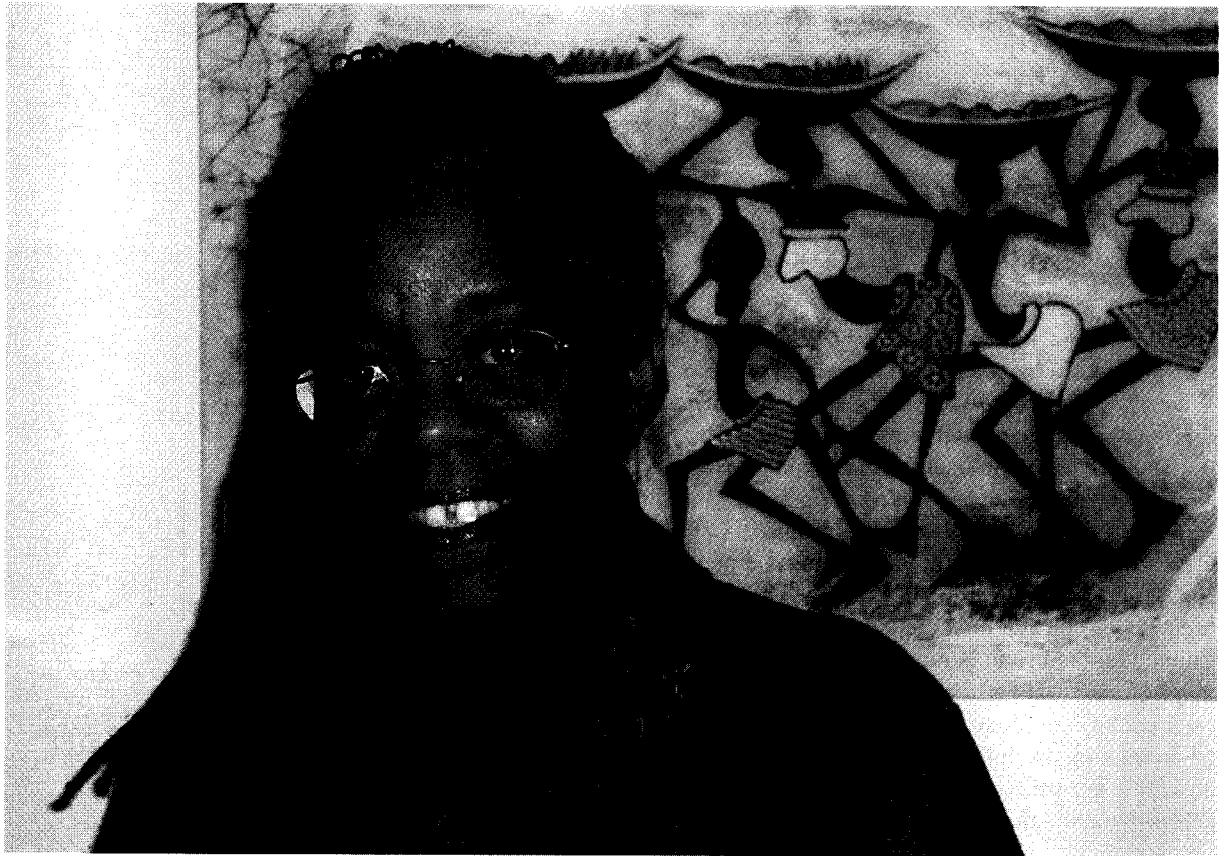
The Black woman griot-historian must be shaped by an African world-view which evolved within democratic/consensus tribal societies where the oral tradition of transmitting information and knowledge is interwoven among music, art, dance, and crafts and everyday activities intermix with communication



Still, "Black Mother, Black Daughter," Dir. Sylvia Hamilton and Claire Prieto, 1989. Courtesy National Film Board of Canada.

and connection with both the spiritual world and the ancestral past. (285)

After conducting a number of oral interviews during the 1970s with a blacksmith, a logger, and a midwife, I began to recognize the importance of oral tradition in communities of African-descended people. This tradition spoke of and to individual and collective histories. Race discrimination and segregation coupled with gender bias and poverty prevented most Black women in Nova Scotia from achieving higher education, thereby excluding them from among other opportunities, the chance to write, study, publish, and lecture. In spite of such formidable barriers, however, women such as the late Dr. Carrie Best



Sylvia Hamilton, Courtesy National Film Board of Canada

not only wrote, but also published her own newspaper, *The Clarion*, in the 1940s. It was dedicated to advancing human and civil rights for all. Dr. Pearleen Oliver took up the struggle and wrote and published historical manuscripts and also became a prominent public speaker and advocate against injustice (Washington).

Pearleen Oliver would come to play a significant role in my film *Black Mother Black Daughter*. During the 1970s I straddled several communities of concern. I worked as a volunteer with and sometimes as an employee of Black community organizations, and as a volunteer with women's groups such as the Reel Life Video Collective (Halifax), the National Congress of Black Women of Canada, and community groups dealing with housing, health, and the arts. I became involved in community cable television production and broadcast journalism. One of the earliest cable shows I produced was for the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW). It featured two Black women from different generations: Lavinia Harris, an elder, and Cynthia Thomas, a university student. Some years later I would continue examining this cross-generational theme in *Black Mother Black Daughter* when I invited Lavinia Harris to be in the film to talk about her life.

Fragments of stories from the distant past were passed down in the community. They were stories I did not hear in school. The learning environment in which we were

physically segregated restricted our potential as learners and dampened our spirits. We faced daily insults and name calling drawn directly from the caricatures of African people in the school textbooks. My Mother's generation contended with "Sambo," among other epithets. My generation had "Bunga," "Simba," "Tarbaby," and the ubiquitous "Topsy." When my daughter was five, she was called "chocolate bar" by one of her classmates at school.

My excavation process involved listening to stories, visiting communities, and searching in the stacks of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia for documentary material. In 1983, efforts were gearing up in Nova Scotia to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the Loyalists in Nova Scotia. Little attention was given to the fact that a significant percentage of the Loyalists were African people.

I wanted to challenge the notion that the United Empire Loyalist (UEL) designation equaled white, by demonstrating that there was an amazing story sitting, waiting, just below the surface of the generalized Loyalist narrative. Not only did I have the fragments of the passed-down stories, such as that of Rose Fortune⁴ shared with me by her descendant Daurene Lewis (who later also appeared in *Black Mother Black Daughter*), but having spent time pouring over various historical and archival documents and books, I was convinced there was a large story to tell. My particular interest in Black Loyalist women resulted in

a paper I presented at the Loyalist Bicentennial Conference held in 1983 in Halifax, Nova Scotia (Hamilton 1995). I was both elated and saddened by some of the responses. Elated because there was genuine interest in the story I was trying to tell, and saddened because there were people who had studied Loyalist history but who were unfamiliar with the Black Loyalist story.

Throughout this period I began learning about photography and I acknowledged my own strong need to see images which somehow reflected my people and African descended communities. I was also developing an understanding of how and what visual imagery communicates, as distinct and different from what a written text might. I thought a lot about the intersection point between individual biography and a community's collective narrative. Researching, writing, presenting, talking—at the same time as working in formal and informal settings including the community, the media, and government—provided a rich cauldron of experiences.

This then is part of the back-story for the development of *Black Mother Black Daughter*, a half-hour documentary I wrote, narrated, and co-directed with Toronto-based filmmaker Claire Prieto, and which was my formal entry to the field of filmmaking.⁵ Taking up Alice Walker's quotation, I believed it was not just a question of passive acknowledging; this is not to suggest that this was her intention, rather, that for me, the acknowledgement had to be concretized.

Deciding To Work in Film

Working in film naturally evolved from my work in media and in writing, and from my growing interest in the creation of visual imagery. I had always felt a disconnect between what I experienced and saw in my communities, and in society, and the images and visual representations I and others were given back via the educational system, the multiple forms of mass communications (television, films, books and magazines), theatre and art shows. Creating images would become a way to forestall forgetfulness and to counter the erasure of stories from our individual and collective memories. The process became a buttress against ignorance.

Film Historian Gloria Gibson Hudson of Indiana University's Black Film Archive, in writing about women filmmakers of the African Diaspora, identified what she called a female-centred narrative, a term she applied to films such as *Black Mother Black Daughter*. She explained that:

The female-centred narrative takes cognizance of women in relation to the convergence of race, sex and class. This cinematic perspective in turn provides an authentic historical and socio-cultural context to address specific thematic issues such as cultural identity, social invisibility, and economic marginalization.

Within this aesthetic and cinematic structure evolves a framework in which individuals or characters exhibit a resilience to oppression and subsequently develop an increased sense of self determination and acknowledgement of "woman self." (80)

Black Mother Black Daughter is a modest, unassuming short film, which by its existence, accomplished several things: it made Black women's lives visible—made them count. It challenged traditional representations of Canadian and Nova Scotian history by calling attention to both experiential and factual knowledge which had heretofore gone unrecorded and ignored. Practically, it provided the

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first opportunity for several women to achieve their first credit on a film project. It was released in April 1989 and over one thousand people came out for the screening in Halifax. Similar numbers attended the Toronto screening, and hundreds came out in cities across Canada. Shown in more than 40 film festivals worldwide, the film is used in educational settings across Canada. I have often thought about the varied reasons why this film has been so well received. Perhaps it taps the elusive concept we call the "universal;" it carries stories that travel past race, gender, class, time and geography. I appear in the film along with my mother, Marie, and my young daughter, Shani.

My mother tells a number of stories that I have termed "survival strategies," ways of negotiating your identity and independence in a society that has erected race and gender barriers among others. When Shani was 13 she was asked to write about what she had learned from her grandmother. She wrote:

My grandmother, Dr. Marie Hamilton, taught me about being a girl by telling me to do what I want and not let anyone discriminate against me for being a girl. She told me that everyone has the same rights no matter who they are. She would always tell me to do my best and to always keep trying at anything and everything I wanted to do. She would tell me all kinds of stories of how people would be prejudiced toward her or people she knew, and how they reacted to this discrimination. I learned a lot from her stories and I use what I learned everyday.

She continued with a very specific example of one of the

stories that I had told her:

When I was older my mother would tell me stories about things my grandmother did before I was born. For example, what my mother's family calls the "taxi story." My grandmother was taking a taxi as she always did, and the driver was driving very, very fast. My grandmother wanted the driver to slow down, so she told him this: "If you are in such a hurry to get where I'm going, you can stop and let me out and continue on your way." This slowed the driver right down. From this story I learned that you should not let other people do things to you, that you don't want them to do. There were a lot of messages in those little stories about her that meant a lot to everyone who heard them, and I am not surprised at all.

The image of a mother with a young girl sitting between her legs as she combs, oils, and braids/plaits the girl child's hair is an enduring one and speaks to the ancestral connection in many African communities on the continent and in the Diaspora. The act of braiding, weaving hair is extended to fabric to create garments, to wood to fashion baskets and barrels, to palm and other trees to create shelter. At any moment in time, countless women of African descent perform this same ritual, perhaps unaware of its unifying connection. In the same way as the hair is braided, and at the same time as the hair is braided, stories have been told, almost as if woven into the hair of the child as part of her cultural memory. It was often during these braiding sessions that we learned the survival strategies mentioned earlier. They usually contained guiding phrases, such as "stand up and be counted."

I was reminded of this fundamental principle by the Jones family of Truro, who are featured in a film I directed called *Against the Tides, the Jones Family*. The film was part of a four-hour television mini series in 1993 called *Hymn To Freedom*, about the history and contributions of African Canadians. The family of Wilena and the late Elmer Jones learned these strategies well. In addition to Wilena, the film features several daughters—Lynn, Janis, and Debbie, a son, Burnley (Rocky), and his daughter, Tracey. It is a family of activists: Janis is an educator, Lynn, a labour leader and community activist, Burnley-Rocky a lawyer and long-time activist, and his daughter Tracey, a librarian and a leader who has emerged in her own right. Wilena taught her children that if they saw something that was not right, it was their responsibility to work for change. She was their model.

"No More Secrets"—When the Personal Becomes Political

Women of African descent still work double and triple days within the home and outside to provide for their families. Within this context they suffer violence, poverty,

and ill health—conditions that disrupt the development of their potential and their ability to live lives free from oppression. Yet, in spite of these barriers, women through oral legacies and traditions of committed work have struggled to ensure their own survival and that of their families and communities.

Over the years I have developed relationships with the people whose lives and work I treat in film or in print. It is not always the same women, but often women drawn from similar constituencies, or the same constituency of concern. While the issue of violence against women was a variable in the communities—and perhaps in the lives in some form—of the women in *Black Mother Black Daughter*, it was a piece of the story that needed a space of its own. This film was akin to opening the first page of a long and detailed book, a book with many chapters. My development and subsequent production of the two-part documentary *No More Secrets*, which focuses on violence against women in the Black community, became another chapter and one having several layers.

Violence was a tenacious, though often hidden, resident in Black communities and in communities world-wide. I recall though my own mother's clarity on this issue: a man should never ever have the chance to hit a second time. Confronting violence against women within the Black community is prickly and difficult. For a variety of complex reasons, including racism and fear of stigmatization, it has been rarely talked about publicly. It took a group of African Baptist Church women to "stand up and be counted."

The African Baptist Women's Institute was painfully aware of the profound effect violence was having on the lives of Black women and their families in Nova Scotia. They completed a research project and embarked on a plan of action. Over and over they heard the message from women they met that Black women were not reflected in any existing anti-violence educational material. This absence made a significant difference in how the problem was perceived and understood within the community and perpetuated the myth that it was not "our" problem. Aware of my film and community work, the Institute approached me to produce a documentary for educational use.

Conceptually, *No More Secrets*, part one, *The Talking Circle*, tackles the question of why there continues to be silence within African descended communities on this issue. The women in the circle actively break that silence by speaking out. Part two is *Understanding Violence Against Women*. Once the silence is broken, we can begin the analysis, begin to break down the issue, and begin to understand in preparation for action. After a public screening at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery in Halifax, Nova Scotia in February of 1999, it was picked up for use in transition houses, community workshops, schools, and correctional institutions.

Violence against women continues to be the defining

issue in the feminist/womanist struggle. It is at the core of women's equality concerns here and around the world. If a woman does not feel, and is indeed not safe either in her home, in her neighbourhood, in the streets of her city, or on the country roads of her community, then she is not a completely free person. She does not have this elusive "equality" held up as one of the fundamental tenets of a democratic society. For the Women's Institute it was of the utmost importance not only to acknowledge this problem but to find ways to combat it. As women, they shared with women across race, class, and geography the experience of violence in their lives. Knowing the role the African United Baptist Church plays in the community, they felt the Church had to be actively engaged in the struggle against violence and in the healing that has to take place.

No More Secrets featured everyday stories of women we might sit beside on the bus, passing the time talking about the weather, or stand in line behind at the grocery store. It was and remains a very brave act on the part of the women who revealed their personal stories. They did so with the profound hope that they might point the way for other women. It was also a brave step for the Women's Institute, a traditional church-based organization. The women and the men, the latter appear in part two, speak about mobilizing the entire community—women and men working together—to break the cycle. Theoretically, this approach is rooted in the specific realities of Black women's experiences. It speaks to their practice of working for both personal and community empowerment.

Searching for Portia White

At the time I was making *Black Mother Black Daughter*, I wrestled with the amount of material I had found and the variety of women whose stories lined up to be told. In the film Pearlleen Oliver says, "we only have a few minutes so we can't do the impossible." These were wise words indeed. Portia White was at the head of the queue. Before the current set of Canadian female divas, there was "Canada's Singing Sensation"—Portia White. A brilliant contralto, she was Canada's most famous artist in the 1940s.

Carol Heilbrun writes that when she was young in the 1930s and early 1940s she was caught up in biography because,

it allowed me, as a young girl to enter the world of daring and achievement. But I had to make myself a boy to enter that world; I could find no comparable biographies of women, indeed, almost no biographies at all. (27)

Portia White was born in 1911, and, according to her mother, she was an avid reader. I think that, like Heilbrun, she would have had few if any biographies of women to turn to, and certainly none of Black female classical

concert performers. So how was it that she latched onto the idea of becoming a concert artist? This question was one of the main ones propelling me into her story.

In setting out to make a film about Portia White I was acutely aware of the growing interest in "biographies" and the attendant discussions about the form, especially in print. Essential questions concern what should be included, what does one exclude and what sources should be used (authorized or unauthorized, or both). These, coupled with an ever-growing list of ethical questions, may lead to many sleepless nights. While the debate has been centred on print, many of the same questions are present and are magnified when one contemplates a "film treatment" of a person's life. Length is always a factor, a nemesis of sorts. Film speaks in images combined with sound; there are no footnotes, addendums, or appendices.

In making this film there were all of the usual challenges a documentary filmmaker faces; beyond those, however, my major preoccupation was how best to tell the story with integrity. How do you tell the life of an African-descended woman in Canada who chose, at a very tumultuous time in world history, to lead a very unconventional life? How do you understand a woman who chose to move past the strict societal boundaries prescribed for Black women?

Often, if the film is about a person who for whatever reasons has achieved a measure of fame or success, the filmmaker can count on finding information with an average amount of digging. Maybe someone else produced a piece, or wrote a book, or the person may have written memoirs or left journals. Ideally, the filmmaker will also interview her subject. In Portia White's case, in spite of her fame at a point in our national cultural history, no biography (either print or film) existed; she left no autobiography.

I began with fragments of her story and after many, many years, completed a one-hour (a 50-minute television hour) documentary entitled *Portia White: Think on Me*, about her life and career. It has been screened in festivals and televised by three Canadian national broadcasters. It is noteworthy that after several broadcasts, I received e-mail correspondence from viewers from across Canada and some from viewers in the United States who receive Canadian channels. Some sent short congratulatory comments while others wrote lengthy reflective notes, offering special memories of having met or seen Portia White in concert.

In making the film I did find answers to some of the questions I had about her, but there is still more I want to know. I am not finished with her story. Portia White died in 1968, the year I graduated from high school. Little did I know then that some 30 years later I would make a film about her.

Film—and increasingly video in various formats—is a significant tool of exploration and enquiry for African descended women. It allows us to create visual memories

that otherwise might not exist and to boldly enter previously unexplored pathways.

A frequent question filmmakers are asked as they complete a film is, "What's your next project?" While this is not an unreasonable question, I am amused sometimes because if I pause for very long, the questioner is more than willing to suggest films I should make. Consequently, in addition to the "to do" list of films I keep, much like a grocery list—check them off as I go—I know that if I ever run out of ideas, there are people who are more than willing to offer suggestions.

Of the signposts, I have erected a few. Many more await creation not only by me but more importantly, by the growing number of talented, engaged young artists in the African Nova Scotian community and in the Diaspora, who following in the spirit and path of Portia White, are blazing trails all of their own.

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¹I commonly use the terms Black and African descended interchangeably.

²While this article chronicles a personal journey, I must point out that during this same period, a significant amount of work was created by African-descended women across disciplinary areas throughout Canada. Without offering an exhaustive list, a few examples will demonstrate this point. Dionne Brand and Djanet Sears both won the Governor General's Award for their literary work; other writers of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction include Lillian Allen, Peggy Bristow, Afua Cooper, Cheryl Foggo, Claire Harris, Nalo Hopkinson, Makeda Silvera, Maxine Tynes, Adrienne Shadd, and Njoke Wane. Spoken word poets Shauntay Grant and Motion, both of whom were top contestants in CBC Radio's National Poetry Face-Off, are creating dynamic work. Filmmakers Christene Browne, Karen King, Glace Lawrence, Lana Lovell, Claire Prieto, and Frances Anne Solomon produced and directed a variety of film and video work that received both national and international attention. Dancers and choreographers, visual artists, musicians, quilters, actors, community activists, and many other creators have contributed to a growing body of work by African descended women in Canada.

³Portia White was a gifted concert performer; Viola Desmond challenged racial segregation in Nova Scotian movie houses; Edith Clayton, who was featured in my film, *Black Mother Black Daughter*, was a skilled basket weaver. Carrie Best was a newspaper founder and editor and tireless human rights activist. Pearleen Oliver is an African Baptist Church leader, writer, historian and hu-

man rights advocate. Mary Helen Washington said, "It is instructive to recall as a kind of footnote that white men have always held this power, a power in evidence everywhere in the world. In all the great capitals—I am thinking particularly of Washington and London—there are hundreds of monuments to them, bronzed busts of immense proportions, statues of figures in ceremonial robes, documents and signatures on display in museums, all witnessing the historic power of men to mythologize themselves, to remake history, and to cast themselves eternally in heroic form. There is hardly a trace of women's lives. We have been erased from history" (xii).

⁴Rose Fortune was a Black Loyalist who set up her own baggage transfer business and appointed herself police-woman in Annapolis Royal in the late 1780s.

⁵For a discussion of the development of *Black Mother Black Daughter*, see Hamilton 1995.

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