

## An Analysis and Documentation of the 1989 Exhibition *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse l'arrivée des femmes artistes noires sur la scène artistique canadienne dans les années 80 en examinant l'exposition-jalon, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*. Elle montrait les travaux de onze femmes artistes faisant partie de la diaspora africaine du Canada. Présentée d'abord à *A Space Gallery* de Toronto en janvier 1989 et se déplaçant, la même année, à travers le Canada, vers quatre autres galeries gérées par des artistes, cette exposition créait deux précédents : d'abord elle se donnait comme un exemple significatif de travail anti-raciste et, ensuite, elle écrivait un chapitre important du développement culturel de l'histoire canadienne de l'art. En effet, elle était la première exposition canadienne à être vouée entièrement au travail de femmes artistes noires et, aussi, la première à être entièrement organisée par des femmes conservateurs toutes d'origine africaine.

Cet essai considère l'exposition *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*, comme un texte postcolonialiste engagé dans une pratique artistique activiste et examine comment les oeuvres individuelles deviennent aussi des textes disruptifs par leur exploration particulière de la construction identitaire du sujet qu'est la femme noire de la diaspora. Utilisant des stratégies postcolonialistes pour analyser ce projet comme un texte « créatif », essayant d'« affecter » la situation des femmes artistes noires du Canada, cette étude fonctionne ultimement comme une analyse critique et comme une documentation historique de l'exposition, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*, de ses artistes et de leur production.

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## Résumé

Cet article analyse l'arrivée des femmes artistes noires sur la scène artistique canadienne dans les années 80 en examinant l'exposition-jalon, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*. Elle montrait les travaux de onze femmes artistes faisant partie de la diaspora africaine du Canada. Présentée d'abord à A Space Gallery de Toronto en janvier 1989 et se déplaçant, la même année, à travers le Canada, vers quatre autres galeries gérées par des artistes, cette exposition créait deux précédents: d'abord elle se donnait comme un exemple significatif de travail anti-raciste et, ensuite, elle écrivait un chapitre important du développement culturel de l'histoire canadienne de l'art. En effet, elle était la première exposition canadienne à être vouée entièrement au travail de femmes artistes noires et, aussi, la première

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In the past decade, discussion and activism in the arts around identity politics have brought on a steady stream of publications, festivals and exhibitions focusing on the work of African Canadian artists. One such project was the groundbreaking exhibition *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* which not only marked the entry of Black women artists into the Canadian art scene during the late eighties but also paved the way for more art by people of African descent to be exhibited.<sup>1</sup> However, to date, no catalogue has been published for a group exhibition of Black women artists in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The following essay on *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* is an attempt to address this paucity of published materials on artists of colour in Canadian art history. Beginning with a critical analysis of the exhibition and a brief cataloguing of the artworks within the context of the different themes brought forward by the project, it closes with an examination of two of the works in terms of stereotypes and the politics of representation as they concern visual images of Black women.

### *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.”<sup>3</sup>

With these words, turn-of-the-century Black activist Anna Julia Cooper articulated the intimate relationship between issues of gender and race involved when considering diasporic experiences of Black women. Almost a century later this statement, republished many times since its first

appearance in *A Voice of the South* (1892), was engaged once more by the Diasporic African Women's Art Collective in the title of their 1989 exhibition *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* to assert the project's political trajectory of centring the Black woman in its artistic inquiry.

Organized by the Diasporic African Women's Art Collective (DAWA), *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* set two precedents, each of which mark it as a significant example of anti-racist work in the arts as well as an important cultural development in Canadian art history: it was the first exhibition in Canada to devote itself entirely to the work of Black women artists, and it was the first of this kind to be coordinated by Black women curators.

The idea for *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* was conceived by Buseje Bailey and Grace Channer, two Black women activist-artists of the DAWA collective, a non-profit community network of African-Canadian women artists formed in 1984 to promote Black women's culture in Canada. As summarized in Houseworks Gallery and Café's March 1989 programme, the exhibition had three goals: 1) “to expand and publicly vocalize the concerns of Black women as a cultural group” so as to “move from invisibility to visibility, from the margin to the centre;” 2) “to offer an opportunity to the public to view a body of art by people of African descent within the context [for which] it was created;” and 3) “to empower the participating artists [as well as future African-Canadian women artists] by validating the artistic experiences of Black women in Canada.”

After two years of coordination, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*, with the participation of eleven artists from Toronto, Ottawa, Kingston, Montreal and Edmonton, began its tour with an inaugural exhibition at Toron-

to's A Space Gallery on 28 January 1989 and travelled to Houseworks Gallery and Café in Ottawa, XChanges Gallery in Victoria, Galerie Articule in Montreal, and Eye Level Gallery in Halifax where it closed on 23 September 1989.<sup>4</sup>

As Post-colonial Text: Issues of Historicity and "Home"

The exhibition *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* challenged traditional Western art world politics of aesthetics and representation by providing a space where Black women's experiences could be articulated. At the same time, it demanded recognition for the contributions of Black women to the shaping of Canadian cultural identity. In doing so, it brought forward two important issues connected with the identity construction and artistic expression of African diasporic women: historicity and location. Location, in this case, refers to the situating of "home" and the making of spaces for identity articulation. The following addresses the two issues in relation to the political agenda of the exhibition.

The historicity of the DAWA project was posited by the curatorial team as the point of entry for Black women artists into the Canadian art scene, which had largely ignored their previous artistic contributions and hence denied their existence altogether. Through a process of self-authorization involving, as Trinh T. Minh-ha explains, "authorized voices authorizing themselves to be heard," the women who participated in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* challenged the dominant politics of representation in Canada by "naming" themselves as agents of their own cultural production.<sup>5</sup>

Following this, it could be said that the exhibition represents a creative post-colonial text which embodied, within its production, post-colonial strategies that worked to effect agency for women artists of African descent. As a visual text, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* recorded the historical collective and personal memories of the Black women who were involved in its creation. This reading is suggested further by Bailey and Channer in their notes for the exhibition:

The work will be organized into several discrete areas, reflecting the communal compounds of traditional African society. Within these spaces, sculpture, constructions, music, poetry, fabric, painting and movement will comprise a *creative document* of diasporic, African imagery [my emphasis].<sup>6</sup>

In a very pragmatic way, "naming" the exhibition as a text within its historical context, as well as within this study, enables its use as a valuable source of information on Black

women's experiences in an academic forum that has very little written on them.

Interpreting *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* as a post-colonial text also allows a reading of the project's dynamics as echoing and reinforcing the states of migrancy (or "migratory subjectivities," to use Carole Boyce Davies' term) experienced by many of its artist participants, who were not always present at each of the venues.<sup>7</sup> For instance, in negotiating a space of named agency for participants and viewers, the project was forced to adapt to the specificity of each locale and re-create itself from venue to venue just as members of the African diaspora have learnt to survive as migrant subjects in the Americas. Variables involved in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* included the differing dimensions of the galleries, the way the exhibition was displayed, quality of lighting, and the absence/presence of artists and their works. In their curatorial notes, Bailey and Channer describe this continuous transformation throughout the tour in this way:

The energy the exhibition created before, during, and in the future has been powerful. At each location, each gallery space, each city, another tone, a new shape, an enlightened expanding of the exhibition's personality bloomed. Its vision was warm, firm and inclusive.

This description lends *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* a sense of autonomy which empowers it as a living exhibition, one which continually expanded and contracted, adapted and evolved, and most importantly, made itself at home wherever it went. An understanding of the DAWA project as a living text of Black women's experiences balances the physical absence of its artists. The exhibition's historicity affirms their immaterial presence through a visual embodiment of their struggles as Black women artists in the art world.

The issue of location, or situating the "where" of the exhibition's interrogation, is equally central to the understanding of the political impetus behind the project. The historical displacement of diasporic subjects and their subsequent migratory subjectivity has not only contributed to their invisibility but has also problematized the development of a politics of location for members of the diaspora. As yet, for many diasporic subjects, the notion of "home" often involves a metaphor of migration, or journey, rather than a fixed geographical point. The implied journey adopts a non-linear configuration that is shaped by a great number of foreign and floating signs which continually locate and dislocate subjects as they attempt to situate a "homeplace" for themselves. "Homeplace," according to Black feminist, bell hooks, refers to "the construction of a safe place where

black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination.”<sup>8</sup>

For Black women, whose diasporic experiences have historically forced them to work outside of their homes, the notion of “home” becomes a particularly crucial site of resistance.<sup>9</sup> According to Dionne Brand, “from the institution of slavery in the Americas to current exploitative work structures,” Black women, along with other women of colour and immigrant women, have worked in homes other than their own.<sup>10</sup> For members of DAWA involved in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*, the activity of making other spaces of Black women’s experience such as the Canadian art scene feel like home was to work in tandem with this reclamation of a “homeplace” as a site of resistance. Certainly the DAWA project managed to create a spatial site of resistance within the art world, as well as individual pockets of “homes,” or sub-texts of resistance, within each of the artist’s projects.

While not all the works in the exhibition were overtly political, the mere participation of the artists in the project can be construed as being political as well as activist. In *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Nina Felshin writes:

Participation [in activist art] is ... an act of self-expression or self-representation by the entire community. Individuals are empowered through such creative expression, as they acquire a voice, visibility, and an awareness that they are part of a greater whole. The personal thus becomes political, and change, even if initially only of community or public consciousness, becomes possible.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the politicization of audience participation through the collaborative nature of the project on the part of both its artists and its audience, as well as the contextualization of the project within the Canadian art scene, also indicated an activist cultural practice in effect. These two formal strategies, typical of such cultural practices according to Felshin, were apparent in the way community involvement was promoted by the curators through the organization of workshops in as many of the hosting cities as possible.<sup>12</sup> Informative workshops on different subjects conducted by various curators and several of the artists themselves were realized in the Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa venues.

The politicization of artist participation in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* could be seen in the way that the various works were not simply displays of aesthetically pleasing objects but also represented important milestones, economic or otherwise, for the artists who had

to scrimp and save in order to get the necessary training to create them. As is the case with the exhibition participants, many Black women artists are also “heads of households, generally the primary income earner, poor, and working class” and have to negotiate forces in their surroundings – such as poverty and racism – that discourage them from making art in the first place.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, many Black women artists see their artistic experiences, which often explore the convergence of their public and private realities, as integral to the struggles of Black women and Black people in general. According to Bailey, for Black artists who have “been historically excluded from power in society, sometimes just creating oneself into existence, by creating art, is revolutionary.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly, from this perspective of a history of oppression, artistic expressions of personal yet culturally specific experiences, such as the ones found in this exhibition, can also be construed as political.

The political subversiveness of *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* is most apparent in its different uses of physical and theoretical space. For example, the DAWA production physically contrasted itself to the museum institution as a statement of resistance towards colonizing apparatuses in society. According to Marlene Nourbese Philip, for Africans and the African diaspora, the “white box” museum setting “has always been a significant site of their racial oppression.”<sup>15</sup> Artworks by people of African descent, far removed from their original cultural contexts, have been traditionally displayed as untouchable formal art objects void of the cultural significance given to them by their creators. *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* not only displayed art that was created specifically for that context, but it also subverted Eurocentric definitions of art viewing environments through the use of music, incense and candles. This created a warm and inviting atmosphere of which, as one critic wrote, “the first impression [was] not predominantly visual. It [was] aural and olfactory, appealing to touch, taste and ear.”<sup>16</sup> According to the curators, “children were encouraged to touch, feel, be with the materials in the pieces in their own ways which encouraged adults to be involved in the ‘art’ in a way that breaks the established rituals of the art gallery institution.”

The media in the exhibition, which ranged from textiles to wooden boxes to tree branches to vèvès, was also an important site of resistance for many of the artists. Rather than limiting themselves to the more canonical mediums of painting or sculpture, their conscious use of materials associated with craft, such as dyed cloth and items gathered from nature, was seen as a way to subvert the traditional separation in dominant discourses on art of so-called “low” from “high” art, as well as that of “political” or

“activistic” art from “fine” art. Also interesting is how the predominance of fibres, found objects and materials collected from nature revealed the relationship between the artists’ economic status and the media explored. Not only did these materials provide unconventional means of expression; they also proved to be economical choices of art supplies – a fact which, once more, reminds us of the economic realities faced by many Black women artists.

On a more theoretical note, the exhibition challenged the dominant art establishment most forcefully through the political act of taking possession of a space to articulate marginalized voices. The space used and/or the context of the show were as important as the works exhibited because the space reflected, to a certain extent, external social realities outside the art world. For instance, just as Black women continue to struggle in whatever context they find themselves in, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* stridently asserted its Black feminist agenda whether it was in a predominantly white-populated venue (such as Victoria) or in a predominantly Black one (such as Halifax).<sup>17</sup> Challenges lay, especially for the former, in educating an audience unaccustomed to seeing work by artists of colour and, for both kinds of venue, in re-defining the roles of Black women and Black women artists. This is another instance in which the exhibition favoured a reading as text, or a collection of sub-texts, that extended beyond the walls of the gallery space in which it was physically confined. This brings us to a discussion of space in relation to the arrangement of the exhibition and the politics of representation addressed in the individual works.

“When I Breathe There is a Space”<sup>18</sup>

The system of representation in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* with its satellite sub-texts can be likened to a “mattering map” where each body of work marked a site of resistance and a juncture point in which issues of significance to African-Canadians were raised.<sup>19</sup> Dzian Lacharité’s serene, almost spiritual, yet monumental *Right Time, Right Place*, for example, can be seen especially to provide or stake out this precise point of reflection: it makes reference to the historicity (when) and location (where) of Black women through its title (a dialectic drawn from that of the exhibition’s perhaps?) and its aesthetic exploration of temporal and spatial realities. The re-created traditional dwelling made of bamboo branches, light immaterial fabric for its ceiling, and a brown cloth door invited viewers to walk barefoot on the cool bed of sand inside the structure in order to experience the feeling of presence embodied by terms like refuge, shelter and “home.”

In particular, however, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* focused on the mnemonic experiences of the diasporic female subject in its attempt to map out a terrain for Black women’s art in Canada. Constituting the link between the many different individual pieces, the act of remembering further historicized the exhibition as a site of resistance. As Elena Featherston writes, “for women of color re/membering ourselves is a daily act of courage, a ritual of survival ... Re/membering is a form of resistance; it is a life-affirming and self-defining act.”<sup>20</sup>

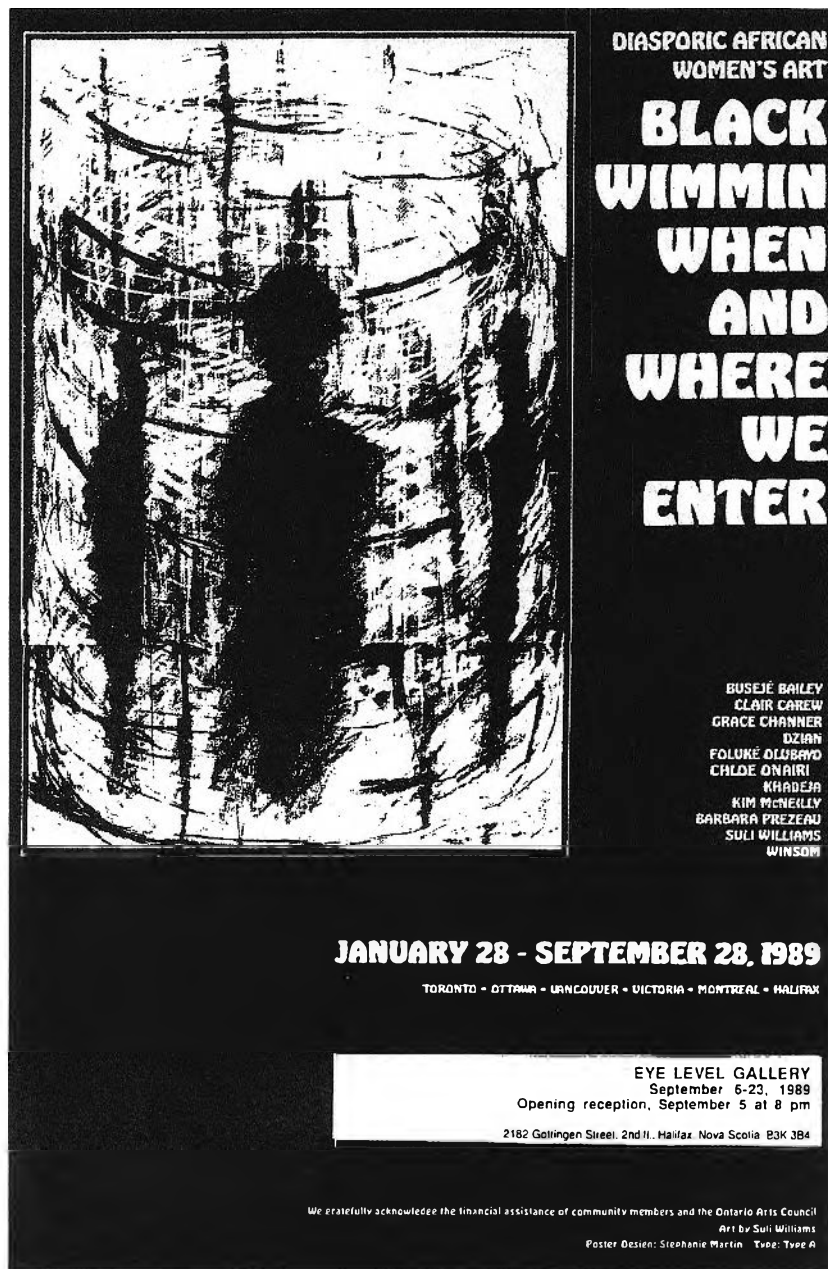
bel hooks elaborates further on the usefulness of memory for Black people in the following:

Thinking again about space and location, I heard the statement “our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting”; a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate the present.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, memory “can be a practice which ‘transforms history from judgement on the past in the name of a present truth to a «counter-memory» that combats out current modes of truth and justice.’”<sup>22</sup> For the diasporic subject, the subversive potential for a counter-memory to transform history is of particular relevance in light of how hegemonic discourses have represented the diaspora and its experiences of exile, slavery and migration solely in terms of Otherness.

The two works by Winsom and Suli Williams exhibited in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* can be seen to embody such counter-memories. Winsom’s textile installation *Kukubuka* (Swahili for “memories”) placed the act of remembering as central to the exhibition site. This creative text – reconstructed from the artist’s memories – documented how her “people were taken from Africa in chains across the ocean to be slaves in Jamaica.”<sup>23</sup> Silhouetted images of Black women washing clothes by the sea were visible through a thin grey-white fabric meant to suggest an ephemeral layer of mist. Beneath this lantern-like set-up of cloth, chains were strewn menacingly over the papier-maché reconstruction of the African continent on the floor to represent the threat of slavery. Similarly, memories of Black women’s experiences of slavery also formed the resonant tone of Suli Williams’ *Happy Birthday Daisy, through her hands*. This textile installation, a homage to the artist’s grandmother Daisy, was comprised of a delicate octagonal tent made of muslin, ten feet high, held up by thin wooden rods. Visible only from the interior of the structure were celebratory paintings of a mother and daughter, oversized hands, and dancing figures. Unfortunately, be-

Figure 1. *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* poster, featuring preliminary drawing of Suli Williams's *Happy Birthday Daisy, through her hands*, 1989. Black and white exhibition poster, 11 x 17 inches (Photo: curators' files).



cause of its delicate nature, *Happy Birthday Daisy* did not survive the tour and was only shown in the inaugural exhibition at A Space Gallery.<sup>24</sup> However, the preliminary drawing for Williams's piece was used to illustrate the exhibition poster for the A Space venue, as well as the documentation released by Houseworks Gallery and Café for the venue in Ottawa (fig. 1).

Interestingly, the textual reconstruction in this essay of "transitory creations" that no longer "exist" save in photographic records and in the memories of their creators and audiences further highlights the importance of memory as

a way to preserve histories or, as in the case of *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*, the details of a significant event in art history.

Other issues raised by the works in the DAWA exhibition included preconceptions of art produced by the African diaspora and different aspects of identity politics surrounding Black women. For example, the art of Chloë Onari and Barbara Prézeau seems to represent what is often perceived to be typical of art by people of African descent, that is, commodified art objects which cater to a tourist audience and paintings and designs in the so-called "primitive" style. Regardless, both artists continue to create work in their medium of expression in styles that demonstrate a persistent personal interest in exploring their cultural background and artistic self-expression. While Chloë Onari, who calls herself a "surface design artist in textiles," explored the uses of colour, materials and media in her piece entitled *Betha De Kool Sony "Me No Pinko Me Red,"* a mixed-media floor installation consisting of fabrics and handmade dolls, Barbara Prézeau explored, through traditional ritual symbols from Haitian culture, how the people of Haiti combined Christian icons with their ancient beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Alongside her several bright, rough-surface paintings on thick hand-made paper, Prézeau's *Vèvè* consisted of religious imagery drawn in a cross formation on the gallery floor using different kinds of grain flour. Illuminated with candles, the images represented "the protector of the woods, the god of agriculture, the cycles of life, the two snakes of androgyny and, at the centre, a heart with a knife in it."<sup>26</sup>

Another recurring theme explored in many of the works was the issue of identity politics, especially as it concerned Black women. Notions of representation and subjectivity were examined, challenged, re-envisioned and/or re-affirmed through various methods of re-/presentation. The works by Claire Carew and Kim McNeilly, for example, can be said to have dealt with the articulation of Black women's identity in a very open and direct manner. Claire Carew's *Here I Stand*, a "tribute to [the artist's] Aboriginal, African, and European ancestors," was a political affirmation of the artist's diasporic female presence amongst other Others. De-



Figure 2. Grace Channer, *Ba Thari*, 1989. Mixed-media floor sculpture (Photo: artist).

picting images of several women of colour, the painting also bore textual graffiti which read, "Work like a mule" and "I had no alternative," sad but strong statements referring to the struggles of women of colour in society. Similarly, *Father of Africa, Mother of the Jews, Black Woman* by Kim McNeilly continues this reclamation of Black women's identity in an exploration of the artist's Canadian/African/Jewish heritage as vibrant with custom and tradition. This mixed-media installation was comprised of a menorah holding seven lit candles and "three long box constructions overlaid with magazine clippings, maps, fabric designs, and family photos."<sup>27</sup> The menorah, strategically placed on a horizontal box, suggested a sacred altar space within the installation.

By contrast, the works of Grace Channer, Khadejha McCall and Buseje Bailey can all be said to have dealt specifically with images of Black women in society: how they view themselves, how they are viewed, and how they want to be viewed.

Usually the focal point of the exhibition space, Grace Channer's *Ba Thari* (a South African phrase meaning "women from whom generations come") is a mixed-media floor sculpture made of twigs, branches, shredded cloth and a piece of driftwood (fig. 2). Unlike the prevailing stereotypical prototypes of Black women – ritualized fertility goddesses, versions of the mammy figure – Channer's representation of the Black female subject evoked an empowered female subject capable of action. In a letter to this author, the artist explains how *Ba Thari* "represented the women who ensured generations of culture and history to have survived through the adverse oppressions beset on women's lives." For Channer, "the resilience of Black women was echoed by that of the driftwood which had passed through many eras ... and touched many shores [but] still survived to tell its stories."

*Ba Thari* also addressed the self-images of Black women. According to African American artist Adrian Piper,

When cultural racism succeeds in making its victims suppress, denigrate, or reject these means of cultural self-affirmation [the solace people find in entertainment, self-expression, intimacy, mutual support, and cultural solidarity], it makes its victims hate themselves.<sup>28</sup>

In order to address this self-hate, *Ba Thari* suggested through the shredded pieces of cloth – one of which read "Sometimes we just hate ourselves" – being expunged from the



figure's stomach, the need for Black women to continue refuting and casting off the stereotypes imposed on them by both white and Black society.

In contrast to Channer's approach, Khadejha McCall used elaborately screen-printed and batiked textiles to depict different perceptions of Black women. *Strong Black Woman*, depicting a Black "super mom," challenged the male role in the commercial world, while the visual dynamics in *One Day Soon* interrogated the historical and current status of Black women in North American society. *Mother Williams* explored Black women's roles as spiritual healer and nurturer. Also focusing on the Black female subject was Buseje Bailey's mixed-media work on panel board entitled *The Black Box* which addressed the image of Black mother-

hood through a tribute to female family members and Black women's history.

### Representations of Black Women

Channer's *Ba Thari*, Bailey's *Black Box* and McCall's *Strong Black Woman* are three examples of how representation and resistance worked together in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*. From abolitionist politics to contemporary Black feminist theory, the Black female body has been an important site of resistance for people of African descent. "Slavery made control of the Black body a central issue in the relationship between whites and blacks."<sup>29</sup> According to Diane Roberts, "representations of whites and blacks fuel a war over the body: the black body, the white body, the female body. The body is defined and circumscribed according to gender, race, and class."<sup>30</sup> Through their different artistic explorations of the image of the Black woman, the works by Channer, Bailey and McCall challenge racial and gender stereotypes of women of African descent that have been constructed by colonial and neo-colonial discourses and re-/define the parameters of representation for the Black female body. In doing so, they re-affirm, at the same time, the presence of Black female subjects in contemporary society as multifarious, complex and always changing.

### Stereotypes: Read Texts<sup>31</sup>

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a *false* representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an *arrested, fixated form* of representation.<sup>32</sup>

Visual stereotypes are not only strongly influenced by other images, but they are also reinforced by the myriad of fixed references contained in textual sources (words) and actions in society. Not concerned with diversity or individualism on the part of the subjects in question, they serve to "depersonalize individuals and thereby deny them the rights and dignity which our society professes to accord everyone."<sup>33</sup> As Black feminist Alice Walker writes, stereotypes are intended as "prisons of image. Inside each desperately grinning 'Sambo' and each placid 'mammy' ... there is imprisoned a real person, someone we know."<sup>34</sup> Whether positive or negative, stereotypes, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, are simplifications, reductive devices, meant to contain and control subjects according to universalizing notions of race and gender.<sup>35</sup>

Affecting the image of Black people in particular are the kinds of stereotypical representations – by and large American – of Black people propagated by popular culture.

For example, media reports of shootings and violence committed by Blacks on prime-time "real" news continue to reinforce negative images of the Black male which in turn extends negativity to all Blacks. Even though television programming has introduced more positive representations of Black people to the masses since the 1980s, it has not for the most part destabilized any of the social structures that control the media.

The other domain where visual stereotypes of people of African descent are in abundance is in Western art. The proliferation of stereotypical images of Blacks in art history has been documented by Hugh Honour, Guy C. McElroy and Albert Boime, among others.<sup>36</sup> In these works, the Black woman is observed to be portrayed for the most part as an exoticized/eroticized and/or a silent servient subject, that is, either as a sex slave or as a servant. She is "both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by ... others for their own ends."<sup>37</sup> Given this cultural context, as bell hooks writes, "creating counter-hegemonic images of blackness that resist the stereotype and challenge the artistic imagination is not a simple task."<sup>38</sup> The following section discusses how the images of Bailey's *Black Box* and McCall's *Strong Black Woman* counter two common stereotypes in contemporary North American society, the "mammy" figure and the female "Buppie" (Black urban professional) by re-presenting images of Black women.

### Black Motherhood

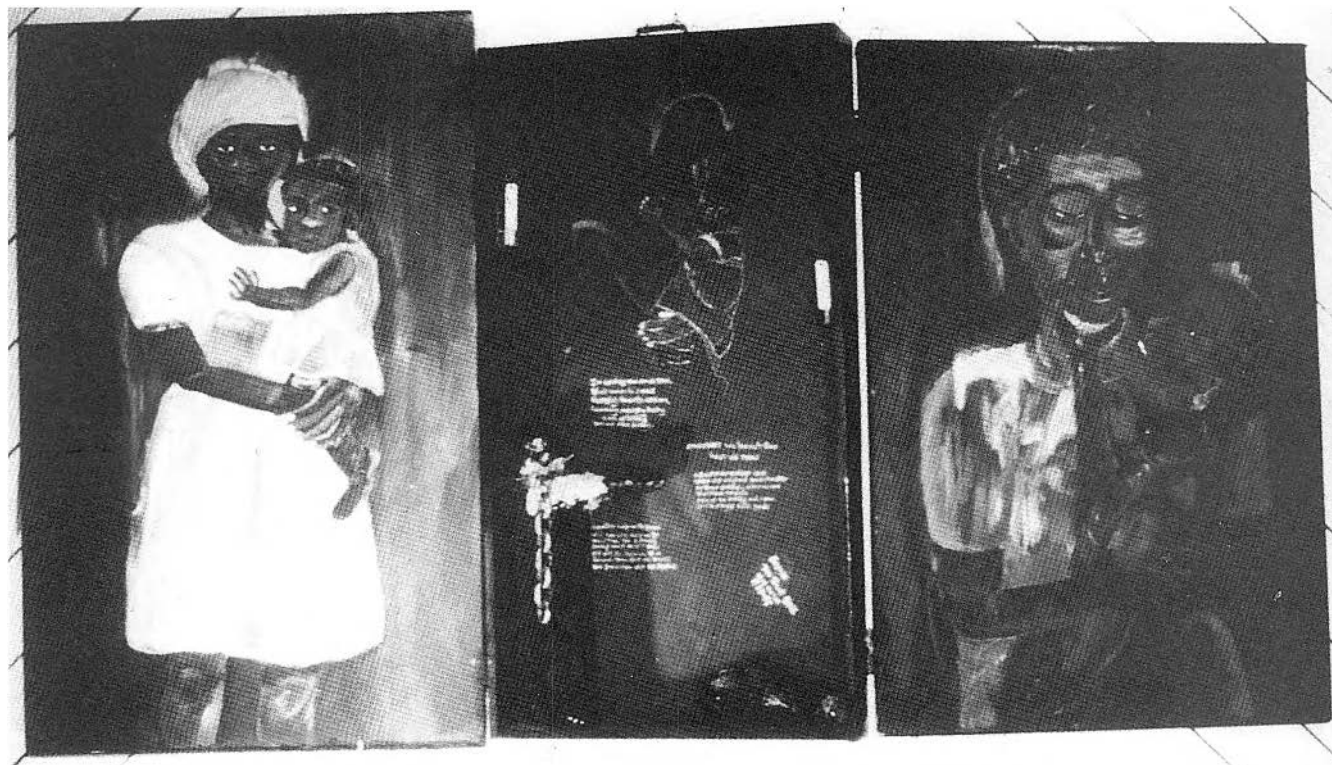
She lived in a box on a ship – a concentration camp named Jesus, named Justice, named Integrity. The box contained her blood. It contained her body.<sup>39</sup>

Buseje Bailey's *Black Box* triptych is a multi-media site that folds accordion-style into a shallow box (fig. 3). When the box is fully opened, a Black mother and daughter can be seen on each of the panels. They record three mother-daughter relationships in the artist's life which loosely translate into metaphors for future, past and present. The figures from left to right represent the artist and her daughter, the artist's grandmother and her mother as an infant and, finally, the artist's mother and herself as a young girl.

Central to *The Black Box's* artistic inquiry is its rigorous critique of the dearth of historical documentation on the lives of Black women and people of African descent in general. This critique is brought about by merging collective memories of the history of slavery with the artist's own contemporary memories of family members, as well as those of the work's audiences. Constantly shifting from visually documenting the artist's female family members to



Figure 3. Buseje Bailey, *The Black Box*, 1989. Mixed-media on panel board (Photo: artist).



representing the generations of women who have contributed to the history of the Black experience, this amalgamation of memories results in a visual text that serves as a living history in its portrayal of the continuity of Black experience.

The more immediate associations with Black people's history of slavery are suggested by the physical structure of *The Black Box*. For example, the wooden structure serves as an "archaeological reminder"<sup>40</sup> of the deplorable conditions in slave ships which Africans were forced to endure during their transportation across the Atlantic as well as an allusion to the story of Pandora's Box.<sup>41</sup> In the Greek tragedy, the curious Pandora unknowingly releases evil spirits when she opens a forbidden box. Similarly, artist Buseje Bailey has opened up a buried chest containing – as its title would imply – Black history. Like the spirits of the Pandora story, the historical contents or memories, both negative and positive, found in *The Black Box* attempt to resist total reconfinement by subsequently resorting to change each time they are referred to or recollected. However, the references to history are not limited to the physicality of *The Black Box*. They are also signified through its visual dynamics.

From a postmodern perspective, according to Mark Cheetham, fragmentation and damage are two culturally specific signs of history.<sup>42</sup> Both of these are manifested in *The Black Box* in several ways. Fragmentation is shown

through the bodily dismemberment of the women and the compartmentalization of the box into past, present and future through the different generations of women, while damage is most apparent in the broken chain. The old shoe and dismembered foot protruding from the central panel (the shoe having been cast off in the run for freedom and the injured foot "having just broken free," according to the artist) illustrate both fragmentation and damage – "fragmentation" in the separation of the shoe from the foot and the foot from the body of the grandmother, the only member of the triptych to have lived through slavery, and "damage" in the ankle injury sustained from the abuses of the past.<sup>43</sup> According to one critic, "[n]o attempt is made to soften the bitter edges of history or to sidestep the brutality of survival" in *The Black Box*.<sup>44</sup>

As viewers weave through time and through these different sites of memory and historical references, it becomes apparent that multiple readings of *The Black Box* as a historical document occur because of the numerous applicable sources of memory. The cyclical and constant regeneration of memories, most obviously suggested by the repeating images of mother and daughter, allows for different histories to be articulated and remembered without presenting the history of Black women as static and frozen in time.

*The Black Box* thus initiates a politicization of memory

by re-presenting history through memories that have been transformed into visual images. In doing so, it destabilizes stereotypical representations of Black women in society. This can be seen in the way *The Black Box* addresses the mythical construction of Black women as “mammy” figures.

Of the different negative stereotypes of Black women persisting all over North America through literature, art, mass media and popular culture, one of the most pervasive is the image of the Black woman as the desexualized “mammy” of the Aunt Jemima type. Usually a jolly older woman with a red polka-dotted headscarf, the mammy is always portrayed in positions of domestic servitude where she excels as primary care-giver to her white employers’ children.<sup>45</sup>

Although the mother figure may represent in almost every culture the archetypal care-giver, the stereotype of Black women as mummies, that is, as “sexless archmothers” who “seem to have no children themselves”<sup>46</sup> but have plenty of time to care for others distorts the historical and social realities of Black mothers, especially when used in reference to the history of slavery. According to sociologist La Frances Rodgers-Rose, African women who arrived in America via the slave trade came from “an environment that stressed the importance of motherhood.”<sup>47</sup> That is, they came with the attitudes and beliefs that “the survival of children was paramount in the culture.”<sup>48</sup> This survival was ensured by Black women through the act of mothering. As Bailey and Channer write:

the women in our history are a very important aspect of our survival. As the keepers of the traditions and the culture, they are the ones who teach and pass them onto the next generation through the act of mothering.

However, as Joanne Braxton’s discussion of the archetype of the “outraged mother” in slave narratives illustrates, under slavery, motherhood was unavoidable because of the combined sexual and economic exploitation of Black female slaves by their white owners.<sup>49</sup> In addition to being physically abused, their bodies used for forced re-/production, “Black women were raped, [and] separated from their children.”<sup>50</sup> Braxton writes: “the twentieth-century Black woman was outraged because of the intimacy of her oppression.”<sup>51</sup>

Thus, *The Black Box* can be said to function not only as a tribute to Black mothers for their strength and dedication to the continuation of Black history but also as a reclamation of the intimacy of motherhood to nurture one’s own family exclusively as opposed to that of the master. The Black mother is not remembered by the artist as a large, jovial, pancake expert, but rather as a long-memoried

woman whose act of mothering Black children ensured the survival of Black people. Seen in this light, she may also represent a possible Black feminist link to social transformation in contemporary theorizations of race and gender.<sup>52</sup>

The Female “Buppie:”  
Challenging “Status-Discrepant” Attitudes

Khadejha McCall’s *Strong Black Woman* is a large printed textile in different shades of brown that depicts the repeated form of a Black woman in a dress suit carrying, in one hand, a briefcase, and in the other, an infant in swaddling clothes (fig. 4). The Black woman represented here is obviously a “working mom.”

Like Bailey’s *Black Box*, McCall’s *Strong Black Woman* challenges the stereotype of Black women as being only “domestics.” According to Black feminist Makeda Silvera, getting employment visas as live-in domestic workers was the main way that Black women (mainly from the West Indies) entered Canada since as early as 1955.<sup>53</sup> Continuing to this day, the Canadian government immigration policy of admitting large numbers of Black Caribbean women solely to work as domestic workers has reinforced the colonial stereotype of Black women as servant in the contemporary Canadian context.<sup>54</sup>

*Strong Black Woman* destabilizes this stereotype by bringing forth the construction of the female “Buppie” (Black urban professional) as it affects the image of Black women professionals and by extension their status in North American society. The female “Buppie” has been described by Cheryl Bernadette-Leggon as a “status-discrepant professional” because the ascribed status of this subject as a blue-collar worker is discrepant with that of her achieved status as a professional. According to Bernadette-Leggon, for Black women, “the double-bind of race and gender and its effects are greater than the sum of its parts” as both minority-ascribed statuses of race and sex are operant.<sup>55</sup> As a result, only a few Black women professionals occupy “high visibility” positions in private-sector companies. According to Omolade, “the majority of Black women professionals are concentrated in the ‘handmaiden’ professions, predominantly female occupations such as nursing, teaching (elementary, kindergarten, and nursery school, librarianship and social work).”<sup>56</sup> For Brand, Black women’s socialization to become nurses and teachers “can be seen as a trajectory from maid/servant/domestic help” – both employ Black women as helping, caring subordinates.<sup>57</sup>

From within this context, *Strong Black Woman* addresses how the problems encountered by Black women profession-

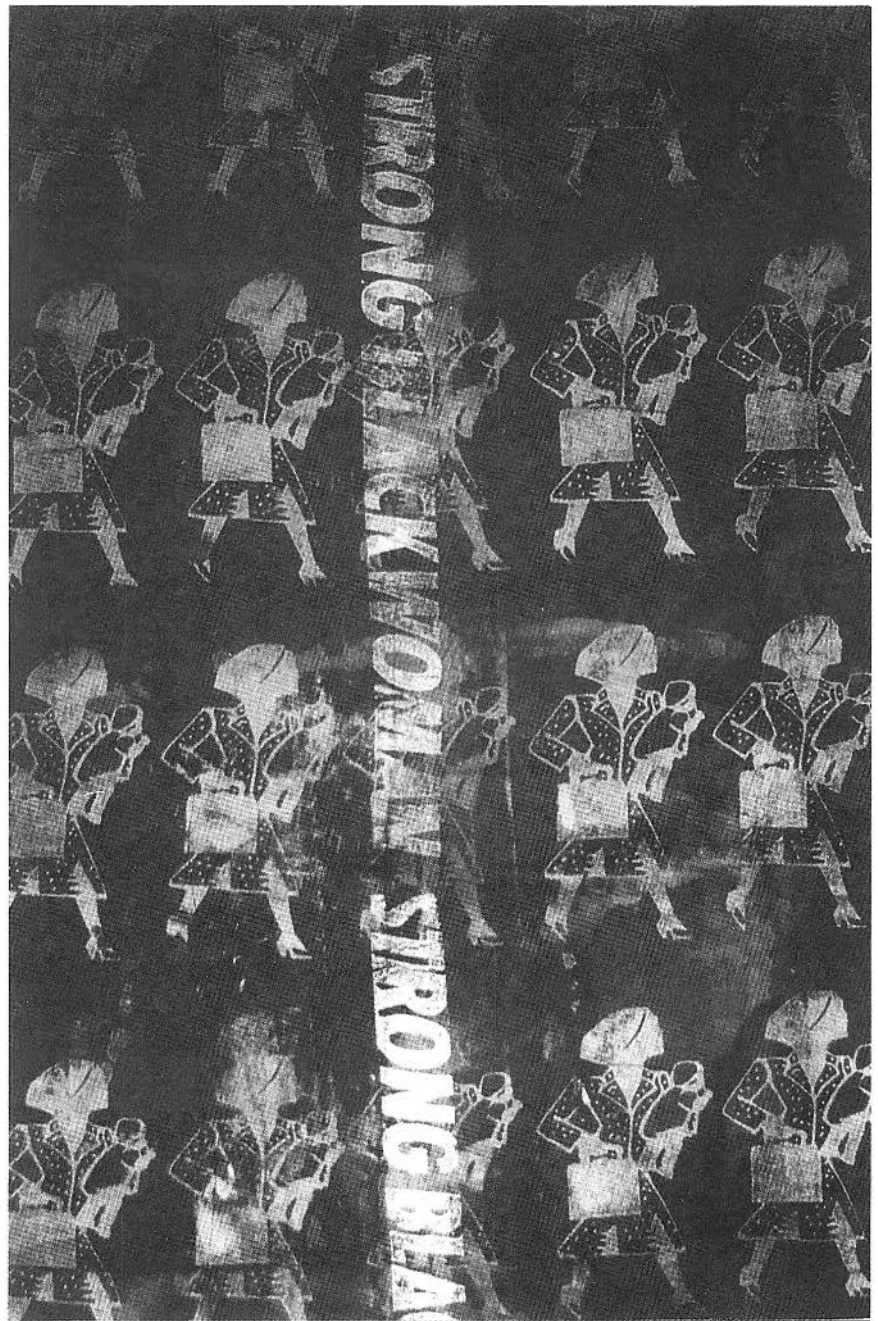
Figure 4. Khadejha McCall, *Strong Black Woman*, 1989. Copyart, silkscreen, handprinting, and painting on unstretched canvas, 48 x 36 inches (Photo: artist).

als in the corporate world lie in the way the two dominant stereotypes of Black women, the mammy (servant) and the matriarch (bad mother), continue to affect the lives of women of African descent in contemporary society.

The mammy figure, said to have originated during, and linked specifically to, the years of slavery in the United States,<sup>58</sup> is reinvented today in the “new mammy.” Thus, not only is this “white fiction of Blackness”<sup>59</sup> still one of the most recognizable stereotypical images of our day thanks to the marketing experts at *Aunt Jemima’s Pancake Mix*<sup>60</sup> (and, one might add, the casting of such classic films as *Gone With The Wind*), the “new and improved mammy” figure exists in North American enculturation more than is generally realized. According to Omolade, “[i]rrespective of setting and job title, the mammy legacy continues to weave itself into the lives of nearly all Black women workers.”<sup>61</sup> For example, in the public sector where the so-called demammification of Black women, that is, the transition from Black women doing typical “mammy work” to clerical administrative and professional employment,<sup>62</sup> is most apparent, the old mammy figure is seen to have merely been modernized in the image of the “Buppie.” The Black woman professional who is being viewed as a “new mammy” is often expected not only to carry more than her normal load of administrative duties but also to play a mother figure role for the other members of staff, regardless of whether she has children at home or not.<sup>63</sup>

The controlling image of the matriarch also influences how the Black woman professional is perceived by society. According to Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins:

While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in white homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the “good” Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the “bad” Black mother ... From an elite white male standpoint, the matriarch is essentially a failed mammy, a



negative stigma applied to those African-American women who dared to violate the image of the submissive, hard-working servant.<sup>64</sup>

Thus the matriarch is a controlling image used to negate the agency of Black women who have been able to disassociate themselves from the mammy stereotype by having successfully entered the racialized and gendered job market of North American society.

Using representation as resistance, McCall's *Strong Black*

*Woman* refutes the negative stereotypes of the mammy and the matriarch by presenting an image of the contemporary Black woman as being quite capable of raising children and maintaining the demanding itinerary of a professional career. In contrast to the “strong Black woman” in times of slavery who was forced to carry the burden of raising her children only for the slave master’s profit, the modern “strong Black woman” is shown to be managing her own family. Moreover, in its visualization of successful Black women in job markets other than that of the domestic realm, *Strong Black Woman* manifests itself as an especially useful and empowering image for contemporary young Black women.

Like Bailey’s *Black Box*, McCall’s *Strong Black Woman*, in conjunction with the larger theme of *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*, provided exhibition visitors with another textuality from which to read the complexity of the African diasporic female subject.

Together, the many personal and collective memories and spaces of articulation brought forward in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* were able to convey a sense of history being shared, yet at the same time, in their instability and changeability, they also served to voice the individualism of each of the artists whose mnemonic traces were being exposed. As such, the exhibition, read as a maturing map in which each body of work is taken to represent a site of resistance through memory, can be seen not only to have addressed the historicity and location of Black women in Canada but also to have supported a politicization of memory which promoted a deeper understanding of the Black female diasporic subject.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to document and critique an episode in the history of Black women artists in Canada embodied by *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*. This exhibition signalled an important turning point in the struggle for representation of Black women artists in Canadian art history by raising awareness of their presence and contribution to this area of study. It was also significant in the way it challenged stereotypical constructions of Black women, Black women artists and their work. The persisting proliferation of stereotypes and racialized notions surrounding Black women and their art, some of which have been brought forward in this article, reveal that the social realities of racism and sexism are far from being eradicated from the art world and continue to infringe upon the daily lives of contemporary women artists of colour. Finally, *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* demonstrated that aes-

thetic activism in the context of the gallery or community centre space can constitute an effective form of intervention against racism in the arts and society in general.

## Notes

- 1 Some exhibitions in artist-run centres which have featured the work of Black Canadian women artists since then include: *By Any Means Necessary* (1990), *Black Women and Image* (1991), and the series of exhibitions presented in conjunction with the *Celebrating African Identity (CELAFI)* Festivals in 1992 and 1997, of which the most notable was the exhibition *Women’s Work: Black Women in the Visual Arts* at YYZ Artists’ Outlet (Toronto, 9-26 July 1997) curated by Buseje Bailey, which was considered as a follow-up to *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*.
- 2 The recent *Women’s Work: Black Women in the Visual Arts* provided an accompanying text containing Bailey’s curatorial statement and an exhibition essay by Alice Ming Wai Jim, but no catalogue.
- 3 Anna Julia Cooper, epigraph in Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984).
- 4 Interestingly, although the exhibition was lauded as representing Black artists across Canada, the artists who participated in *Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter* noticeably represented a limited segment of the Black Canadian community; except for Barbara Prézéau and Dzian LaCharité who are French-speaking and Ottawa- and Montreal-based, respectively, and Suli Williams from Edmonton who was the only representative from the Prairie provinces, the others are anglophone and were living in or near the Toronto area at the time of the exhibition.
- 5 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York, 1991), 188.
- 6 Buseje Bailey and Grace Channer, “*Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter*,” unpublished curatorial notes, 1989, n.pag. All subsequent citations in relation to co-curators Bailey and Channer refer to this text.
- 7 Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York, 1994), 1. The author suggests that the many states of migration undergone in the lived experiences of a Black female subject greatly contribute to the construction of her identity.
- 8 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Toronto, 1990), 42.
- 9 hooks, *Yearning*, 47. This view differs from the politics of white feminism which has located home as a crucial site of oppression for (white) women, while work outside the home has been considered liberating. See Dionne Brand, “A Working Paper on Black Women in Toronto: Gender, Race and Class,” *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics*, ed. Himani Bannerji (Toronto, 1993), 272.

- 10 Brand, "A Working Paper," 272.
- 11 Nina Felshin, *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle, 1995), 12.
- 12 Felshin, *But Is It Art?*, 8-29.
- 13 Brand, "A Working Paper," 272.
- 14 Buseje Bailey, quoted in Lillian Allen, "Revolutionary Acts: Creating Ourselves in Existence," *Parallélogramme*, XIII, 4 (April/May 1988), 36.
- 15 Marlene Nourbese Philip, *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture* (Stratford, 1992), 104.
- 16 Susan Crean, "Women's Bodies, Women's Selves: Reclaiming An Artistic Identity," *Canadian Art*, VI, 2 (Summer 1989), 22.
- 17 Also interesting are the historical and cultural contexts of the maturing artist-run network in Canada across which the exhibition was travelling. For a lengthier discussion of this as well as of the audience responses to the exhibition while it was touring its different venues, see my M.A. thesis, "Black Women Artists in Canada: An Analysis and Documentation of the 1989 *Black Wimmen – When and Where We Enter*," Montreal, Concordia University, 1996, esp. 31-34, 84-88.
- 18 This sub-title comes from Buseje Bailey's feeling that if there isn't a space, you just have to make it yourself. Susan Douglas, "When I Breathe There is a Space: An Interview with Buseje Bailey," *Canadian Woman Studies*, XI, 1 (1989), 40-42.
- 19 The idea of "matterng maps" is drawn from Lawrence Grossberg, "Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom," *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York, 1993) 50-65. Grossberg discusses matterng maps as a construction that one forms in order to locate oneself politically in a space.
- 20 Elena Featherston, *Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture and Identity* (Freedom, 1995), preface.
- 21 hooks, *Yearning*, 147.
- 22 Jonathan Arac, quoted in bel hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York, 1992), 343.
- 23 In discussing the various works, I have drawn freely from conversations with the artists and from their artist statements. I am grateful to them for discussing their work with me, but it does not necessarily follow, of course, that they would agree with all aspects of my account. The artists' statements are cited only when needed for clarification.
- 24 Foluké Olubayo's air-dried clay work of a pyramidal structure decorated with sets of hands and symbols suggesting rebirth suffered similar misfortune.
- 25 Crean, "Women's Bodies, Women's Selves," 22.
- 26 Crean, "Women's Bodies, Women's Selves," 22.
- 27 Crean, "Women's Bodies, Women's Selves," 22.
- 28 Adrian Piper, quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York, 1990), 7.
- 29 Michael D. Harris, "Ritual Bodies – Sexual Bodies: The Role and Presentation of the Body in African-American Art," *Third Text*, XII (Autumn 1990), 92.
- 30 Diane Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region* (New York, 1994), 2.
- 31 Barbara Johnson, epigraph, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987). "A stereotype is an already read text."
- 32 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York, 1990), 163.
- 33 Robbin Legere Henderson, "Prisons of Image," *Prisons of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*, ed. Robbin Legere Henderson and Geno Rodriguez (New York, 1989), 6.
- 34 Alice Walker, epigraph, *Prisons of Image*.
- 35 Bhabha, "The Other Question," 163.
- 36 See Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Blacks in Western Art*, I-IV (Cambridge, 1989); Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art (1710-1940)* (Washington and San Francisco, 1990); Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington and London, 1990); and Ellwood Parry, *The Image of the Indian and the Black Man in American Art: 1500-1900* (New York, 1974). For representations of the Black female nude in Canadian art of the 1930s, see Charmaine Nelson, "Coloured Nude": Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy," M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 1995.
- 37 Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 168-69.
- 38 bel hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York, 1995), 96.
- 39 Barbara Omolade, *The Rising Song of African American Women* (New York, 1994), 39.
- 40 Mark A. Cheetham and Linda Hutcheon, *Remembering Postmodernism: Trends in Recent Canadian Art* (Toronto, 1991), 7.
- 41 Douglas, "When I Breathe There is a Space," 41.
- 42 Cheetham and Hutcheon, *Remembering Postmodernism*, 4.
- 43 All citations of the artist hereafter are taken from a personal interview with Buseje Bailey, Montreal, Quebec, 22 August 1995.
- 44 Crean, "Women's Bodies, Women's Selves," 22.
- 45 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White On Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven and London, 1992), 155.
- 46 Nederveen Pieterse, *White On Black*, 152.
- 47 La Frances Rodgers-Rose, "The Black Woman: A Historical Overview" in Rodgers-Rose, *The Black Woman* (Beverly Hills, 1980), 17-18.
- 48 Janice Hale, "The Black Woman and Child Rearing," *The Black Woman*, ed. Rodgers-Rose, 80. The role of mother as surpassing that of wife in importance in African and African diasporic cultures has been heavily documented in African Studies and Black Literature Studies.

- 49 Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1989), 19-20. As children born of Black women were automatically considered slaves, Black female slaves were often purchased as breeders to increase the slave holdings for their masters.
- 50 Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*, 11.
- 51 Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 19.
- 52 Stanlie M. James, "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?" *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, eds. Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia (New York, 1993), 44-54.
- 53 Makeda Silvera, "Immigrant Domestic Workers: Whose Dirty Laundry?" in Silvera, *Fireworks: The Best of "Fireweed"* (Toronto, 1986), 39-46.
- 54 Dionne Brand, *No Burden To Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto, 1991), 28.
- 55 Cheryl Bernadette-Leggon, "Black Female Professionals: Dilemmas and Contradictions of Status," *The Black Woman*, ed. Rodgers-Rose, 190.
- 56 Omolade, *The Rising Song*, 54.
- 57 Brand, "A Working Paper," 276.
- 58 K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York, 1993), 37.
- 59 Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Facing History*, ed. McElroy, "Introduction," xiii.
- 60 See Marilyn Kern-Foxworth's *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, 1994).
- 61 Omolade, *The Rising Song*, 51.
- 62 Omolade, *The Rising Song*, 51.
- 63 Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, 37-44; bel hooks, "Black Women Intellectuals," *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, eds. bel hooks and Cornel West (Boston, 1991), 154.
- 64 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, 1990), 73-74.