

**Braiding Our Lives**  
**Black Immigrant Mothers and Adult Literacy**  
**Tresser nos vies**  
**Mères noires immigrantes et littératie des adultes**

Stephanie Fearon

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Breaking the Armour and Stirring the Soul

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Résumé de l'article

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# **BRAIDING OUR LIVES: BLACK IMMIGRANT MOTHERS AND ADULT LITERACY**

**Stephanie Fearon**

Independent researcher

## **Abstract**

*Adult literacy is a pressing policy issue in Canada. Reports reveal immigrant communities as accounting for a relatively large share of the country's population experiencing low reading, writing, numeracy, and information processing skills. This paper explores how Black immigrant women who are adult literacy learners negotiate and reconfigure their motherwork while living abroad in Toronto with their families. This article presents insights obtained from six in-depth interviews with African Caribbean mothers living in Toronto. In these interviews, participants shared stories that centre the following questions: What are the literacy experiences of Black immigrant mothers who are adult learners? How can we better support their literacy journey?*

*Drawing on an arts-informed narrative methodology, this study compiled findings gained from interviews into the creative non-fiction story Braiding Our Lives. Braiding Our Lives captures personal narratives, shared by study participants, highlighting the central role of homeplace and cultural work in the lives of Black immigrant mothers who are literacy learners.*

## **Résumé**

*La littératie des adultes est un enjeu politique urgent au Canada. Les rapports révèlent que les communautés immigrantes représentent une portion relativement importante de la population canadienne dont les compétences en lecture, écriture, numératie et traitement des informations sont plus faibles. Cet article explore comment les mères Noires immigrantes apprenantes en littératie des adultes négocient et reconfigurent leur travail maternel dans leurs vies à l'étranger à Toronto avec leurs familles. Les résultats de six entrevues détaillées avec des mères afro-caribéennes vivant à Toronto sont présentés. Les participantes y ont partagé des récits orientés par les questions suivantes : quelles sont les expériences de mères Noires immigrantes apprenantes adultes? Comment pouvons-nous mieux soutenir leurs parcours de littératie?*

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*Drawing on an arts-informed narrative methodology, this study compiled findings gained from interviews into the creative non-fiction story Braiding Our Lives. Braiding Our Lives captures personal narratives, shared by study participants, highlighting the central role of homeplace and cultural work in the lives of Black immigrant mothers who are literacy learners.*

In the 1960s, my maternal grandmother left Jamaica and reunited with two of her sisters in Toronto. She remembers arranging her wet laundry to dry across hot radiators and haggling the butchers on Spadina Avenue for a lower price on oxtail. She recounts riding the subway to Eaton's and rushing up the escalator to buy her first winter essential—a brown wool coat with deep pockets. My grandmother also recalls securing her first job cleaning at a downtown hotel and sending money to her sister in Jamaica, who was caring for the young children my grandmother left behind.

At the age of 16, my mother embarked on her own migration journey and joined my grandmother in Toronto. My grandmother prides her ability to *get by* in reading and writing. As with some of her sisters, my grandmother's experiences of low literacy skills continue to shape the ways in which she practises motherwork, pursues her passions, and receives literacy instruction.

### **Context: Adult Literacy in Canada**

By the 1980s, adult literacy was a pressing policy issue across the world (Barton & Hamilton, 1990; Elfert & Walker, 2020). Literacy was no longer perceived as a binary construct of literate versus illiterate. Instead, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners conceptualized literacy as a contextual social practice existing on a continuum (Elfert & Walker, 2020; Street, 1984). In Canada, adult literacy advocates maintained that literacy skills were necessary for adults to thrive within a dynamic society (Elfert & Walker, 2020; Street, 1984). In response to these shifts in discourse about literacy, a series of international and national surveys sought to capture the experiences of adult literacy learners.

International and national surveys measured literacy as reading, writing, numeracy, and information processing skills across five levels (Elfert & Walker, 2020). Canadian academics, practitioners, and advocates critiqued these measures, arguing that they contradicted socio-cultural understandings of literacy as a plural and dynamic social and cultural practice (Elfert & Walker, 2020), “with different literacies according to the different domains of life and defined by the individual and wider community goals and cultural practices” (Addey, 2018, p. 317). Further, scholars affirmed that the experiences of adult literacy learners, especially women learners of African descent, are informed by varying and intersecting oppressions that help shape their engagement with the world (Brookfield, 2003; Darder, 2015; hooks, 1994; Jones, 2019). Horsman (2004), Isserlis (2008), Jones (2019), and Sheared (1999) proposed that adult learning sites make links between

trauma, the literacy challenges, and isolation endured by racialized women. To illustrate this need, Jones (2019) presented the Women Reading for Education, Affinity and Development (WREAD) program as an example of a critically aware learning space that centred the stories of African American, African Caribbean, and African women literacy learners. At WREAD, literacy practitioners and Black women learners shared narratives detailing their literacy struggles alongside the traumas wrought by racism, gender-based oppression, and economic and political marginalization (Jones, 2019). Their personal stories, Jones explained, documented the ways in which oppression and trauma produce both anguish and strategies for resistance among women learners of African descent.

Over the years, the International Adult Literacy Survey, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies have highlighted that nearly half of Canadians aged 16 and above are estimated to be in the two lowest levels of a five-point scale for literacy, with level three considered the minimum for a person to be able to function adequately in society (Statistics Canada, 2013; Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2017). Further, these surveys revealed immigrant communities as accounting for a relatively large share of the Canadian population experiencing literacy concerns (Statistics Canada, 2013; Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2017).

### **Black Immigrants in Canada: African Caribbean Communities**

Black Canadian communities are diverse and longstanding, and some stretch back to the beginning of settler colonialism in the country (James et al., 2010). The institution of slavery in what is now Canada began in the early 1600s and was abolished throughout British North America in 1834 (Aladejebi, 2016). The enslavement of African peoples in early Canada continues to inform the experiences of African Caribbean mothers currently living in Toronto. For centuries, African Canadian mothers have worked to ensure their community's access to, as well as well-being and safety in, schools across the country. Following the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, African Canadian mothers, like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, spearheaded social movements demanding their participation and that of their community in educational institutions in Ontario (Aladejebi, 2016, p. 8). African Caribbean mothers living in Toronto continue this legacy of demanding the full engagement of their families in public schools that continue to use exclusionary policies and pedagogies against their communities. Dei (1997), Fearon (2020), Onuora (2012, 2016), and James and Turner (2017) have extensively documented the ways that policies—notably those associated with suspension, expulsion, and special education—and the omission of Black experiences in curriculum have contributed to pushing African Caribbean children, mothers, and families from publicly funded schools and learning programs in the province.

I am a Canadian mother of African Caribbean heritage. I am the descendant of Africans who were enslaved in Jamaica. To appreciate my position as a Black Canadian motherwork scholar of Caribbean heritage and adult literacy advocate, it is important for me to detail my family's Canadian migration story. In 1955, Canada implemented the West Indian Domestic Scheme to mediate the movement of predominantly working-class African Caribbean women into domestic services across the country (Crawford, 2018; Henry, 1968; Lawson, 2013). The West Indian Domestic Scheme reflected pervasive racist and sexist ideas that deemed African Caribbean women as best suited for domestic work regardless of

their skills, qualifications, and interests in other areas (Crawford, 2003). It was through this scheme that my grandmother and other African Caribbean women migrated to Canada in the early 1960s. In Canada, African Caribbean women, like my grandmother, were relegated to work as domestics and nannies in private White middle-class households and hotels, or as cooks, cleaners, and health-care aides in public institutions (Crawford, 2003). My grandmother explained that domestic workers were not encouraged to further develop their literacy skills, nor did their demanding work schedules allow them to pursue formal education opportunities.

In addition to Canada, Jamaica and other Caribbean nations benefited from this export of female labour "through market affiliation with Canada and from remittances sent home by domestic workers" (Daenzer, 1993 p. 85). Crawford (2003) reminded us that African Caribbean women were not passive victims in this interaction. Many were household heads and saw migration as a way to escape poverty, unemployment, and limited opportunities in their home countries. My grandmother and other African Caribbean women saw migration to Canada as a temporary strategy to support their families and households back home. At the time, to qualify to work in Canada, domestics were required to be aged 18 to 35 and without dependents (Henry, 1968; Lawson, 2013). Some Canadian officials and private employment agencies tasked to fill the country's demand for domestic workers overlooked requirements for women to be free of dependents, most notably children (Crawford, 2003; Daenzer, 1993). As such, some African Caribbean women, my grandmother included, concealed their motherhood identity in order to secure their entry into Canada, leaving behind their children (Crawford, 2003).

By positioning my family's migration story within the historical context, I gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which African Caribbean mothers were affixed into marginalized positions of Canada's racial, gendered, and class hierarchies. The 2016 census reported that Black immigrants living in Canada come from 150 different countries (Statistics Canada, 2019). Long-established Black immigrants are mostly from the Caribbean, accounting for roughly half of the Black immigrant population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019). Most first-, second-, and third-generation Black Canadians identify their ethnic origins as Caribbean, further revealing the deep-rooted presence of Caribbean immigrant communities (Statistics Canada, 2019). Data on adult literacy continues to highlight the dire literacy concerns among immigrant populations (Elfert & Walker, 2020). However, limited literature is dedicated to the adult literacy experiences of Canada's largest Black immigrant population—the African Caribbean community.

Canada's striking historical relationship with African Caribbean mothers further stresses the importance of excavating and amplifying the stories of these particular mothers who experience literacy concerns. This arts-informed research paper contributes to existing literature on adult education in Canada by focusing on the working and literacy experiences of African Caribbean mothers who are adult learners. This study affirmed the need for adult educational programs to be spaces that cultivate Black immigrant learners' practices of cultural work and homeplace.

### Guiding Inquiry Questions

Through a data-driven short story, this arts-informed narrative study captured the ways in which adult literacy policies, racism, ableism, and sexism impact the work, relationships, and learning experiences of African Caribbean mothers who are adult literacy learners living in Toronto. The following questions guided this arts-informed inquiry: What are the literacy experiences of Black immigrant mothers who have participated in a formal learning program? How can we better support their literacy journeys?

### The Study

The purpose of this arts-informed narrative study was to explore with six African Caribbean women living in Toronto their maternal experiences as adult literacy learners. Specifically, I sought to understand how these particular Black immigrant mothers navigated their relationships and learning realities within their communities as adult literacy learners. A purposeful sampling procedure was used as it enabled me to yield the most information about the phenomenon under study. Since I sought to locate African Caribbean women adult literacy learners in Toronto, a snowball sampling strategy, sometimes referred to as network or chain sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002), was employed. Participants were asked to refer other African Caribbean mothers whom they knew to be engaged in motherwork and struggling with literacy. Study participants included women who:

- self-identify as Black immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean;
- live in the Greater Toronto Area;
- have engaged in motherwork;
- are at least 21 years of age and competent to formally give consent for the interview;
- identify as an adult who struggles with literacy; and
- have completed at least two years in a community-based adult learning program (e.g., not-for-profit adult learning centres, private adult tutoring classes, etc.).

### Theoretical Frameworks

To carry out this arts-informed study, it was necessary to complete a critical review of the theories framing the research. African Indigenous, Black feminist thought, and motherwork frameworks underpinned all phases of this research study.

#### *African Indigenous Frameworks*

In her article “African Indigenous Knowledge: Claiming, Writing, Storing, and Sharing the Discourse,” Wane (2005, p. 29) stressed the importance of acknowledging the following at the onset of one’s examination of African Indigenous frameworks:

- People of African ancestry are not homogenous and typify cultural diversity.
- Some common elements exist between them.
- African Indigenous knowledge systems and traditions have been subjected to different forms of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and consequent distortion.
- African cultural resource knowledge is neither frozen in time nor space.

An African Indigenous framework recognizes that knowledge and its methods of investigation are connected to a people's history, land, cultural context, and worldview (Wane, 2005). This framework contends that worldviews inform the ways in which knowledge is sought, critiqued, and understood. An African Indigenous framework maintains that knowledge is not an externalized single Truth to be attained, nor a scientific Truth to be proven (McDonnell, 2012). Rather, knowledge resides and shifts within the spirits of individuals, communities, and lands (Dei, 2011; McDonnell, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2004).

African Indigenous knowledges, which form the core of the framework used for the study, are experiential and based on a worldview and culture that are largely relational. A person becomes human in the midst of others and seeks both individual and collective harmony (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). In this vein, acquisition of knowledge is collective and community-oriented (Wane, 2005). Central to African Indigenous knowledges is an orientation to a "collective ethic" where survival of the group derives from interdependence and interconnectedness (McDonnell, 2012; Mkabela, 2005; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013).

Literary works by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2006, 2007) demonstrate the fundamental role of orality in African Indigenous frameworks. As a system, African Indigenous knowledges are characteristically oral and passed from generation to generation in the context of everyday community living and activities (Mkabela 2005; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013; Wane, 2000). Its complexities are expressed in communal ceremonies and rituals, such as storytelling, proverbs, folktales, recitation, sport, poetry, riddles, praise, songs, dance, music, and other activities (Dei et al., 2000; Elabor-Idemudia, 2000; Kashope Wright, 2000; Turay, 2000; Wane, 2000). Lebakeng (2010) reminded us that Indigenous frameworks of knowledge are not static and undergo "a continuous process of experimentation, innovation and adaptation" (p. 25). African Indigenous frameworks have yielded results and contributions that have been discounted by many (Dei et al., 2000; Wane, 2005) and looked down upon relative to Eurocentric models of knowledge production (Dei et al., 2000; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013; Wane, 2005). Colonial institutions continue to mischaracterize Indigenous frameworks as simplistic and not amenable to the systematic rigour of scientific investigation (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013).

An African Indigenous framework was used in this arts-informed study as it served as a platform to further challenge colonial representations of African Indigenous cultures and knowledges. The framework supports the study's objective to, as Dei et al. (2000) wrote, "rupture the present relationship between 'valid' knowledge and 'not valid' knowledge, [as well as] introduce 'indigenous knowledges' as legitimate ways of knowing that are both dynamic and continuous" (p. 5).

Considering that culture is the lens through which a person perceives, interprets, and makes sense of their reality (Onuora, 2012, 2016), an African Indigenous framework provides this study with grounding to investigate the work of African Caribbean mothers who are adult literacy learners, as well as how their work is cared about within their communities. Research viewed through the lens of African indigeneity affords Black peoples worldwide with a framework through which to reclaim values, practices, and beliefs that continue to shape our existence and sustain us as whole communities (Daniel, 2005; Onuora, 2012, 2016).



### **Black Feminist Thought**

African Indigenous frameworks are not without limitations and are subject to critical analysis. As Dei (2011), Onuora (2016), and McDonnell (2012) warned, Indigenous knowledge systems can reproduce sites of disempowerment for women. Dei (2011) stressed that when engaging with Indigenous frameworks, we must do so in ways that contribute to deconstructing and questioning sites of oppression. Like scholars before me (Collins, 1986, 1987, 2000; hooks, 2007; Massaquoi & Wane, 2007; Onuora, 2016), my work centres Black women's practice, thinking, and theorizing.

Black feminist thought allows for this study to critically engage with the manifestations of patriarchal domination present even within African Indigenous knowledges. At the end of the 20th century, writings by African American theorists, like bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), helped to usher in a shift in post-modern feminist thought. Such theorists advocated for politics of empowerment focused on the complex and nuanced lives of Black women. These American theoretical frameworks have influenced a growing body of work by Black feminists in Canada. Black Canadian research (scholarly, literary, visual, and performative) contributed to an explicit theory of Black feminist thought in Canada that prioritized Black women's everyday life and thinking.

Like in the United States (Collins, 1986, 1987, 2000), Canadians have critically explored Black women's social location, activism, and self-determination within a country that continues to be shaped by its practices of colonialism and slavery. Literary works by Dionne Brand (2001), Afua Cooper (2007), Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane (2007), D'bi.young (2007), and others have long articulated the lives of Black women in Canada. These Black Canadian thinkers express the complexities of lives produced by the intersections of race, class, nationalism, culture, gender, language, and sexuality. Black feminist thought, in Canada and abroad, demands the critical study of Black women's mothering experiences. As such, Black feminist thought grounds this arts-informed study and provides a framework to identify, question, interpret, and reimagine the work and care of Black immigrant mothers who are adult literacy learners living in Toronto.

### **Motherwork**

Feminist theorists Sara Ruddick (1989) and Adrienne Rich (1986) have propelled the study of mothering and motherwork internationally. These early American scholars explored mothering as a site that affords women opportunities for agency. Ruddick (1989) argued that the work of mothering "demands that mothers think" and "out of this need for thoughtfulness, a distinctive discipline emerges" (p. 24).

In Canada, feminist thinkers continue to politicize mothering as work of resistance. Canadian scholars such as Andrea O'Reilly (2004) and Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane (2007) documented the preserving, nurturing, and healing aspects of Black motherhood. O'Reilly (2007), a professor at York University's School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, traced Toni Morrison's theory of African American mothering as articulated in her work. Black mothering is central to Black feminist theories, and motherhood is a persistent presence in Morrison's work. Examining Morrison's novels, essays, speeches, and interviews, O'Reilly illustrated how Morrison builds upon Black

women's experiences of and perspectives on motherhood to theorize a Black motherwork that is, in terms of maternal identity, role, and action, radically different from the motherwork prescribed in the dominant culture. Black motherwork, according to Morrison, Collins, and other Black feminists, is an act of resistance, essential to Black women's fight against racism and sexism, and propels our ability to achieve well-being for ourselves, our children, and our community (O'Reilly, 2004). Motherline, an aspect of Black women's motherwork that centres communal learning and cultural knowledge systems, and homeplace, a site where the agency of Black mothers and their children is nurtured, are integral components of Black motherwork (Fearon, 2020; O'Reilly, 2004).

Scholarship dedicated to Black maternal thinking and practice is spearheaded by Black Canadian women. Black Canadian thinkers like Onuora (2012, 2016), Perryman-Mark (2000), and Flynn and Henwood (2000), among others, use storytelling and narratives to investigate the interconnections between the scholarly and motherly work of Black Canadian women. Such Canadian scholarship archives the longstanding African-centred tradition of women-to-women networks that Black mothers draw on for support. Education researchers, such as Dolana Mogadime (2000) and Adwoa Ntozake Onuora (2012, 2016), contribute to this body of literature by joining feminist pedagogies with the motherwork of Black Canadian women. In so doing, these education researchers further support this study's aim to deepen learning associated with Black Canadian women who engage in the work of mothering.

Motherwork frameworks are essential to this study's investigation of the work and care of African Caribbean women adult literacy learners. Motherwork frameworks enable me to fuse scholarship on Black motherwork with that of adult literacy and policy. Ultimately, motherwork frameworks provide insights needed to interpret and articulate how we, African Caribbean mothers, understand, practise, and leverage motherwork in our daily lives in Canada.

### **Methodology and Story Structure**

This study intertwined "the systematic and rigorous qualities of conventional qualitative methodologies with the artistic, disciplined, and imaginative qualities of the arts" (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). Guided by an arts-informed narrative methodology, this study employed Black storytelling to investigate the literacy experiences of African Caribbean mothers in Toronto and to render scholarship accessible to multiple audiences. Black storytelling, explained Toliver (2021), focuses on how people of African descent counter society's rejection of Black life. Cole and Knowles (2008) defined Black storytelling as stories emerging "from the lived experiences of Black people and communities that use Black knowledge/s as a tool to extend and author oneself beyond the conditions of anti-Blackness" (p. 4). This arts-informed study centred the everyday stories of African Caribbean mothers in Toronto and humanized their literacy learning experiences. The methodology required the use of art to represent the study's findings. Specifically, the findings section of this article relied on the Black storytelling tradition of call-and-response to illustrate the complexity and richness of the work and care of African Caribbean mothers who are literacy learners in Toronto.

Diasporic African communities have long engaged in the practice of call-and-response. Call-and-response patterns characterized play and work songs and spirituals sung by

enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and North America (Sale, 1992). Call-and-response is a dialogic exercise between a speaker and listener where “the speaker’s statements (‘calls’) are punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104; Toliver, 2020). Indeed, call-and-response is a shared storytelling event requiring communal participation (Boone, 2003; Richards-Greaves, 2016; Toliver, 2020). Toliver (2020) and Boone (2003) noted the prevalence of call-and-response patterns in everyday exchanges throughout the African diaspora. As long as there is a speaker and an audience, Toliver (2020) asserted, call-and-response can occur in a conversation between a mother and her children, during an academic presentation, in an adult education classroom, or in a short story. As the practice of call-and-response can be carried out in a myriad of African and African diasporic communal spaces, I contend that the practice can also be found in African Caribbean mothers’ stories documenting their literacy triumphs and challenges in Toronto.

The creative non-fiction short story *Braiding Our Lives* represents the study’s findings. *Braiding Our Lives* assumes a call-and-response structure and, with the use of footnotes referencing scholarship and reflective questions, invites the reader to consider the ways that multiple research traditions (i.e., storytelling, literary arts, and formal qualitative and quantitative scholarly work) come together to reveal the lives of African Caribbean mothers who have literacy concerns. *Braiding Our Lives* requires the reader to reflect on and disclose their own responses to the ideas put forward by participants, current policies, literature, and previous academic studies. This format honours an arts-informed research methodology by centring research on Black immigrant mothers’ stories.

*Braiding Our Lives*, the data-driven short story representing study findings, is informed by African oral storytelling traditions like call-and-response and audience participation (Morrison, 1984; Sale, 1992). *Braiding Our Lives* captures pertinent information garnered from the study’s in-depth interviews with six participants and current scholarship. The representation of the study’s findings as a short story engages readers in a dialogic exercise with participants and current scholarship. Readers are asked to vicariously experience what the participants have gone through and affirm them as legitimate sources of knowledge. Readers are also challenged to leverage that knowledge to enact a change.

This study used a comprehensive analytic process, rooted in Black storytelling, for collecting and interpreting stories shared during in-depth interviews (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2001). This process positions storytelling as central to the analysis, synthesis, and presentation of data. For this study, I used and built on Banks-Wallace’s (2002) process to reveal the depth of participants’ lived experiences. This analytic process includes the following:

- a) locating the interviews within the historical context and cultural norms,
- b) demarcation of boundaries for individual stories,
- c) thematic and functional analysis of stories,
- d) grouping stories according to themes and functions,
- e) comparison of story themes and functions across participant interviews
- f) restructuring participants’ memories into storied accounts, and
- g) reviewing stories for conspicuous absences and silences.

**Structure of Footnotes**

Similar to other arts-informed researchers, like Onuora (2012, 2016), I used footnotes extensively throughout each story. Onuora (2012, 2016) used footnotes to contextualize data-driven stories about African Canadian maternal pedagogies. In this short story, footnotes go beyond simply situating the stories within scholarship. The footnotes capture the many voices, ideas, and structures that inform Black maternal life in Canada. Footnotes are used throughout each story to invite readers to participate in an improvised call-and-response where scholarship, audience reflections, and participants' voices are placed in dialogue. In addition to referencing current scholarship, footnotes also comprise poignant questions that aim to help readers further connect the story to their own lived experiences. The footnotes situate the stories in the historical, political, and social context of participants' everyday life as African Caribbean mother learners living in Toronto.

As captured in participant stories, Black life in Canada is noisy, overwhelming, and complicated (Fearon, 2020; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019). The use of the footnotes reflects the complexities of Black immigrant literacy learners' work and care. Visually and in content, the structure prioritizes the voices of the participants. I invite readers to engage in the call-and-response in ways that are authentic to them. Readers are welcome to read the footnotes separately from participants' stories or alongside.

**The Story: *Braiding Our Lives***

*Toronto, Canada, 1993*

On a weekday night in November 1993, Jennifer Mitchell<sup>1</sup> slumped into the twin-sized bed she shared with her husband, Tim. Muffled television voices and her husband's grunts seeped into the bedroom from across the hall. Twenty-three years old and pregnant with her first child, Jennifer wedged the telephone receiver between her shoulder and ear. The telephone cord circled her stomach and made its way to the nearby nightstand. A single brass lamp, topped with a beige shade, stood on the table and cast shadows across the telephone's dial pad and bedroom walls.

"Ma, the doctor told us we're having a girl," Jennifer whispered into the phone.

In a Trinidadian sing-song voice, the older woman replied, "Does your husband know about the family curse?"

"I told Tim, but he doesn't believe in stuff like that."

Dark wiry curls, almond skin, and low literacy skills bound Jennifer and the women in her family together. Despite brief stints at a primary school in Trinidad and two Canadian high schools,<sup>2</sup> Jennifer, like the other women in her family, struggled to read and write.<sup>3</sup>

1 Participants' names have been changed to uphold their requests for anonymity.

2 "Immigrants account for a relatively large share of the Canadian population with literacy problems, as people born outside Canada are twice as likely as those born in Canada to have literacy problems" (Statistics Canada, 2001, p. 3).

3 "In Canada [adult] literacy is associated with poverty, stigmatised groups, and with adults who 'made poor choices'" (Quigley, 1990, p. 104).

“Jennifer,” the older woman squawked, “you can barely read yourself. I can’t read. My mother and her mother couldn’t read.<sup>4</sup> We’re all cursed.”<sup>5</sup>

“I know, Ma.” Jennifer’s glossy blue nails zigzagged across her growing belly. “I just hope things will be different for our baby.”<sup>6</sup>

The older woman huffed, “I’ll pray on it.”<sup>7</sup>

The two women mumbled goodnight and hung up the telephone.<sup>8</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

*Toronto, Canada, 2010*

On a spring evening in 2010, Jennifer strolled into the family room and sank onto the leather sofa. The sofa squeaked under her jeans as she shimmied to the edge. Framed baby pictures of Jennifer’s sole daughter, almond-skinned with an afro, lined the wall and encased the muted television. Jennifer watched a silenced Lloyd Robertson and another news anchor mime the national happenings.

Jennifer’s now teenaged daughter entered the room with a dozen or so sheets of paper in hand. She dropped to the parquet floor and squeezed between her mother’s knees. The stack of paper, dotted with rows of printed black letters, balanced on the teen’s crossed legs.

“Mom, when’s Dad getting home?” the girl wondered aloud.

Jennifer held her daughter’s hair in one hand and a comb in the other. The comb’s dark teeth raked through the ends of the girl’s curls.<sup>9</sup>

“He’s stopping by Mona’s<sup>10</sup> to pick up some food.” Jennifer moved the comb section by section to sort out tangles and knots in the girl’s black hair. The mother probed, “You need help with something?”

The girl dropped her cleft chin and leafed through the paper. “I just want him to read over this essay I wrote.” The teen shrugged. “It’s gotta make sense, yuh know, and it’s due tomorrow.”

“I’m sure it’s good.” Jennifer dragged the comb from the space between the girl’s eyebrows to the base of her neck, parting the hair. “You’re smart,” Jennifer added.

4 “According to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), 42.2 percent of Canadians were estimated to be in the two lowest levels of the prose scale (out of 5 levels) (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995). Level 3 was considered the minimum for a person to be able to function adequately in society” (Elfert & Walker, 2020, p. 115).

5 “[Black women] who must contend with a legacy of oppression are especially vulnerable to feelings of helplessness and marginalization of their feelings” (Jones, 2019, p. 51).

6 “[Some women] see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism” (Collins, 2000, p. 176).

7 “Spirituality was taught to [Black Caribbean women] as a survival strategy, and not necessarily framed as religious practice. Nevertheless, [Black Caribbean women] are aware that spirituality can borrow from religion and thus religious rituals and practices, such as prayer, are lodged in [their] imagination as tools from which to draw strength and courage” (Bobb-Smith, 2007, p. 63).

8 In the short story, Jennifer’s mother uses oral traditions, a form of cultural work, to recall the “family curse.” How do you engage in cultural work? In what ways does literacy support this work? For educators, how do your learners engage in cultural work? In what ways does literacy support their cultural work?

9 “The intimacy of sitting close to someone and talking about life while they style your hair is a sense of familiarity many Black people grew up with at home” (Harvin, 2020).

10 Mona’s Roti is a restaurant that has been serving Toronto’s Caribbean community for decades.

The young girl looked up to the stippled ceiling and back down to the floor. "This essay ..." The girl balled her hands and knocked the paper. The corners of the first few pages creased under her fists. "It has to be excellent. Lots of smart people apply to university. I need to be the best."<sup>11</sup>

"Let me see this essay then." The mother leaned over the girl's head and mapped out the hairstyle with her eyes.<sup>12</sup> She decided on two cornrows going straight back. She folded strands of hair, one over the other, to begin the first braid.

The girl chuckled, "You wouldn't understand. I'll wait for Dad."

"I got sense you know?" The mother's hands moved quickly through the girl's hair. The single cornrow swelled as it made its way past the teen's left ear.

"I mean it might be too much for you to read," the daughter insisted.

"Read it for me while I finish up your hair." The first braid, now completed, rested on the teen's shoulder. Jennifer twirled its end around her thumb and index finger.

The girl lowered her shoulders and read the essay aloud.

Tears circled the mother's nose and pooled at the top of her lip.<sup>13</sup> Her hands pulled and wrapped the last bit of hair into a cornrow, stretching front to back.<sup>14</sup>

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*Toronto, Canada, 2013*

Early one summer morning in 2013, Jennifer and her mother held hands as they faced the outdoor self-serving bank machine.

"Let's go inside to the bank teller," grunted the older woman. She raised her eyebrows and pointed with her lips to the bank's green door handles.

"Ma, we're already standing at the machine. Just take out the money." Jennifer turned to her mother and looked past the woman's wired glasses and glared at her deep brown eyes. When Jennifer was in high school, she and her mother spent Saturday mornings cooking in their Morningside Avenue apartment kitchen. She would watch her mother's dark eyes dart from the stovetop to the oven door to the handmade roti skins resting in the blue crest plate.<sup>15</sup>

11 "Black daughters must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those very same structures" (Collins, 2000, p. 54).

12 "For [Black women], hair is not just something to play with, it is something that is laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and, in turn, how you feel about yourself" (Thompson, 2009, p. 80).

13 "Navigating their literacy struggles alongside the traumas wrought by racism, gender-based oppression, poverty, and political marginalization produces both anguish and strategies for resistance" (Jones, 2019, p. 49).

14 The characters in the short story showcase the innovative ways that cultural practices and literacies are shared among Black immigrant women and girls. For instance, Jennifer involves her daughter in the hair-braiding process as a way to pass on knowledges and deepen relationships. What are some cultural practices found within your community? How were these practices passed on to you? For educators, what are some cultural practices found within your learners' communities? How were these practices passed on to them?

15 In the short story, the characters demonstrate the various ways that African Caribbean mothers engage in literacy. For example, Jennifer and her mother practise cultural forms of literacy, such as cooking and hair braiding, whereas, Jennifer's daughter stresses the importance of reading and writing. What does literacy mean to you? How did you come to this understanding? For educators, what does literacy mean to learners? How did learners come to this understanding?

“Jennifer, you know I can’t read all those words on that machine,”<sup>16</sup> the older woman whispered.

“Ma, I told you. I’ve been doing really good<sup>17</sup> at my reading class. Put in your bank card right here.” Jennifer let go of her mother’s hand and tapped the flashing green slot with her yellow chipped nails.

The older woman fumbled in her purse. A balled tissue fell from her bag and landed on the paved ground. She pulled a green bank card from her purse and shoved it into the machine.

“Ma, punch in your bank code.”

The older woman complied. Jennifer read some words on the screen, stumbled over others, and skipped a few altogether. The two women punched buttons until the machine beeped and released five \$20 bills. The older woman grabbed the money and shoved it into her opened purse.

“You should come to my reading class,” Jennifer said. “It’s Thursday nights at the church. A bunch of volunteers run it.”<sup>18</sup>

The older woman bowed her head to the leather bag. Her glasses slipped to the tip of her nose as she tucked the money into a pocket in her purse. “Naw, I’m too old for things like that.”<sup>19</sup>

“There’s lots of older Black women who come and can’t read either. Plus, it’s run by this Jamaican woman,”<sup>20</sup> Jennifer explained.<sup>21</sup>

“You broke the family curse. You made sure my grandbaby can read. Don’t worry about me.” The grandmother tugged the zipper on her purse.

Jennifer confessed, “I gave my everything to make sure she went to the best primary school.”<sup>22</sup>

“And now she’s off to university in a few weeks.” Mother and daughter joined hands. Jennifer’s yellow nails rested on her mother’s greased knuckles and faced the morning sky.

“I’m thinking of trying for my hair licence again. My reading teacher said she’ll help me.<sup>23</sup> The other mothers in class said they’d help me too. They all know how hard it is to make

16 “Many Black [women] have learned to deny our inner needs while we develop our capacity to cope and confront in public life” (hooks, 2005, p. 105).

17 “The art and practice of loving begins with [Black women’s] capacity to recognize and affirm ourselves” (hooks, 2005, p. 107).

18 “Literacy practitioners have been associated with volunteer do-gooder grannies in cardigans, rather than professional teachers, and adult literacy has, by and large, existed outside the mainstream of education and its learners outside what is generally understood as the mainstream of society” (Elfert & Walker, 2020, p. 111).

19 “Within a racist/sexist society, the larger culture will not socialize Black women to know and acknowledge that our inner lives are important” (hooks, 2005, p. 107).

20 “[In Canada], people aged 56 or over made up more than half (54%) of all those with literacy problems” (Statistics Canada, 2001, p. 3).

21 In the graphic short story, Jennifer expresses to her mother the importance of establishing learning spaces co-created by Black mother learners. In what ways can formal learning spaces be reimagined to honour learners’ cultural knowledges and practices?

22 “[For Black mothers], the decision to make her family the most important priority was an act of resistance” (Collins, 2000, p. 55).

23 “Marginalized communities become more critically aware of their oppression and begin to utilize education as a practice of freedom” (Jones, 2019, p. 49).

it here as a Black woman who can't read.<sup>24</sup> Maybe I can open a hair salon one day." The two women turned away from the bank machine to face the summer breeze. They moved onto the sidewalk, stepping on fissures and gaps along the path.

"The landlord dropped off some letter the other day," muttered the elderly woman.

"I'll take a look at it for you."<sup>25</sup>

"You hungry?" asked the older woman. "I can make us something to eat. I'll pack some food for you to take home for my grandbaby." Hand in hand, the women strolled under the sun's rays and dancing clouds, leaving the bank and its machine behind.<sup>26</sup>

### Story Insights

#### *Homeplace*

Toni Morrison (O'Reilly, 2004), bell hooks (2015), Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1987, 2000), and others have long investigated acts of resistance spearheaded by Black women. Such scholars have extensively contributed to a body of literature that presents mothers of African descent as leaders in making homeplace—domestic households committed to the care and nurturance of their family in the face of racist and sexist oppression. While much extant research on Black motherhood examines how mothers of African descent create homeplace for their children, scant research examines how mothers create such sites for themselves and one another. This study addressed such a gap in literature by capturing the experiences of African Caribbean mothers establishing homeplace as they navigated marginalization and low reading skills in Toronto. In her seminal piece, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks (2015) signalled the historical and political significance of homeplace in African and diasporic African communities. hooks (1990) wrote, "Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension" (p. 42). Toni Morrison reiterated the prominent role of mothers in creating these humanizing sites for their families (O'Reilly, 2004). Morrison described homeplace as an aspect of Black motherwork where women of African descent affirm their children and families and subvert oppressive systems, all while encountering social, race, class, and gender oppression (O'Reilly, 2004).

This study, as portrayed in the short story, depicted the ways that African Caribbean women learners dedicate time and space to organize in the face of racism, classism,

24 Toward the end of the graphic short story, Jennifer shares with her mother the sense of empowerment she experienced when gathering with fellow Black women to improve her reading skills. This short story presents Black mothers creating affirming learning spaces for each other as cultural work and an act of resistance. How might learners' cultural work be used to promote individual and collective resistance against injustices?

25 "...finally a phase of reverse dependence when mothers are frail and more dependent upon their offspring" (Everet et al., 2016, p. 335).

26 After reading this graphic short story, readers are left to rethink the ways that adult learning spaces can better serve African Caribbean mother learners like Jennifer and her mother. How might cultural work and cultural literacy skills deepen African Caribbean mother learners' understanding, evaluation, use, and engagement with written texts? For educators, how might cultural work and cultural literacy skills deepen Black mother learners' understanding, evaluation, use, and engagement with written texts?



sexism, and ableism. The story *Braiding Our Lives* echoes participants' insistence that motherwork involves the establishment of a homeplace where African Caribbean mothers who are adult literacy learners are affirmed. Participants shared narratives of working with members of their networks to create spaces where African Caribbean mother learners and their children are able to heal from injustices. For example, in *Braiding Our Lives*, Jennifer crafts a homeplace in her living room through the braiding of her daughter's hair, while her mother exercises agency and expertise through cooking. Indeed, in the short story, Jennifer identifies a community-based adult literacy program led by Black women volunteers as a place of affirmation and belonging. In the story, Jennifer and other women learners of African descent come together at the local church for literacy instruction. At this weekly program, African Caribbean women learners and volunteers establish spheres of influence that resist and undermine oppressive structures. Jennifer, as with the other study participants, maintained that in such a homeplace African Caribbean learners are able to uplift each other's motherwork, aspirations, and joy as meaningful.

*Braiding Our Lives* also reminds readers of the ways that homeplace constitutes a site of resistance for African Caribbean mothers living in Toronto. Throughout history, women of African descent have recognized the subversive value of homeplace (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015). Much like the affirming sites established in the kitchen and living room by Jennifer and her mother, homeplace is a domestic space crucial for African Caribbean women to uplift, organize, and struggle to resist domination in Toronto. Homeplace, as captured in the short story, is a liberatory space where African Caribbean mothers who face reading challenges resist public narratives based in deprivation, and instead restore their dignity. Throughout the interviews, participants lamented the challenges they faced in helping their children with schoolwork and pursuing professional goals. For example, the short story captures Jennifer's sorrow at being unable to read her daughter's essay or pursue her aspirations of owning a salon. Jennifer's mother, who also struggles with reading, is unable to confidently and independently make housing and financial decisions. Both Jennifer and her mother understand their reading challenges as preventing them from advocating for their rights and those of their children in a society that dehumanizes Black women and girls (Fearon, 2020; Onuora, 2016). The mothers in the study connected their personal encounters with anti-Black racism, sexism, classism, and ableism to broader social agendas. Participants recognized their treatment as contributing to the reproduction of racism and marginalization of Black mother learners. Accordingly, their resistance involved establishing a homeplace with other African Caribbean mothers that existed beyond the confines of their private Toronto households. In *Braiding Our Lives*, the Black women-led adult literacy program is a safe public place where Jennifer and other African Caribbean mothers not only improve their reading, but also heal from the wounds inflicted by oppression. By collectively establishing and attending the adult literacy program, Jennifer along with other African Caribbean mothers become agents of change in improving their literacy, as opposed to objects that need to be saved.

***Motherline***

At the start of the story, readers learn that Jennifer and other women in her family struggle with literacy. Despite their literacy concerns, the story captures the diverse ways that Jennifer and her mother pass on knowledge needed for survival to one another and future generations. Readers witness Jennifer braid her daughter's hair as a form of cultural work. While braiding hair, Jennifer challenges her daughter's perception of literacy as limited to reading and writing. Jennifer, like other study participants, broadens the meaning of literacy to include socio-cultural wisdoms and practices. Jennifer's mother, who also struggles to read and write, cares for her family through cooking. Jennifer's mother engages in cooking as a form of cultural work and activism that intentionally connects past, current, and future generations to their Caribbean homeland. The older woman's cooking reminds members of her family that her cultural work helps to ensure the omnipresence of the Caribbean as they collectively build new homelands in Toronto.

Jennifer and her mother engage in what Lowinsky (1992) called passing knowledge through the motherline. Lowinsky (1992) explained, "The motherline is a body knowledge, and birth story and family story and myth...Every woman who wishes to be her full female self needs to know the stories of her motherline" (p. 141). The study, as captured in the short story, affirmed that the motherwork of Black immigrant women who are literacy learners involves the transmission of intergenerational knowledge. The study showcased that this passing of cultural capital equips Black women and their children to think critically of the society in which they live.

Collins (2000), O'Reilly (2004), Trotman (2011), King and Ferguson (2011), and other feminists suggest that Black mothers' work as cultural bearers is a form of activism that supports Black women's and their families' ability to thrive in North America. In the story, Jennifer's hairdressing skills and the grandmother's cooking expertise exemplify motherline as a source of power and complement Sheila Radford-Hill's (1986) observation that "the power of Black women was the power to make culture, to transmit folkways, norms, and customs, as well as to build shared ways of seeing the world that insured our survival" (p. 168). *Braiding Our Lives* conveys participants' cultural work as a way to cultivate self-love, agency, and healing among Black women literacy learners and their children.

***Reimagining Adult Literacy Programs for African Caribbean Mothers***

In discussions of homeplace and motherline, Toni Morrison (O'Reilly, 2004) and other Black motherwork thinkers (Fearon, 2020; Onuora, 2012, 2016) explored the leadership role of Black mothers in establishing spaces at home that cultivate healing, cultural knowledge, and resistance against varying and intersecting forms of oppression. The short story *Braiding Our Lives* centres the diverse ways that African Caribbean mothers create these safe and revolutionary spaces at home. Canadian adult learning programs are tasked to provide African Caribbean mothers with opportunities and resources to carry on this tradition of homeplace and motherline within the structures of their programs. To do so, I, much like Kelly (2020), assert that educational institutions committed to equity must assume responsibility for challenging racism and actively supporting learners whose identities subject them to oppression. Heeding García's (2017) calls for improved hiring protocols, I urge adult learning programs to recruit educators and administrators who reflect the cultural and gender identities of Toronto's Black immigrant communities. Further, staff

at adult learning programs must be willing to identify, raise concern about, and address inequities occurring within their institution. Patel (2016) and Kelly (2020) described these “acts of fugivity” as necessary to transform learning institutions into sites of liberation for Black communities.

In *Braiding Our Lives*, Jennifer confides to her mother that she will receive support from her adult learning program to pass Ontario’s certifying hairdresser exam. Jennifer’s adult learning program engages her in a curriculum that is relevant to her professional and personal aspirations and responsive to the obstacles that she and other Black immigrants face in Toronto. I encourage adult learning programs to engage Black immigrant mothers in a curriculum that embeds their narratives and current lived experiences in Toronto. Further, staff must engage in professional development to ensure that they are equipped to create space within their institutions for Black immigrant mothers to revel in their cultural knowledge and demonstrate their cultural pride. Educators must engage Black immigrant women in the curriculum in ways that leverage knowledge passed on from the motherline for reading development. Lane (2017) and Kelly (2020) also stressed the importance of selecting reading material that recasts learners as agents of change. As such, educators must use learning resources that elicit discussions and action centred on collectivity, equitable leadership, and a politicized ethics of care to support learners’ socio-emotional well-being and literacy development.

### Conclusion

Jaye Jones (2019), interim associate dean in the School of Health Sciences, Human Services and Nursing at Lehman College-CUNY, challenged us to reimagine the ways in which we can support Black and immigrant women who are literacy learners. Throughout the years, concerns around adult literacy learning have resulted in the establishment of varying policies, institutions, and organizations in Ontario (Elfert & Walker, 2020). Increasingly, these systems and institutions position literacy as a set of essential skills for the workplace. Currently, adult literacy has been largely reduced to employability skills that are under-supported (Elfert & Walker, 2020). Canadian literature documents the ways in which adult literacy continues to occupy the periphery of both education and social policy (Conway et al., 2007; Elfert & Walker, 2020; Quigley, 1990). This shift of learning toward employability skills has resulted in adult learning experiences that are detached from an analysis of structure, history, and resistance (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Freire, 1970/2007; Jones, 2019).

I began this article by recounting my grandmother’s emigration from Jamaica and reading experiences in Toronto. My grandmother, now in her late 80s, continues to encounter reading challenges. Much like the older woman in the story *Braiding Our Lives*, my grandmother has rejected invitations to join literacy programs geared toward senior immigrant women. Despite these programs representing a homeplace for some African Caribbean women, my grandmother, as with the older woman in the story, doubts the ability of any formal public learning site to affirm African Caribbean identities, cultural knowledge, and dignity. Although my grandmother was unable to review my school essays and read me popular storybooks, to this day she takes pride in cooking Jamaican delicacies like curry goat and jerk chicken for me and my children and husband. The cultural work led by African Caribbean women, like Jennifer’s mother and my grandmother, help establish

safe and affirming spaces for themselves and their families. Their cultural labour is a testament to their leadership that thrives in a society that demeans their race, gender, and reading skills. Adult literacy educators are, thus, challenged to develop a formal learning program grounded in African Caribbean mothers' concepts of homeplace and motherline.

This study affirmed the need for adult educational programs in Toronto to be spaces that cultivate Black immigrant learners' practices of cultural work and homeplace. Embedding adult education programs in larger understandings about literacy, culture, and power, we can honour the knowledge and work of Black immigrant women learners. This process fosters dialogue that encourages cooperation and the centring of Black mother learners. Such a reimagining of educational spaces in Toronto for Black immigrant mother learners further acknowledges their motherwork as collective practices of freedom. I close this article by offering educators a series of reflection questions to help guide their repositioning of Canadian adult learning programs for Black immigrant mothers:

- How might adult literacy programs centre mothers and grandmothers when developing learning opportunities for Black immigrant communities?
- How might educators address social and educational inequities existing within their learning institutions and society at large?
- What policies and work conditions are needed to recruit staff reflective of the cultural and gender identities of Black immigrant communities?
- How might institutionally marginalized narratives be centred in curriculum?
- How might educators connect classroom learning experiences to the histories and current realities of Black immigrant communities in Toronto?
- How might adult literacy programs partner with individuals and organizations to strengthen learners' pride in their cultural work and knowledge?
- How might learning material be selected and used to position Black immigrant learners as agents of change?
- How might adult literacy programs support the social, emotional, and intellectual well-being of Black immigrant women learners?
- How might educators leverage learners' personal and cultural stories to inform curriculum, policies, and professional development?

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