



Class of 1951

ABSENCE AND VISIBILITY: RACIALIZED NURSES IN ONTARIO

By Andrea Fatona, writer
(Commissioned by Nina Levitt to accompany her work)

Mammy, wet nurse, domestic worker ... nurse. Black women have traditionally worked as caregivers, playing a central role in reproducing nation and capitalism. Writer Dionne Brand has noted the long history – “first as slaves, then as fugitives” – of black women serving as domestic workers and labourers in Ontario. Yet, visual evidence of black nurses is virtually non-existent in the annals of Canadian nursing history. How should we respond to this absence – and how can we suture these women into the historical narrative of this country in the 1950s through the 1970s?

For decades, black women were barred from the nursing profession in Canada. In her discussion of anti-black racism in nursing in Ontario, scholar Tania Das Gupta writes that “Canadian nursing schools did not admit Canadian-born, Black students before the 1940’s, apparently because Canadian hospitals would not employ them.” Activism led by groups such as the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People challenged the racism of Canada’s immigration and educational practices, and by the 1960s a small number of women from the Caribbean were admitted to Canada to attend nursing schools.

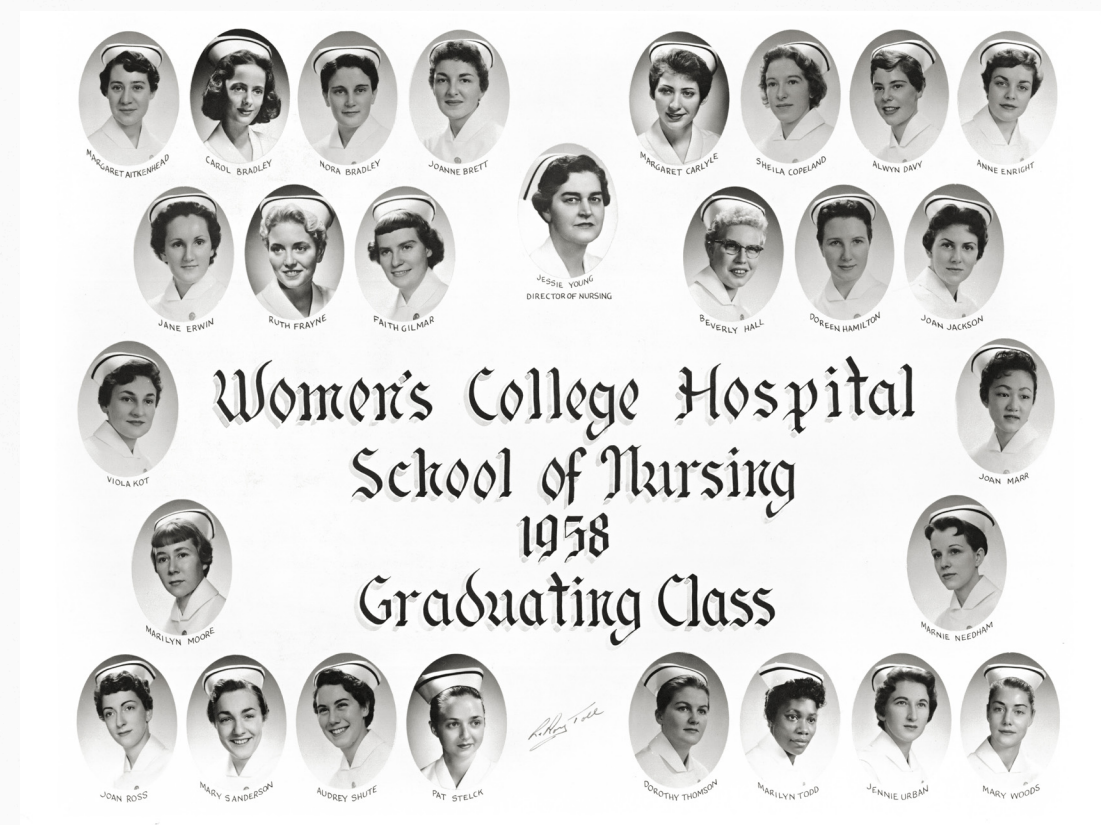
In contrast, black women were highly visible in the nursing profession in Britain by the 1960s. In the late ’40s and ’50s, many young women from the Caribbean, including my mother, immigrated to Britain to enter the nursing profession, which was one of the few avenues open to racialized women that would allow for the prospect of upward mobility.

By the early ’70s the complexion of nursing in Canada had darkened considerably, as a result of changes in Canadian immigration policies, which began to focus on skills and labour market needs rather than on race and country of origin. Black nurses from Britain were recruited to Canada

to take up membership in a profession that had been almost the exclusive domain of white women.

The paucity of images of black nurses in the archival records begs us as viewers to pose sharp questions about the construction of race, class, and gender. It compels us to interrupt taken-for-granted narratives and ask questions about whose bodies and stories were privileged as respectable representations of femininity and caring in nursing in Canada. And we are also compelled to make black nurses visible and to ask about their experience in the profession.

When viewing these yearbook images, we serve as witnesses to Canada’s racist immigration, educational, and labour practices. We also confront, as Sherene Razack points out, the fact that women are “socially constructed in different and unequal relations to one another.” We are reminded that “it is not only that some women are considered to be worth more than other women, but that the status of one woman depends on the subordinate status of another woman in many complex ways.”



Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991), p. 15

Tania Das Gupta, “Anti-Black Racism in Nursing in Ontario,” *Studies in Political Economy* 51 (Fall 1996), p. 99

Sherene H. Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 158