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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article rassemble une multitude d'histoires orales et de documents historiques (journaux, recensement et documents gouvernementaux) afin d'étudier l'emploi des femmes à Toronto pendant la Grande Crise des années 30. L'article cherche à identifier comment la race, l'ethnie, le sexe et les classes sociales influencent sur l'expérience de travail des femmes. Dans l'industrie des vêtements de Toronto ou en tant que commis, employées de maison et enseignantes, les femmes qui paraissent dans cette étude démontraient des niveaux de stabilité économique variés, provenaient de différents groupes ethniques et raciaux et profitaient conséquemment d'occasions d'emploi différentes dans une période où l'accès à l'emploi était d'une importance toute particulière pour les femmes et leurs familles. Par exemple, bien qu'elles étaient du même sexe et partageaient une formation et une classe sociale communes, certaines femmes, telles que Claire Clarke et Mildred Johnson, n'avaient pas les mêmes occasions d'emploi. L'article vise à explorer l'intersection de l'identité et de l'accès au marché du travail afin d'expliquer ce phénomène pendant les années 30. Somme toute, l'expérience des individus indiquerait que le genre ne mérite pas une place primordiale dans l'analyse de tous les secteurs du marché du travail pendant la grande dépression. Dans certains contextes historiques, et dans l'expérience de certaines femmes, le sexe était un facteur moins pertinent que la race, l'ethnie ou la classe sociale.

# “In case you hadn’t noticed!”: Race, Ethnicity, and Women’s Wage- Earning in a Depression-Era City

Katrina Srigley

ON ANY TYPICAL WORKDAY morning during the Depression, Toronto’s wage-earning women emerged from their homes — flats in Kensington Market, bungalows in suburban Weston, or row houses in the East End — and headed to work where they earned wages as domestics, teachers, clerical staff, garment workers, and the like. Although Canadian histories of the Depression have not granted them a great deal of attention, these female breadwinners were major players in Toronto’s labour market: in 1931 one in four wage-earners were women; by 1941, amid World War II, the proportion had risen to nearly one in three.<sup>1</sup> The growing presence of women in the workforce was not peculiar to Toronto, of course. In urban centres across North America industrial expansion, new forms of office administration, and altered labour processes had provided growing job opportunities for employed women. The widespread economic insecurity of the 1930s had also accelerated this trend. In a period when “men’s” jobs in primary industry were particularly vulnerable, women, who had a much lower unemployment rate, occupied

<sup>1</sup>In Toronto between 1931 and 1941 the number of gainfully occupied woman 14 years of age and over rose from approximately 91,780 to 111,334. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 1,102. Many women who were doing piecework from their home, domestic work (inside and outside their home), and helped with the family business would have been overlooked as non workers. At this time Greater Toronto included the following communities: Etobicoke, Forest Hill, Leaside, Long Branch, Mimico, New Toronto, Scarborough, Swansea, Weston, York Township, York East Township, and York North Township. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Monographs Vol. XIII* (Ottawa 1931), 470-1.

increasingly central roles in their families as primary wage-earners.<sup>2</sup> In many more households than before, “the gender of breadwinners” was female, as women’s wages fed, clothed, and provided shelter for their families.<sup>3</sup> While such factors pulled more women into the workplace, job availability and economic need were not the only determinants of a woman’s access to (and desire for) employment in Toronto’s labour market. Women’s employment options were conditioned by race — by which I mean both whiteness and non-whiteness — ethnicity, marital status, gender, and class. In 1931, Toronto’s population was roughly 631,200 and its 5 largest racial and ethnic groupings included 510,432 members of the “British Races,” 13,015 Italians, 45,305 Hebrews, 10,869 French, and 9,343 Germans. Groups such as the Polish and the Dutch hovered between 9,000 and 5,000 people, while Blacks, Russians, Greeks, and Ukrainians registered between 5,000 and 1,000 in the decennial census for the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> As these numbers indicate, Toronto was largely a WASP city during the 1930s. Anglo-Celtic dominance created both privileges and disadvantages for female workers who received differing access to training and employment.<sup>5</sup> An analysis that pays particular attention to the importance of racial identities to women workers, while also acknowledging the multiple identities they held, uncovers critical and otherwise hidden aspects of working women’s experiences in this 1930s labour market.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of a race critical analysis of Toronto’s Depression-era women workers is particularly well illustrated by Claire Clarke’s still painful memories of her work experiences. In our 2001 interview, Clarke, 88 and still living in her own home, related some of the challenges faced by wage-earners in 1930s Toronto. With obvious pride, she remembered how she had stood second in her graduating class at Central High School of Commerce in 1931, telling me “I graduated at the top of my class ... you know I received the Timothy Eaton scholarship medal. The Jewish girl received the gold medal and I received the silver medal.” Equally evi-

<sup>2</sup>In 1931, roughly 18 per cent of Canada’s male wage-earners were unemployed compared with 7 per cent of its female wage-earners. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Unemployment Vol. VI* (Ottawa 1931), 94. This statistic must be viewed critically. First of all women were often not counted among the unemployed because of prevailing assumptions that women were dependents fulfilling their domestic role. There were certainly many more unemployed women than this statistic suggests.

<sup>3</sup>Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990).

<sup>4</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Cross-Classifications Vol. IV* (Ottawa 1931), 912. Religious groupings also reflect important cultural divisions. In 1931, 68 per cent of the city worshipped at Anglican, Presbyterian, or United Churches. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Cross-Classifications Vol. IV* (Ottawa 1931), 912-3.

<sup>5</sup>Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988).

<sup>6</sup>For more on this theme see: Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women’s Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880-1920s* (Urbana 2001); Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘joy my freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1997).

dent all these years later was her disappointment that despite her impressive academic achievement, "there was no [job] placement for me." That was "very unusual" she added, "because during all my years at the school in the summertime they would select girls and send them off to the parliament buildings to work. I was never selected."<sup>7</sup> Clarke expected, like other girls her age, to find employment in order to help her family who, in this case, were living in a newly purchased home in a downtown Toronto neighbourhood (near Bathurst and Queen Streets). With a smile, that broke into laughter she recalled: "I ended up making hats!"

Well I would get up and go down to King Street you know and see if they needed any help. The proprietor was a Mr. Wise. I remember him to this day. He hired me to sit and make hats. And then all this time I was lobbying, writing civil service exams and, you know, keeping my (pause) qualifications up.<sup>8</sup>

In many respects, Clarke's work experiences confirm the findings of feminist historians who have examined how gender and class have shaped the employment of women workers in early twentieth-century Canada.<sup>9</sup> Wage-earners like Clarke faced sexist job segregation; indeed, an increased number of available jobs in Ontario's largest urban centre did not ensure women a position of choice. Of the women employed in Toronto in the early years of the Depression, 27 per cent of them worked in personal service, 28 per cent in clerical occupations, 17 per cent in manufacturing (primarily in the textile industry), and 11 per cent in professional service occupations such as teaching and nursing.<sup>10</sup> By 1941, despite the onset of the war and the movement of women into non-traditional occupations, little had changed. Eighty-four per cent of employed women were involved in these sectors of the labour market.<sup>11</sup> This ghettoization denied women access to skilled jobs in

<sup>7</sup>Claire Clarke, interview by Katrina Srigley, May 2001, October 2001, April 2002.

<sup>8</sup>Claire Clarke, interview.

<sup>9</sup>See for example: Nancy Christie, *Engendering the State: Family, Work and Welfare in Canada* (Toronto 2000); Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*; Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto 1995); Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto 1988).

<sup>10</sup>Of the 79,120 women reported as employed in 1931, 21,263 worked in personal service, 21,959 in clerical occupations, 13,352 in manufacturing, and 9,172 in professional service. These broad areas of occupation were further divided into categories such as teaching, domestic service, and stenography. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1931), 226-237.

<sup>11</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 218-220. For a discussion of gender based job segregation in the American context see: Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Chicago 1987). In this important study of job segregation in the US electrical and auto industry, Milkman asserts that employment discrimination based on sex was a consequence of

the industrial sector and positions as administrators, principals, and doctors in offices and hospitals. It also legitimized lower earnings: women received on average one-third to one-half the earnings of men.<sup>12</sup> Hampered by these obstacles, Clarke was searching for work when the plight of the male breadwinner prompted widespread anti-feminist sentiment in the country's newspapers. Moreover, government sanctioned regulations allowed employers — particularly in occupations in the civil service, nursing, and teaching — to deny women employment after marriage. These discriminatory expectations about marital status and wage-earning ensured, as Veronica Strong-Boag puts it, that women were “defined and delimited, not so much by any lesser capacity for work or determination, or thought, but by patriarchal custom and male authority.”<sup>13</sup> Clarke undeniably lived in a society that valued the labour of men over women. She could not find work despite her vocational education.<sup>14</sup> However, sexism alone does not adequately explain Clarke's labour force experiences. Significantly, when asked why she had difficulty securing employment Clarke did not mention issues related to gender or class; instead she exclaimed with great conviction, “I AM BLACK IN CASE YOU HADN'T NOTICED!”<sup>15</sup>

Clarke's story, and her explicit racial explanation of her failure to find work in her field, as well as the work memories of the other women — Anglo-Celtic, European and African Canadian — who are the subjects of this study, compel us to scrutinize more closely how race interacted with gender, class, and other variables to produce not only certain kinds of experiences — and women's memories of them — but also the complex identities that women workers forged in this period of economic stagnation. Certainly, high rates of male unemployment generated considerable insecurity about the position of male breadwinners within the family and the increasing rates of female employment did little to quell these fears; instead they expanded concerns that the Depression was diluting female domesticity as well. Such anxiety is well represented in the editorial pages of daily newspapers. In both

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industrialization rather than a natural division based on family responsibility. Once established, she claims this division was intractable and did not respond to the jump in women's employment in 1930s and 1940s.

<sup>12</sup>In Ontario in 1931 women earned on average \$636 per year, while men earned \$1,005. By 1941 the situation was worse. Women earned on average \$574 per year, while men earned \$1,112, 49 per cent more. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Summary Vol. I* (Ottawa 1941), 801.

<sup>13</sup>Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 3.

<sup>14</sup>In 1931, 84 per cent of employed women in Toronto were single women. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Unemployment Vol. VI* (Ottawa 1931), 1,172. For more on the employment of single women and the feminization of certain occupations see: Graham Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work* (Toronto 1987); Milkman, *Gender at Work*; Sangster, *Earning Respect*; Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto 1995); Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*.

<sup>15</sup>Claire Clarke, interview.

Canada and the United States, women and men took up their pens to challenge the position of women wage-earners, particularly those who were married. Their rhetoric, at times motherly, was more often venomous. One defeated (and particularly irrational) man claimed that “women ha[d] captured all the jobs except fatherhood!”<sup>16</sup> Such condemnations were quite frequent in the early years of the Depression and, not surprisingly, historians interested in issues of gender and work have paid considerable attention to these and other expressions of gender hostility and discrimination.

The 1993 *Gender & History* debate between US historian Alice Kessler-Harris and Canadian specialist Margaret Hobbs underscores some of the critical differences in how feminist historians have evaluated negative discourses of working women in the 1930s and offers a point of departure for addressing the relationship between the breadwinner’s gender and identity formation.<sup>17</sup> While both historians agree that gender significantly influenced people’s reactions to women’s employment as well as workers’ identity, perception, and behaviour, they ultimately provide different explanations of how gender as a social variable influenced those who challenged, rhetorically at least, the position of women workers.<sup>18</sup> In her reading of these attacks, Kessler-Harris suggests that in the context of a major depression economic need had a greater influence on these letter writers’ perspectives than a desire to strengthen sexist notions of female domesticity. She thus challenges what she sees as the tendency of women’s historians to give gender too much analytical weight.<sup>19</sup> She proposes instead that the dramatic changes in the labour market had created “a legitimate space for female breadwinners,” particularly those who fulfilled the role of sole provider, such as single women, widows, and married women with husbands who were unable to work. In Kessler-Harris’ interpretation, this legitimacy alters how we should understand sexism in the Depression context. For some female breadwinners identified “not only as women but as young people, family supporters, parents and dependents, they were vulnerable to any who threatened to undermine their family roles, whether such people were male or female.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Kessler-Harris concludes, basic issues of economic justice prevailed.

<sup>16</sup>Anonymous, “That’s a Man’s Job,” *Business Woman*, (July 1930), 14.

<sup>17</sup>Alice Kessler-Harris, “Gender Ideology in Historical Reconstruction: A Case Study from the 1930s,” *Gender & History*, 1, 1 (Spring 1989), 31-49; Margaret Hobbs, “Rethinking Antifeminism in the 1930s: Gender Crisis or Workplace Justice? A Response to Alice Kessler-Harris,” *Gender & History*, 5, 1 (Spring 1993), 4-15; Alice Kessler-Harris, “Reply to Hobbs,” *Gender & History*, 5, 1 (Spring 1993), 16-9.

<sup>18</sup>“A Man Talks to Women,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 20 March 1939.

<sup>19</sup>Kessler-Harris, “Reply to Hobbs,” 16.

<sup>20</sup>Kessler-Harris, “Gender Ideology in Historical Reconstruction,” 40; Marcus Klee also has a good discussion of this in his dissertation. See Marcus Klee, “Between the Scylla and Charybdis of Anarchy and Despotism: The State, Capital and the Working Class in the Great Depression, Toronto, 1929- 1940,” Ph.D. thesis, Queen’s University, 1998, 233-4.

Like other feminist historians who have drawn connections between gender and class, Hobbs' reading of the Canadian material highlights the links between resistance to women's wage-earning and patriarchal assumptions about male breadwinning and female domesticity prevalent during the interwar years. And, in her debate with Kessler-Harris, she does not concede a less influential position to gender; while acknowledging that concerns about economic justice might have been influential, Hobbs insists that public cries for women to vacate the work force cannot and should not be "wrenched ... from the fundamentally gendered context, which spawned them."<sup>21</sup> In this debate and her national study of employment, unemployment, and social policy, Hobbs argues that such anti-feminist discourse reflects a labour market in which sexism kept women's earnings well below men's wages, limited their job options, and denied married women work even in periods of acute need. Thus, she concludes, gender was a central and important "ideological liability" for working women during the Depression.<sup>22</sup>

Whichever side of this debate historians may wish to position themselves, most would agree that gender matters a great deal. However, as Clarke's memories of racial discrimination, and the differing memories of the other women central to this study, suggest, we need to examine more closely how an individual's multiple identities influenced their lives in this particular time and place. For some women at least, gender was not the only, nor necessarily the most important, social factor shaping their work experiences; nor did they prioritize gender when remembering and trying to make sense of their past experiences. Thus, this paper, then, shifts the focus away from the debate over how much gender actually mattered and towards a more explicit discussion of how race and ethnicity, along with other variables, including gender and class, converged in various ways to shape women's lives and memories. In probing the individual stories of a diverse group of working women in Depression-era Toronto, I draw most explicitly on the scholarship of feminist historians whose important work on immigrant, ethnic, black, and other racialized working-class women in North America has well demonstrated the value of moving beyond static models of patriarchy that assume the primacy of gender as an ex-

<sup>21</sup>Hobbs, "Rethinking Antifeminism in the 1930s," 5-6.

<sup>22</sup>Margaret Hobbs, "Gendering Work and Welfare: Women's Relationship to Wage-Work and Social Policy in Canada During the Depression," Unpublished PhD, University of Toronto, 1995, 26; 71. Ruth Roach Pierson's well-documented study of the unemployment insurance debates during the Depression indicates that gender was central to insurance entitlement during the Depression. This left many female workers in untenable economic situations. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 77-103. In the American context, Lois Scarf reaches similar conclusions with regards to the predominance of gender. See Lois Scarf, *To Work and To Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Connecticut 1980).

planatory factor in historical experience.<sup>23</sup> While remaining attentive to gender and class, scholars such as Ruth Frager, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Nancy Hewitt, and Franca Iacovetta have shown us that other social variables can be equally or in some cases more important than gender in structuring both the experiences of women in a given context and their memories of those events. Feminist historians who have examined women's lives and stories through the lens of ethnicity and race as well as gender, class, culture, age, lifecycle, and other social categories joined a rich literature on gender and class; they also offered new perspectives on women's wage-earning and activism that, for example, were particularly sensitive to immigrant women's different cultural understandings and expressions of femininity, waged work, resistance, and protest.<sup>24</sup> So doing, they also showed that these women's notions of their respectability and the ways in which they forged and articulated their identities as women, workers, foreigners, wives, and mothers differed significantly from both middle class and working-class Anglo-Celtic models of ideal womanhood and female respectability. Studies of supposedly unruly ethnic "female mobs," of Italian and other "Latin" women's direct action on the streets, and of neighbourhood and community-based mobilizations led by mothers and daughters remind us of the need to pay closer attention to European, Cuban, and other homeland strategies that women transplanted to North America, including

<sup>23</sup>Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement, 1900-1939* (Toronto 1992); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs*, (1992), 251-74; Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal & Kingston 1992); Jacqueline Jones, "Race and Gender in Modern America," *Reviews in American History*, (March 1998), 220-38; Nancy Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s," *Social History*, 10 (October 1985), 299-322; Gerda Lerner, "Reconceptualizing Difference Among Women," *Journal of Women's History*, 1 (Winter 1990), 106-122; Varpu Lindström, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Women in Canada* (Toronto 1988); Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto 1991); Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston 1988); Carolyn Strange, "Dead Men and Wounded Womanhood: Trials of Clara Ford and Carrie Davies," in Franca Iacovetta and Marianna Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto 1992), 149-88; Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto 1995).

<sup>24</sup>See Julie Guard, "Authenticity on the Line: Women Workers, Native "Scabs," and the Multi-ethnic Politics of Identity in a Left-Led Strike in Cold War Canada," *Journal of Women's History*, 15, 4 (Winter 2004), 117-40; Franca Iacovetta, "Feminist Transnational Labour History and Rethinking Women's Activism and Female Militancy in Canadian Contexts: Lessons from an Internationalist Project," annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Winnipeg, 3-5 June 2004; Donna Gabaccia, Franca Iacovetta and Fraser Ottanelli, "Labouring Across National Borders: Class, Gender and Militancy in the Proletarian Mass Migration," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 66 (Fall 2004), 57-77.

some important cultural tools such as women's stories of resistance that were told and retold at the kitchen table and in children's plays performed at the socialist hall.

For the Depression era, Frager's work on Jewish women workers in inter-war Toronto illustrates how the shifting influences of ethnicity, gender, and class shaped Jewish women's roles in family and workplace. Contrary to dominant Anglo-Protestant conceptions of womanhood, femininity for these women included a central, forceful, and sometimes highly aggressive role in protest — from housewives' bread strikes to union organizing — and workplace reform.<sup>25</sup> As with other studies of multi-racial or multi-ethnic communities on strike, Carmela Patrias' study of a strike that the multi-ethnic town of Crowland (Welland), Ontario waged against the provincial government for cutbacks on relief support, highlights the cross-ethnic class solidarities that developed among working-class residents. It also sheds light on ethnic women's role in the strike, especially their strategies involving children, and how their identities as workers (or the children of workers), foreigners (though many of them were Canadian-born), wives, and mothers were forged in a context of making common cause with others like themselves.<sup>26</sup> Québec historian Denyse Baillargeon uses ethnicity to define the parameters of her study of married working-class women in Depression-era Montréal. Taking us "into the very heart of the domestic sphere," she considers the living conditions, life cycle, and strategies used by housewives to combat economic instability and highlights the importance of domestic space for an understanding of working-class francophone Montréal during the Depression.<sup>27</sup>

With a few notable exceptions, Canadian feminist historians so far have paid significantly less attention to race than to gender as an analytical tool, particularly

<sup>25</sup>Other historians in Canada and the United States have reached similar conclusions when exploring the intersection of femininity and ethnicity. See Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence Massachusetts, 1860-1912* (Urbana 1993); Jennifer Guglielmo, "Italian Women's Proletarian Feminism in New York City Garment Trades, 1890s-1940," in Donna Gabbaccia and Franca Iacovetta, eds., *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives: Italians Workers of the World* (Toronto 2002); Robert Ventresca, "Cowering Women and Combative Men?": Femininity, Masculinity and Ethnicity on Strike in Two Southern Ontario Towns, 1964-1966," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring 1997), 125-58.

<sup>26</sup>Carmela Patrias, "Relief Strike: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario, 1930-1935," in Franca Iacovetta, Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s* (Toronto 1998), 351.

<sup>27</sup>Denise Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family and Home in Montréal during the Great Depression* Yvonne Klein trans., (Waterloo 1999), xi. Also see *Menagères au Temps de la Crise* (Montréal 1991); "If You Had No Money, You Had No Trouble, Did You?" Montréal Working-Class Housewives During the Great Depression," in Wendy Mitchinson *et al.*, *Canadian Women: A Reader* (Toronto 1996), 251-68.

with regards to whiteness.<sup>28</sup> As Afua Cooper recently observed, “feminists, historians, and theorists alike have generally privileged gender oppression [over that of race] as the main cause of women’s subordination” and thus have failed to understand the central role of both whiteness and blackness to Canadian women’s and gender history.<sup>29</sup> For the Depression period in particular, the complex relationship between race, gender, and work experiences for women workers identities and memories deserves greater exploration. Dionne Brand’s study of African Canadian women from 1920-1950 provides overwhelming evidence of the role of race and gender in structuring the labour market discrimination experienced by African Canadian women throughout the Depression, World War II, and post war period.<sup>30</sup> But Brand’s work should represent the beginning, not the end, of exploration into as well as debate about race and gender in historical scholarship. Picking up the threads of race, gender, and citizenship in her recent study of women’s employabil-

<sup>28</sup>See for example: Constance Backhouse, *Colour Coded: A legal history of racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto 1999); Carl E. James, *Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Ethnicity, Race and Culture* 3rd ed (1995; Toronto 2003); Carl E. James and Adrienne Shadd, eds., *Talking About Identity: Encounters in Race, Ethnicity, and Language* (Toronto 2001); Carl E. James, *Experiencing Difference* (Halifax 2000); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto 2001); Sherene Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (Toronto 1998); Elizabeth Vibert, “Real Men Hunt Buffalo: Masculinity, Race and Class in British Fur Traders’ Narratives,” *Gender & History* (Great Britain), 8, 1 (1996), 4-21; Barrington Walker, “The Gavel and the Veil of Race: Blackness in Ontario’s criminal courts, 1858-1958,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 2003. Though not generally using gender and race as categories of historical analysis, in the American context scholars have taken up the issue of African American women’s work and the influence of race on labour force discrimination during the Depression era far more extensively. See: William Sundstrom, “Discouraging Times: The Labour Force Participation of Married Black Women, 1930-1940,” *Explorations in Economic History*, 38, 1 (1998), 123-146; Robert Boyd, “Survivalist Entrepreneurship: A Test of the Disadvantage Theory of Business Enterprise,” *Social Science Quarterly* 81 (2000), 972-984; Phyllis Palmer, “Black Domesticity During the Depression: Workers, Organizers, Social Commentators,” *Prologue*, 29, 2 (1997), 127-131; Yolanda Chavez Leyva, “Faithful Hard-Working Mexican Hands”: Mexican Workers During the Great Depression,” *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, 5 (1995), 63-77.

<sup>29</sup>Afua Cooper, “Constructing Black Women’s Historical Knowledge,” *Atlantis*, 25 1 (2000), 39. Cooper’s thoughts echo those of the following scholars: Kum-Kum Bhavnani, *Feminism and ‘Race’* (Oxford 2001); Hazel V. Carby in “White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,” in Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, ed., *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London 1983); Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of White Women: Whiteness Race Matters* (Minneapolis 1993); bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston 1989).

<sup>30</sup>Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s-1950s* (Toronto 1991).

ity during the late depression and World War II era, Jennifer Stephen adeptly shows how such social variables were woven through and constitutive of perceptions of women's employment. Different female wage-earners had variant relationships with "the state, formal waged economy and labour market," depending on, among other things, racialized notions of domesticity and citizenship.<sup>31</sup> In the context Stephen explores, whiteness could also be a site of power and privilege for women. Most recently, Iacovetta has suggested that we more effectively de-centre the "WASP women worker" and the paradigms of female respectability and activism derived from studies of primarily dominant majority women (WASP in English Canada, or Francophone in Québec), paradigms that, despite almost two decades of scholarship on "other" women workers, still provide the standard against which "other" women's experiences and actions are compared.<sup>32</sup> The intellectual trajectory of one of Canada's leading feminist historians, Ruth Pierson — from a women's historian to a race-critical gender scholar — offers a good illustration of the ways in which current debates about race and racialization have led to reassessments of women's relationship to the labour force, the state, and other institutions and to their experiences and identity formation. A "conception of interlocking and mutually constitutive character of social categories," Pierson writes in the introduction to *Nation, Empire and Colony: Historicizing Race and Gender*, "explodes the notion that gender rotates simply around a single axis of polar opposites."<sup>33</sup> It also provides an opportunity to reassess gender discrimination and the labour market participation of women during the Depression.

A case study of Toronto that uses oral history is particularly well suited to answer questions about identity and women's work experiences. Toronto was the second largest city in Canada during the Depression years.<sup>34</sup> Its economy supported significant female employment in a range of jobs in spite of gender restrictions and major economic stagnation; in fact, the city had a higher percentage of women in the labour market than any other metropolis in Canada at the time.<sup>35</sup> Toronto's population, though overwhelmingly Anglo-Protestant, did include, like Montréal and

<sup>31</sup>Jennifer Stephen, "Deploying Discourses of Employability and Domesticity: Women's Employment and Training Policies and the Formation of the Canadian Welfare State, 1935-1947," Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 2000, 30.

<sup>32</sup>Iacovetta, "Feminist Transnational Labour History."

<sup>33</sup>Ruth Roach Pierson, "Introduction," in Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Nation, Empire, and Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race* (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1998), 2. Also see Sherene Razak's article in "Rigorous Feminist Standards!: A Panel in Honour of Ruth Roach Pierson," *Atlantis*, 28, 3 (Special Issue 2) (1994).

<sup>34</sup>The exact population statistic collected for Toronto in 1931 was 631,207. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Summary Vol. I* (Ottawa 1931), 81.

<sup>35</sup>In Toronto women held 28 per cent of the jobs in the labour market, while in Winnipeg they held 26 per cent and in Montréal 25 per cent. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1931), 226, 250, 190.

other major cities in the United States, various immigrant and racialized communities, especially Jews, Italians, and East Europeans, as well as African-Canadians and Francophones; women, including wage-earning women, could be found in all these communities.<sup>36</sup> The experiences of these women and those of people in immigrant and working-class communities more generally are not well reflected in the historical sources, which, more often than not, were produced by the city's Anglo-Protestant establishment — government officials, medical and psychological experts, and political élites.

Oral histories offer access to these voices and are particularly useful for exploring the issues raised by scholars like Cooper and Pierson.<sup>37</sup> They provide an opportunity to analyze how discrimination or privilege, or both for that matter, were established and experienced. In an effort to obtain a sample of female subjects who reflected Toronto's racial-ethnic mix, I made contact with several "ethnic" organizations and homes for elders and mined existing collections of oral histories.<sup>38</sup> Over 6 years, 85 women and men welcomed me into their homes and willingly shared their stories with me; in turn, I have made their stories central to this study.<sup>39</sup>

There are various approaches to interviewing and different ways of recovering and handling people's recollections of their lives, and their story-telling.<sup>40</sup> For ex-

<sup>36</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Cross-Classifications Vol. IV* (Ottawa 1931), 912-3.

<sup>37</sup>So too do foreign-language records of immigrant and ethnic organizations or individual diaries and journals, but that is not my focus here.

<sup>38</sup>I called every retirement home and religious organization listed in Toronto's *Yellow Pages*. I then mailed information packages to activity directors with flyers to be distributed to residents or congregants. This proved particularly fruitful as people felt more comfortable responding to my ad when there was an intermediary person. I also placed ads in the following newspapers: *Toronto Star*, *Corriere Canadese*, *Beeton Banner*, *Vaughan Weekly*, *King City Spectator*, and *The Bolton Enterprise*. The African Canadian, Italian Canadian and Jewish Canadian collections at the Multicultural History Society of Ontario have been invaluable to my research.

<sup>39</sup>To date I have completed 54 interviews with women and 29 interviews with men. The memories of both men and women are central to my understanding of the society in which women were working and living. Interview questions related to the following themes: family, schooling, neighbourhood, wage-earning, and leisure time. Participants responded on biographical information sheets and in conversations recorded by tape in 1 ½ and 2 hour interviews. Respondents had the option to remain anonymous. In these cases I have used different names. For the most part people have been happy to add their name and identity to an historical record burgeoning with the names (not the aliases) of famous people.

<sup>40</sup>Readers interested in the debates and recent important contributions to oral and memory history can usefully consult the following: Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Lincoln 1998); Paula Draper, "Surviving their Survival: Women, Memory and the Holocaust," in Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta and Frances Swyripa, eds., *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto 2004), 399-414. Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto 2000); Epp, "The Memory of Violence: Mennonite Ref-

ample, many feminist studies of working-class women, especially of immigrant and racialized women, have used standard taped interview techniques to gather and reconstruct women's lives and subjectivities.<sup>41</sup> In doing so, these scholars have analyzed historical actors' voices, perspectives, recollections, and ideas to understand women's lived experiences, though they have rarely relied on this one source. Recognition of the limitations of retrospective interviews is important but it need not lead us to abandon the tape recorder any more than recognition of the limitations of archival holdings should prompt us to abandon the archives!<sup>42</sup> Such studies have proven particularly fruitful for our understanding of the lives of women whose voices have generally been omitted from the historical record. Recent feminist scholarship dealing with refugee women, wartime rape victims, and Holocaust survivors, as well as feminist anthropologists collecting the stories and narratives of Aboriginal women and South American peasant women, have developed sophisticated understandings of the form, content, and silences of women's narratives and have also introduced us to female subjects who set the criteria and pace for telling their stories.<sup>43</sup> Here my focus on women's lived experiences in Toronto's labour market encourages a reading of memories as a source for women's voices and the events of their lives. While I have also incorporated critical issues flagged by scholars of women's oral traditions and memory history, I worked from the as-

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ugees and Rape in World War II," *Journal of Women's History*, 9, 1 (1997), 58-87; Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge 1987); Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (London 1990); Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York 1998), 87-100.

<sup>41</sup>For Canadian examples see: Dionne Brand, *No Burden To Carry*; Frager, *Sweatshop Strife*; Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*; Lindström, *Defiant Sisters*.

<sup>42</sup>Franca Iacovetta, "Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities and Defiant Domestics: Writing About Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (1995), 217-52; Karen Flynn, "Experience and Identity: Black Immigrant Nurses to Canada, 1950-1980," in Epp, Iacovetta and Swyripa, eds., *Sisters or Strangers?*, 381-98.

<sup>43</sup>Julie Cruikshank, "Discovery of Gold on the Klondike: Perspectives from Oral Tradition," in Jennifer Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond Words: Context for Native History* (Peterborough 1996); Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story; The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in Yukon Territory* (Lincoln 1998); Epp, *Women without Men*; Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, "Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts," in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London 1991), 43-58; Franca Iacovetta, "Post Modern Ethnography, Historical Materialism and Decentering the (Male) Authorial Voice: A Feminist Conversation," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 64, 132 (November 1999), 275-93; Luisa Passerini, "Women's Personal Narratives: myths, experiences, and emotions," in Personal Narratives Group, ed., *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington 1989), 189-97.

sumption that, as Joan Sangster and others suggest, interviews can provide important evidence for both “real” experiences and how people remember them.<sup>44</sup> Thus, like many other feminist historians who use oral interviews, when evaluating interviews I have examined the “facts” of women’s memories by joining their narratives with historical evidence provided in sources such as contemporary newspapers, census data, and government documents; at the same time I have considered the recollection process and pondered not only what women remember, but also taken into account who was involved in the interview, in what context recollection occurred, and how memories were conveyed.<sup>45</sup> These memories provide access to stories about labour market participation that indicate that gender should not be conceptualized as the sole and dominant identity in women’s lives: if gender inequality barred women from formal or institutional power, it did not preclude access to privilege that was created and maintained by a confluence of racial, ethnic, gender, and class forces and expectations, which determined whether some women made their way to employment in the city’s classrooms and hospitals, while others had no choice but to toil in its sweatshops, to clean houses, or to take piecework into their homes.

*Job options?:*

*Domestic Service, Clerical Work, the Garment Industry, and Teaching*

The Depression-era working women discussed here came from various racial, ethnic, family, community, and socio-economic backgrounds. Together they belong to a generation of young women who in many instances lost time and opportunities. They were more likely to delay marriage, abandon educational aspirations, and find themselves constrained by economic insecurity than any generation after them. During the Depression years my female participants were single, between the ages of 15 and 25, and, with the exception of 3 who chose not to marry, all of them ended their participation in the labour market as wage earners when they married or bore their first child.

In this time between schooling and marriage, their experiences as breadwinners had many similarities. Often characterized as dutiful daughters, these young

<sup>44</sup>Sangster, “Telling our stories.”

<sup>45</sup>Detailed field notes recorded before, during, and after the interview that reflect upon the interview context and the differences and similarities which exist between the interviewer and participant in areas like culture, age, and education, are the best way to reflect upon the shared process of memory generation. See for further discussion on this approach: Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York 1991); Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: the Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London 1987); Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones, *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1980); Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of The Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York 1998); Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By* (London 1990).

single women contributed all or part of their wages to their families.<sup>46</sup> They also worked in a city that, unlike nearby “blue collar” Hamilton, enjoyed greater economic security because of its large financial, civil, and service sector.<sup>47</sup> The inter-war years saw record numbers of Torontonians without homes and livelihood, dependent on the government for relief, but the city’s unemployment rate was slightly below the national average.<sup>48</sup> Toronto’s diversified economy, which included plenty of light industries, suffered less than those economies dependent on one form of industry for stability, such as manufacturing, agriculture, or exports. And, jobs traditionally performed by women such as domestic service, clerical work, manufacturing, and teaching were generally sheltered by the economic stability of Toronto’s secondary and tertiary sectors.

A few men (0.06 per cent in 1931) worked as domestic servants in Toronto but the occupation was, as it was before and after these years, overwhelmingly female during the Depression.<sup>49</sup> The category of personal service included jobs such as boarding house keepers, waitresses, and general cooks; in 1931, more than 50 per cent of the women in personal service were domestics even though domestic service was the least desirable occupation choice for most women wage-earners.<sup>50</sup> It

<sup>46</sup>The term dutiful daughter was frequently used during the Depression to describe the young women who had forgone their individual desires for marriage or schooling to help their families economically and socially.

<sup>47</sup>For more information on the economic development in these areas of the city see: J.M.S. Careless, *Toronto to 1918: An Illustrated History* (Toronto 1984); Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto 1988).

<sup>48</sup>Toronto’s unemployment rate was 16.7 per cent in 1931 compared to the national average of 18.87 per cent. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Unemployment Vol. VI* (Ottawa 1931), 1,267. In general, the provinces that relied upon the wheat market suffered the most in the early years. As a result Saskatchewan was particularly vulnerable while Ontario was relatively more stable. Beside P.E.I., Ontario had the lowest percentage of people not at work. Canada, Census, *Monographs Vol. XIII* (Ottawa 1931), 243. Western families often relied on assistance from “the Good Will, the Salvation Army or relatives in Ontario.” Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years, 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression* (Toronto 1973), 281.

<sup>49</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 1,106. There were 10,758 female and 741 male domestics noted in Toronto in 1931. Canada, Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1931), 236. I could find no other indication of these men in the historical record; however, one man who worked as a launderer during the Depression did write an editorial in the *Evening Telegram* which discusses his job loss in the “old-fashioned trade” of blacksmithing and his subsequent employment in an occupation for which his “wife showed [him] the fine points.” He had been doing it for four months, quite “fanc[ied] hand laundering and figured he was “ready anytime to go into a contest against the best fancy work laundresses in the world.” *Evening Telegram*, 23 July 1932.

<sup>50</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 1,106. Varpu Lindström’s work on Finnish domestics makes the important observation that not all women accepted domestic work as negative. Indeed, the Finnish women she studied worked

had the lowest pay and among the worst working conditions. Consequently, it was generally women who had no other options who took up these jobs, particularly (though by no means exclusively) married and immigrant women. As Mabel Duncan noted in our 2001 interview, “a lot of women went into housework because that was the only kind of work they could get if they were married.”<sup>51</sup> This memory is consistent with the experiences of women in this study whose qualifications for employment were moot because of their marital status. Joyce Cahill and Margaret McLean recall how their mother was forced to work as a domestic after her husband lost his job. “She couldn’t do anything. Our mother was not schooled, and, well, she couldn’t have got a job then anyhow as a married woman” recalled Cahill. “No, good heavens!” exclaimed McLean. Their mother had no schooling and she was married, which significantly limited her employment options. What she did start to do “was clean offices and so she would go, she’d leave about three o’clock in the morning ... for two hours come back get us kids ready for school or whatever, then go again.”<sup>52</sup>

Advertisements in Toronto’s newspapers also indicate the importance of identity, including ethnic identity, to personal service occupations. Frequently, potential employers indicated an ethnic preference, as in “Girl, Polish preferred, for Domestic Help”; “Capable girl Russian or Polish preferred for general housework, no cooking, references, sleep out.”<sup>53</sup> Similar ads appeared for German, Finnish and “Negro” women. Some advertisements emphasized religion: “Domestic Help Wanted: Christian girl for general housework, with knowledge of cooking \$5 weekly.”<sup>54</sup> Still others reflected the fact that certain ethnic groups had a reputation or otherwise fit the image of a domestic in people’s minds. Less well-known is Claire Clarke’s recollection that Americans living in Toronto requested black women for service as they were so closely associated with this occupation south of the border.<sup>55</sup>

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collectively to maintain a positive image and effectively resisted representations of themselves and treatment at the hands of employers which cast them as domestic slaves. See Lindström, *Defiant Sisters*; “‘I Won’t Be a Slave!’: Finnish Domestics in Canada, 1911-1930,” in Franca Iacovetta with Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s* (Toronto 1998), 166-86.

<sup>51</sup>Mabel Duncan, interview by Katrina Srigley, November 2001.

<sup>52</sup>Margaret McLean and Joyce Cahill, joint interview by Katrina Srigley, February 2002.

<sup>53</sup>*Mail and Empire*, 1 January 1931; *Evening Telegram*, 29 January 1935.

<sup>54</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 29 January 1935.

<sup>55</sup>Immigration policy has supported this association between ethnicity and domestic service. Though slowed to a trickle during the Depression years, immigration as a domestic was one of the few ways that single non-professional, particularly non-white, women gained entry to Canada. See for further discussion: Marilyn Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada*, Canadian Historical Association pamphlet, 1991; Barbara Roberts, *Whence They Came: Deportation from Canada, 1900-1935* (Ottawa 1988); Makeda Silvera, *Silenced* (Toronto 1989).

Depending on their class position, people, including women, experienced and recalled domestic service differently. Diana MacFeeters' family had household help during the Depression. "I remember," she said, that "my mother would interview them and they were live in. Their magnificent pay was \$25 a month," but she quickly added, "they got a uniform."<sup>56</sup> When asked about the general feeling that conditions were poor for domestics MacFeeters disagreed: "You got all your food and lodging. You didn't have any other expenses ... unless you were sending money home to wherever you come from."<sup>57</sup> As historians have documented, many women were sending money home to family members, or supporting their own family who lived elsewhere in the city. That was true of Anne Hinsta, who arrived in Toronto from Finland in 1929 and worked at the Royal York and the Prince George Hotels. In an interview conducted for labour historian Wayne Roberts in the 1980s, she described her position: "I was a chamber maid and pay was small, but we used to get tips."<sup>58</sup> After her marriage in 1930 she stopped working, but when her husband lost his job in 1932 she hit the pavement looking for work. Her memory of that experience is noteworthy.

They didn't have much work ... well they didn't have work at all ... we went on welfare ... city welfare, well I could not stand that. I started looking for a domestic job and I used to sit for days and days in the unemployment office. The ladies used to come and see you there if they want to pick you.<sup>59</sup>

Eventually, a woman from Forest Hill, a wealthy Toronto neighbourhood, hired both Hinsta and her husband but not before she asked "are you honest?" As Hinsta remembered "that hurt my feelings and I said if there is anything we guarantee it is that we are honest." She offered them employment for \$35 a month; however, their two-year-old son Roy was not welcome. With few employment options they accepted the job and boarded their son for \$25 a month elsewhere in the city.<sup>60</sup>

The exploitation experienced by people like the Hinstas was not uncommon. However, economic disenfranchisement did not mean domestic servants accepted their work conditions without comment. They voiced their discontent in local newspapers. One critical domestic who wrote to the *Evening Telegram* compared her situation to slavery:

<sup>56</sup>Ron and Diana MacFeeters, interview by Katrina Srigley, March 2002.

<sup>57</sup>MacFeeters, interview.

<sup>58</sup>Anne Hinsta, interview, *Wayne Roberts Collection*, Archives of Ontario (OA).

<sup>59</sup>Hinsta, interview.

<sup>60</sup>Hinsta does not indicate where she boarded her son Roy; however, she does say that boarding was common because so many Finnish women were domestics and Finnish men were off working in the bush. Hinsta, interview.

The way domestics are treated in Toronto is shameful. My opinion is that free advertisements make it easier for people to exploit us. In most places there is work a plenty and skimmed milk, and the wage so small as to be not worth mentioning ... Cannot somebody act to cause an improvement? It's like buying and selling human beings.<sup>61</sup>

Another woman, after seeing a cartoon published in the same newspaper depicting "Mrs. Toronto" as a kind employer willing to pay \$20 for a maid but unable to find any willing takers, was outraged by what she saw as an insulting misrepresentation. She wrote:

I have answered every single advertisement for a housekeeper which appeared in the last nine months and the most I have been offered is 10 per month. The great majority offered me only a good home and perhaps a little pocket money. If I could get a pail of tar and some feathers I might be able to get along on this. How can anyone live decently on such wages?<sup>62</sup>

Connie Lancaster has vivid memories of the difficulties of domestic service. Lancaster immigrated to Canada as a foster child on a movement handled by the Salvation Army. But soon after arriving on her placement as a farm helper, she fled and found a job as a domestic in Toronto. Since childhood she had hoped to be a nurse but these opportunities were not open, at least initially, to an uneducated immigrant girl. In our 2002 interview, she shared with me her story of those years: "when I was eighteen my options were very limited, because of lack of education and I had no family to fall back on. I was homeless if I didn't make one, so I started as a domestic."<sup>63</sup> But the awful work conditions meant she did not keep this job for very long. "It was a job, I had an awful time because I didn't know electricity when I came to the city ... I got \$25 a month for keeping a 14 room house clean." Although the literature on English immigrant women in Canada has said much about this sort of training, Lancaster received no training in the operation of household appliances. The first time she lit the stove she turned on the gas, went to find a match and returned several minutes later. The subsequent explosion did not endear her to her employers. "I lost my hair, my eyebrows and the dust off the floor. I went up and the family said: You could have blown us up! But nobody told me."<sup>64</sup> She soon found a job at another home in Toronto.

Luckily for Lancaster the Depression increased rather than decreased the middle-class demand for the household labour of certain groups of women, including white British-born ones. She found another job quickly. A *Chatelaine* journalist who covered this situation in a 1932 article marveled that,

<sup>61</sup> *Evening Telegram*, 30 April 1935.

<sup>62</sup> *Evening Telegram*, 23 April 1935. The cartoon was published in the *Evening Telegram* on 18 April 1935.

<sup>63</sup> Connie Lancaster, interview by Katrina Srigley, (2001). Eventually Lancaster did become a nurse with the Salvation Army. She worked in Toronto at the Grace Hospital.

<sup>64</sup> Lancaster, interview.

despite unemployment figures which have long passed the astonishing stage and almost leave one stupefied, superintendents of women's employment bureaus report that domestic service is the one class of job for which vacancies always outnumber suitable applicants.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, as the cost of living decreased more middle-class households could afford domestic help. Ron MacFeeters, a man from a middle-class Toronto family, remembers "that a lot of small, really small two and three bedroom houses ... had a funny little room off the kitchen called the maids room. It would have a sink in it and room for a bed and I guess a chest of draws."<sup>66</sup> Higher demand for domestics did not ease the job search of all women. The same *Chatelaine* writer noted that vacancies outnumbered "suitable applicants." Mrs. Hinsta and others certainly remembered the lack of jobs. At the time, some domestics noted the exploitation of the situation with anger. "Has it ever occurred to you, or anyone else," she wrote, "that a great number of Toronto's citizens (the average working class) who have not felt the 'pinch' of depression as others have, are taking a mean advantage of the present state of affairs."<sup>67</sup> When they had the option, many women protested by refusing to take domestic jobs, irrespective of demand.

As a consequence of vacancies and a perceived shortage of acceptable workers, an interesting tension emerged in the press between domestics who complained about working conditions and housewives who claimed that working-class women were shunning such jobs for a languid life on relief. In one editorial signed "ONE OF THOSE MOTHERS" a self-identified homemaker in search of a domestic insisted that authorities compel working-class women to take on this job. Otherwise, "[h]ow in the world can they succeed" in their role as household managers "when so many homes are looking for help?"<sup>68</sup> She claimed to be having a hard time finding a reliable girl despite the fact that she offered "\$25 a month ... a good home, the best food, served at the same time the family [was] served, almost every night out, in addition to the regular full afternoon off each week and almost every Sunday afternoon [off]."<sup>69</sup> Not all people agreed with Toronto's housewives. Stories of poor wages, bad working conditions, and labour shortages did capture the attention of some reformers. In 1932 Constance Templeton of *Chatelaine* magazine wrote an article which proposed that if the home "were run on more businesslike lines, more women of the right type would be attracted to it...."<sup>70</sup> Who was the right "type" of woman? Well, Hudson noted, unlike in Europe where wealthy houses require large

<sup>65</sup> Constance Templeton, "Can Domestic Service Be Run on a Business Basis?" *Chatelaine*, December 1932, 17.

<sup>66</sup> MacFeeters, interview.

<sup>67</sup> *Evening Telegram*, 29 August 1932.

<sup>68</sup> *Evening Telegram*, 7 February 1935.

<sup>69</sup> *Evening Telegram*, 7 February 1935.

<sup>70</sup> Constance Templeton, "Can Domestic Service Be Run on a Business Basis?" *Chatelaine*, December 1932, 17.

staffs most Canadian houses only require a "cook general or houseworker."<sup>71</sup> But these workers had to be trained, indeed certified, and given a regular routine much like a stenographer. That way, Canadian housewives would get trained girls who knew what to expect at their workplace. Not surprisingly, these plans were never carried out, and domestic service remained a ghetto for married women, immigrants, and non-Anglo women.<sup>72</sup>

In certain sectors of the economy, such as office work, wages were more substantial and work conditions more favourable. Clerical workers in the city's financial sector and in the offices of industry did not experience widespread slow downs or job loss. And, as Graham Lowe's research demonstrates, the feminization of clerical occupations was well under way by the 1930s.<sup>73</sup> What had been a male occupation until the early 20th century became, with the expansion of the office and the invention of the typewriter, a space occupied by increasing numbers of women. Despite such feminization clear divisions between men's and women's jobs continued within offices. For instance, in 1931 men occupied more than twice as many accounting positions as women did in Toronto offices, while 93 per cent of stenographers were women.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to men who were more often lifetime breadwinners, women in clerical work, as in other occupations, earned wages at a particular stage in their life. Certainly, this was true for the overwhelming majority of clerical workers in this study; after completing the necessary schooling, they worked only until marriage. Of those who worked in offices, 71 per cent left work when they married, while approximately 29 per cent did not marry or continued to work after

<sup>71</sup>Constance Templeton, "Can Domestic Service Be Run on a Business Basis?" *Chatelaine*, December 1932, 17.

<sup>72</sup>In New York during the 1930s, training schools were organized for domestics by community associations like the Urban League and funded by the federal government. The School of Household Work was one of the better-known schools. Ultimately, Brenda Clegg concludes, despite their innovation such schools did little if anything to improve the working conditions of black domestics in New York during the Depression. Brenda Clegg, "Black Female Domestics During the Great Depression in New York City, 1930-1940," Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 1983, 137.

<sup>73</sup>Graham Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: the Feminization of Clerical Work* (Toronto 1987). For a discussion of the American context see Margery Davies, *Women's Place is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers, 1870-1982* (Philadelphia 1982).

<sup>74</sup>Of the people employed as accountants and bookkeepers in Toronto in 1931, 3,124 were women and 9,520 were men. In 1941 little had changed. Men held 10,124 of the positions and women occupied 4,124 of them. In stenography there was a similar pattern. In 1931, 10,843 stenographers were women and 758 were men. In 1941, women and men held 12,888 and 659 positions respectively. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 1,106.

marriage.<sup>75</sup> Census statistics indicated that this situation was typical for the labour market as a whole: in 1931 four out of five female wage-earners were single.<sup>76</sup> The way in which Mildred Johnson remembers why women did not work after marriage in those years — “I don’t think it entered their heads. I know women who had to work, but you see in those days we hadn’t got to the place where women were tired of their homes” — does not, of course, speak to those married women who did work for pay. But her memories that working women were young and single women is borne out by statistics: the 1931 census also indicates that close to 64 per cent of working women in Toronto were between the ages of 18 and 34.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, it was common practice, and in some offices required, for women to leave work when they married. Matrimony meant the financial support of a husband but it also initiated greater household and family responsibilities. This “ideal” did not hold for jobs like domestic service, but in clerical occupations marital status affected access to employment, as did other sites of identity such as race.

Racist hiring practices and the implicit race-designations for employment and employability are well captured by the stories shared by Claire Clarke and Violet Blackman. These Canadian women of Caribbean descent were single and in their late teens and early twenties during the Depression. They lived in a city, which, unlike New York, had a tiny black community that included three churches, Mr. George’s grocery store, mutual benefit and social organizations like the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Home Service Association and the Eureka Club, one medical doctor, Dr White, and two lawyers, the most well-known being B.J. Spencer Pitt.<sup>78</sup> Toronto’s black neighbourhoods were viable communities but small black businesses and workplaces could not provide the women in their community with a range of jobs, or even a sufficient number of even very low-paying ones. In this regard, white ethnic women had access to more jobs within their (larger) immigrant or ethnic communities than was the case for black women

<sup>75</sup> Fourteen women in this study were clerical workers. Ten left their job when they married. Two did not marry and two continued to work after marriage. Neither of these women found this to be exceptional, though Helen Campbell did explain that she was a *private* secretary. She obviously felt this was an important factor in legitimizing her position as a married office worker.

<sup>76</sup> The percentage of married women in the workforce increased from 2 per cent in 1921 to nearly 4 per cent in 1931. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1931), 37.

<sup>77</sup> Mildred Johnson, interview by Katrina Srigley, February 2002. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII*, (Ottawa 1931), 226.

<sup>78</sup> Spencer Pitt was a well-known lawyer and important role model for young West Indian and African Canadian women and men during this time. Claire Clarke, interview; J.E. Clarke, interview, (Multicultural History Society (MHS), BLA-5122-CLA) 1 August 1978. See also Dawn Moore, *Who’s Who in Black Canada* (Toronto 2002), 81. The 1931 census suggests that there were 1344 people in Toronto’s “negro” community. *Census*, Volume IV (Ottawa 1931), 912.

like Clarke and Blackman. As a result, they were compelled to search for jobs in mainstream white society where plenty of employers and businesses did not see black women as viable workers.<sup>79</sup>

Such views did not stop Claire Clarke from finishing her schooling, but after graduating she could not find a job that required her skills in stenography and typing. "I sent in applications, résumés and got one, I got a very nice response from ACME and I was so happy they were very pleased with my résumé and they invited me for an interview so I went for the interview but of course when they saw me...."<sup>80</sup> In her effort to find work Claire also went to visit an influential black professional man and remembered being snubbed. Her recollection also speaks to the tensions among blacks in a white-dominated world in which light or dark skin African Canadians could lead considerably different lives. With renewed anger, Claire shared the incident with me: "Well you might say he was a light coloured. He was married to a white so naturally he didn't have too much attachment to the black community. But he gave me an interview and he had just to tell me the white girls won't work with you. I got this from him!"<sup>81</sup>

Violet Blackman also had a clear sense of why she could not find employment in 1930s Toronto. Blackman, who had come to Toronto from Jamaica as a twenty year old in 1920, worked as a domestic during the Depression. When asked about employment options in the city, she responded with indignation and exasperation in her voice: "YOU COULDN'T GET office work and factory and hospital work and things like that you couldn't because they would not give you the job ... because of the colour of your skin because you were black you couldn't the only thing that you could get was a domestic."<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Halifax-born Isobel Bailey's hopes of becoming a nutritionist in Toronto were dashed; her memories capture her realization that her race would deny her access to the right courses at the city's schools. Instead, she worked as a domestic and eventually in a silk factory.<sup>83</sup> Most African and West Indian Canadians recall racial discrimination as subtle: Joseph Clarke recalled in a 1978 interview that it "got under your skin and you didn't know what the hell was irritating you," except for when it came to employment.<sup>84</sup> "It was the fun-

<sup>79</sup>Violet Blackman, interview, (MHS, BLA- 6894-BLA); Daniel Braithwaite, (MHS, BLA - 5124 - BRA, BLA - 7986 - BRA); Rella Braithwaite, interview, (MHS, BLA - 7987 - BRA); Claire Clarke, interview; J.E. Clark, interview, (MHS, BLA - 5122 - CLA); Don Moore, *An Autobiography* (Toronto 1985).

<sup>80</sup>Claire Clarke, interview.

<sup>81</sup>For Canadian discussions of such tensions see Brand, *No Burden to Carry*; Shadd and Jones, eds., *Talking About Identity*.

<sup>82</sup>Blackman, interview. (I have added capitalization to reflect the tone of Blackman's voice). Brand, *No Burden to Carry*, 37-8.

<sup>83</sup>Isobel Bailey, interview, (MHS, BLA - 09686 - BAI)

<sup>84</sup>J.E. Clarke, interview. During the Depression, there were divisions in the black community between Canadians and immigrants from America and the West Indies. The Canadians tended to be more assimilated with the WASP community, have greater economic security

niest thing,” Claire Clarke muses about blacks and whites in Depression Toronto, “we mingled together played together but we wouldn’t work together at the time.”<sup>85</sup>

Clarke also fit the profile of a “dutiful daughter.” Moreover, she also possessed important signifiers of middle-class status in Toronto: she had a secondary education, her family owned their own home, and she and her sister took music lessons. But gender and class identities that she shared with white middle-class women did not for her translate into the same employment opportunities. For Clarke, as for Blackman and Bailey, race trumped education and marital status when she sought training and employment in Toronto’s schools and workplaces.<sup>86</sup> These women’s situation, and their memories of those years, stands in contrast to the access that young single women from similar class and educational backgrounds had to better paying clerical jobs.

Mildred Johnson and Thelma Plunkett, who were single Canadian women of Scottish and English descent, were in their late teens when they landed office jobs in the city. While Johnson chose not to marry and remained in an office throughout her working life, Thelma Plunkett left clerical work when she married. During our 2001 interview, Johnson, sitting tall and austere, her shoe heel rubbing methodically against her couch, remembered how she left school at eighteen to attend Shaw’s Business school to earn the requisite training in stenography and typing:

I didn’t go right through. I only went to the fourth form Junior Matriculation and then father asked me what I was going to do, and I said I guess I’ll go and work in an office. So I went to Shaw’s business college, and I got a good training there in business....<sup>87</sup>

Access to clerical work depended upon education. There were differences in requirements (a file clerk required less education than a stenographer, for example), but most offices required training in commercial courses offered at high schools and private business schools around Toronto. The hierarchies within clerical work reflected skill level: secretaries who were expected to be stenographers and typists with a firm grasp of shorthand occupied the highest ranks, while clerks with filing responsibilities rounded out the bottom. The women themselves were well aware of these divisions. In discussing her employment as a secretary, Johnson, who is otherwise of humble demeanor and soft-spoken, confidently assured me “though I don’t consider myself a secretary, I was a darn good typist if I do say so myself.”<sup>88</sup>

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and were often disparaging of, in particular, the West Indians. Claire Clarke, interview; Keith S. Henry, *Black Politics in Toronto since World War I* (Toronto 1981), 6; Harry Gairey, *A Black Man’s Toronto, 1914-1980*, ed. Donna Hill, (Toronto 1981), 14.

<sup>85</sup>Claire Clarke, interview. Clarke continues to be a source of information and insight.

<sup>86</sup>For more on race and access to theatres see Backhouse, *Colour Coded*.

<sup>87</sup>Johnson, interview.

<sup>88</sup>Johnson, interview.

Among the women in this study, the most popular school in Toronto for such courses was Shaw's business school, which offered a range of courses and had locations all over the city. Their advertisements appeared regularly in the city's newspapers but, of course, not all women could take advantage of their offerings. This type of commercial training cost money in the form of wages, tuition, and books. Margaret McLean, and others, tell the story of education limited by the economic constraints of family responsibilities.<sup>89</sup> Malvern Collegiate, a school offering commercial courses, was minutes from their home, but the Tapp family could not afford the cost of books for sisters Ivy Phillips and Marg McLean. Phillips spoke movingly about her disappointment and envy:

well I felt envious of the girls that went to Malvern and you'd see them the way they were dressed that bothered me. I hated going down that time of the morning and I had to pass all the girls all the kids going to Malvern ... I really HATED it. That's something that bothered me that I couldn't go on to high school.<sup>90</sup>

The Tapp sisters went to Danforth Technical High school which was located further away, but as it turned out, they could not remain there either. In sharing this story with me McLean began by saying "You speak of shame." She continued:

Ivy, my sister, and I we wanted to go to Danforth Tech, a high school. Ivy loved sewing. But, eventually mother said I can't buy your books so you will have to go and tell the principal that you are on relief. Well Ivy and I stood outside the principal's office and we couldn't go in. We just couldn't go in. And we went home and told mother and she said, "I'm sorry."<sup>91</sup>

That working-class women were acutely aware that family difficulties hurt their chances of earning the clerical training that would have given them access to better paid jobs is born out not only by the stories that women shared with me but by their children, who grew with their parents' Depression tales. Speaking of his mother, Margaret, and aunt, Gladys Thompson, Ian Radforth understood well that these sisters had thought of extra education "as something they couldn't afford to do."<sup>92</sup> It was only after her marriage failed in the 1940s that Thompson eventually "learned the superior skills" of shorthand and typing to become a secretary, but to do so she had to keep her clerking job while taking "up-grading" courses at night and live cheaply in a rented room. During the Depression, the majority of young women and men did not finish high school let alone complete a university degree or a business school diploma. In 1935, a help wanted ad in the *Evening Telegram* requested a "stenographer and a dictaphone operator for [a] commercial office," stipulating

<sup>89</sup>McLean and Cahill, interview.

<sup>90</sup>Ivy Phillips, interview by Katrina Srigley, March 2002.

<sup>91</sup>McLean and Cahill, interview.

<sup>92</sup>Ian Radforth, interview by Katrina Srigley, December 2003.

that those without "sufficient education" need not apply.<sup>93</sup> Access to commercial education had an impact on job options, restricting access to employment in clerical occupations and to other jobs within the field.

Only certain women could take advantage of the necessary schooling for an office job, but far more women than men enrolled in business schools. Despite high rates of male unemployment, business courses continued to fill with young women receiving training in stenography, accounting, and typing. In fact, women occupied twice as many positions in business schools as men in 1930. In private business and commercial schools there were 3,777 women and 1,183 men enrolled in Toronto in 1930. In 1933, these numbers had dropped substantially; however, women still occupied well over two-thirds of the positions: 1,351 women and 540 men.<sup>94</sup> When asked about competing with men for jobs, Margaret McLean, who worked as a factory worker during the Depression responded: "GOODNESS no! Women were nothing until the war came!" Joyce Cahill concurred: "Yes, if a woman did it, then it was a job men wouldn't do." Similarly, census analysts explained the greater than 10 per cent difference in female and male unemployment rates by pointing to "the dissimilarity in the types of male and female employment."<sup>95</sup>

The ironies of this disparity between male unemployment and female employment did not go unnoticed by Toronto's citizens. In the letter-to-the-editor section of Toronto's *Evening Telegram* a correspondent noted, "that if fifteen [were] waiting at a car stop to board the car twelve [would] be well dressed girls, presumably office girls. Girls [were] in large numbers in offices. A large office looks more like a high-class school for stylish young ladies than a business office."<sup>96</sup> THE GOAT, the letter writer who had inspired this response, had written that he believed "that many women, now employed in various vocations should not hold these positions in the face of so much unemployment," but he was concerned that "it might be a difficult matter to find a male sufficiently qualified to take the places."<sup>97</sup> In Toronto's offices during the 1930s men and women sat behind desks. They filed, typed, and tabulated. At times, their close proximity caused concern among those who feared mixing would lead to immorality or that the presence of so many working women signaled an end to male breadwinning, but, in fact, men and women usually worked in different jobs. And notwithstanding the tough economic times, men were unwilling or ineligible for many positions in the city's offices.

<sup>93</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 29 January 1935.

<sup>94</sup>Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Annual Survey of Education* (Ottawa 1930), 127; Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Annual Survey of Education* (Ottawa 1933), 115. In 1937 there were seventeen different locations offering business courses in Toronto. The business school with the most schools around the city was Shaw's. Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Annual Survey of Education* (Ottawa 1936), 158-9.

<sup>95</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census *Monographs Vol. XIII* (Ottawa 1931), 235-9.

<sup>96</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 15 January 1932.

<sup>97</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 12 January 1932.

After completing her schooling at Shaw's, Mildred Johnson hoped to find a job. "For the first year I had a temporary [job] ... at the Faculty of Applied Science in the office there," she recalled, "but that only lasted till the end of June, the end of the university term proper." After that she noted with obvious disappointment, "I tried to get a job and I couldn't get a job for love nor money."<sup>98</sup> Then came a call from Shaw's, who contacted her, "because I was an Anglican you see they felt that I might apply for the job at the Anglican diocese on Jarvis."<sup>99</sup> In recalling her interview Johnson reminisced:

[The Bishop] wasn't in a good humour because the hospital in Iqaluit had just gone up in flames ... he scared me out of my wits, anyway I came home and I said to my stepmother, I said, "oh I do like the girl in the office, but goodness I don't know about the bishop; but they're going to phone me around 5:30 tonight ..." And the phone rang, 'could I come in in the morning.' COULD I COME in in the morning! I was there before anybody (laughter).<sup>100</sup>

Landing a clerical position was an important economic and social achievement for young women in the context of the Depression. Clerical work, though hardly a ticket to prosperity, did give workers a degree of economic stability. In keeping with the minimum wage of \$12.50 per week, Johnson's starting salary was \$50 a month. This was significantly more than what men who frequented relief lines, women working as domestics, or doing piecework received. The latter earned as little as \$3.80 per week.<sup>101</sup> Johnson shared with me an early story about the job that she would keep for 47 years: "As soon as I got my first cheque — we were paid monthly — I always paid board at home. Girls did in those days. I think I paid about five dollars a week and then as time went on and the salary increased, I increased it each time." A daughters' wage gave families greater financial security. Johnson too was a dutiful daughter but unlike her Caribbean-Canadian counterparts, her higher wages meant that she could give more to her family.

That clerical work might offer better conditions than domestic service or a garment shop does not mean all white-collar workers had good working conditions. Sitting on her sofa, surrounded by the objects of her daily life — cane, walker, pills, tissues, books, pens, crossword puzzle, water glass — Thelma Plunkett vividly remembered her job at H. Brown Silk Company when she was nineteen: "I worked there for five years and oh it was terrible the hours we had to put in ... I know one week I counted up and I had put in seventy-two hours!" She left her job as an invoice clerk, and paid eight dollars a week on the advice of her doctor after toxic dye

<sup>98</sup>Johnson, interview.

<sup>99</sup>Johnson, interview.

<sup>100</sup>Johnson, interview.

<sup>101</sup>In both 1931 and 1941 men earned, on average, 16 - 20 per cent more per year than women. Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution*, 145; Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence* 16 January 1935, 4,410.

fumes had caused her to faint.<sup>102</sup> However, she soon found another job at Aluminum Goods on York Street in Toronto. Her story of the job interview effectively conveys the willingness of women to take advantage of opportunities to land better-paying positions.

When I went in there was quite a group of people, and I thought, oh, I will never get the position ... but anyhow when I went in and was interviewed I told them the different machines that I could use and, but of course there weren't anything like computers then but there were contometers ... and of course when he asked me I had to say that I didn't know how to use one ... so anyway at the end of the interview he said "Would you go to contometer school in the evening if we sent you and paid for it?" So I said OH YES!<sup>103</sup>

In a time of relative job scarcity, Thelma Plunkett transferred jobs, albeit unpleasant ones, with ease. Although she lacked the necessary "contometer,"<sup>104</sup> skills, Plunkett acquired the job at Aluminum Goods and the company gave her money to attend a course in the evenings. She accepted the job enthusiastically because, as she commented, "I was lucky to have a job." Indeed, Johnson and Plunkett were fortunate. Their access to education, their class, and their marital status made them suitable clerical workers. Still, as the experiences of women such as Claire Clarke clearly indicate, these social variables did not ensure employment across the racial divide; race also played a central role even if white women did not clearly articulate it in their memories of this time. In the Depression context, white femininity established racial privilege even as it created some gender disadvantages. It did not stand alone in creating the job market privilege of women such as Johnson and Plunkett, nor was it entirely Anglo-Protestant in construction. For instance, census analysts noted a significant number of Jewish and Italian women among clerical workers in the manufacturing industry in Toronto through the 1930s; their ethnicity was not as much of a liability as the blackness of Caribbean-Canadian women. Also, these women most likely would have been Canadian-born Jewish and Italian Canadians who did not confront the same language barriers as their parents. The presence of non-Anglo but nonetheless white ethnic women in the clerical industry points to the fluidity of employment boundaries and the complicated whiteness which bestowed

<sup>102</sup> Her doctor told her she had better leave "or they would be carrying her out of there." Thelma Plunkett, interview by Katrina Srigley, November 1997. For more on the unhealthy conditions of women workers in Toronto see Catherine Macleod, "Women in Production: The Toronto Dressmakers' Strike of 1931," in Linda Kealey, ed., *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto 1974), 316-7.

<sup>103</sup> Plunkett, interview.

<sup>104</sup> A contometer is similar to a calculator. It is interesting that companies were willing to pay for their employees to attend school in a time of hardship. This points to the fact that Mrs. Plunkett was among the "desirable workers." Norma Langley also reported that her company promoted her when she finished night schooling. Norma Langley, interview by Katrina Srigley, October 1997.

privilege in the form of employment access.<sup>105</sup> Whiteness could also trump religious identities and the disadvantages of being Catholic and Jewish in Toronto.

Working in an industry that had long exploited its workers, female garment workers experienced greater vulnerability and insecurity than did clerical workers. As Henry Steven's 1934 Royal Commission on Price Spreads highlights, the textile industry, which employed 65 per cent of women in manufacturing in 1931, was an exploitative environment for wage-earners in the 1930s.<sup>106</sup> Characterized by stiff economic competition and instability, workers dealt with chronically low wages, poor working conditions, and deskilling. In the dry, blunt words of the Royal Commission, "the worker in the clothing industry can expect neither comfort nor security; in many cases he [sic] can indeed expect only hopeless poverty."<sup>107</sup> Despite efforts to unionize garment workers during the interwar years, the position of a labourer in the needle trades remained precarious. As Mercedes Steedman well documents, female garment workers were particularly vulnerable. Men maintained some control over the labour process because of their skilled positions as "cutters and trimmers, machine operators, finishers and pressers."<sup>108</sup> But, by the 1930s, women occupied very few skilled positions. Ready-made garments and piecework on sewing machines had replaced intricate hand sewing. In these low-paid positions, women were particularly vulnerable to mechanization and speed-ups.

Weak government regulations and the economic instability of the Depression worsened conditions. Several of the largest employers of women in Toronto increased hours and production requirements while simultaneously decreasing wages.<sup>109</sup> Timothy Eaton Company's exploitative policies received considerable publicity because of the Royal Commission. In order to compensate for the economic decline of the 1930s, Eaton's had decreased wages and increased production requirements so that by 1933, a dressmaker who had earned \$3.60 a dozen for her work on voile dresses in the late 1920s now made only \$1.75 for the same work. As

<sup>105</sup>Of the 17,457 teachers in Ontario in 1931, 14,394 were of British origin, 1,728 were French, 54 were Jewish, 46 were Italian, 14 were Indian [sic], and 12 were Asiatic. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 392-3.

<sup>106</sup>In manufacturing, 8,703 of 13,352 women worked in the textile industry. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1931), 227-8.

<sup>107</sup>Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads, *Report on Findings*, 119.

<sup>108</sup>Mercedes Steedman, "Skill and Gender in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940," in Ian Radforth and Laurel Sefton MacDowell, eds., *Canadian Working Class History: Selected Readings* (Toronto 2000), 453. Also see Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940* (Toronto 1997).

<sup>109</sup>Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads, *Evidence of Special Committee*, 28 February 1934, 129-30.

Mrs. Annie Wells testified, workers were being “badgered, harassed,” and threatened with unemployment if they did not reach the expected production quota.<sup>110</sup>

Women workers faced specific barriers in their employment: vulnerable positions on the shop floor, male centered unions, not to mention the masculinist culture of the labour movement, and the added burden of traditional household responsibilities. The following memories underscore how religion, ethnicity, and class intersected in these factories. As Ruth Frager has extensively documented, the garment trade employed large numbers of immigrant women, particularly those who were Jewish. During the Depression, the Kensington Market area, situated on the border of Toronto’s Spadina Avenue garment district, was the nucleus of this immigrant and working-class Jewish neighbourhood.<sup>111</sup> Here Yiddish was often the language of choice and all became quiet as the sun set on Shabbat. Many women, married and single, helped support their families; mothers haggled in the marketplace to stretch limited budgets, daughters and some wives too, worked in the ready-made clothing industry.

Toronto’s Jewish women workers included women like Rose Edelist, who arrived on Baldwin Street in Kensington Market from Poland in 1928. During the Depression, she worked for several companies, each time changing jobs when conditions or wages worsened. She married in 1932 but continued to work until her daughter was born in 1935. The garment industry, along with jobs like domestic service, employed married women. When asked whether her marital status had forced her to abandon her job, Edelist stressed instead childcare responsibilities. “Well, who was going to look after my child?” she asked rhetorically in our 2002 interview.<sup>112</sup> Unable to afford childcare and without a large community of ex-

<sup>110</sup> Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads, *Evidence of Royal Commission*, 16, 17, 22 Jan 1935, 4,410, 4,462, 4,650; Royal Commission on Price Spreads, “Garment Industry: The Speed-Up at Eaton’s,” in Irving Abella and David Miller, eds., *The Canadian Worker in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto 1978), 185-93. By 1935 some women were earning as little as \$6.00 to \$7.00 a week despite the fact that \$12.50 was the established minimum wage. The Minister of Trade and Finance Henry Stevens was forced to resign in October 1934 for exposing the exploitative practices of big business.

<sup>111</sup> There were approximately 45,305 Jewish people in Toronto in 1931. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Cross-Classifications Vol. IV* (Ottawa 1931), 912. For more on Jewish women’s experiences see Paula Draper and Janice B. Karlinsky, “Abraham’s Daughters: Women, Charity and Power in the Canadian Jewish Community,” in Franca Iacovetta, Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s* (Toronto 1998), 186-201; Frager, *Sweatshop Strife*.

<sup>112</sup> Rose Edelist, interview by Katrina Srigley, January 2002. This point was echoed by Mrs. R. Ducove, when asked why she stopped working after her first child was born. Mrs. R. Ducove, interview, (MHS, JEW - 1754 - DUC, 1977). Some women did not have a large family group to rely on for childcare and this, rather than cost, affected their employment choices. For Rose Edelist, it was a matter of affordability. Her immediate family, mother, father, and siblings all lived in Toronto.

tended family, Edelist abandoned the garment trade and breadwinning until her husband opened a delicatessen on College Street. In this situation, Edelist's wage-earning options depended where she worked and the cost and responsibility of childcare. Her story also reminds us that many women worked in small, family businesses that were more often seen as the husband's business. Nonetheless, Edelist's breadwinning experiences differed from those of single women who worked as teachers and nurses, as well as from those of middle and upper-class Jewish women who certainly faced discrimination in an Anglo-Protestant city, but did have greater economic security.<sup>113</sup> Some women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, could avoid the garment industry and find employment in other areas of Toronto's labour market. In the early 1930s, Edelist worked at the Walman Sportswear Company. Here she joined a garment workers union.<sup>114</sup> As her story shows, she still has vivid memories of the strike that her union called in 1931:

The union wanted to have organized union shops. And then they called a strike and we had to leave. All my life I will never forget this strike. It was so terrible that the police protected the shops, and they treated the workers like garbage. It was so horrible. I tell you, I remember how they came so close by with the horses. The picketers they treated terrible. They protected the strikebreakers. So you know even [if] you didn't believe in unions ... you believed in unions when you saw what was doing [sic].<sup>115</sup>

When asked whether there was anyone who did not join the union, Edelist answered, "the gentile girls didn't join because they were happy with their employment situation. They were in a shop that men worked so they made decent wages."<sup>116</sup> Edelist insisted that she had no intention of being a scab. As Frager's work makes clear, the shared ethnicity and class exploitation of many of Toronto's Jewish garment workers, and a shared history of social activism and of anti-Semitism, shaped their union involvement. Edelist's memories also suggest

<sup>113</sup>There were several ways in which the immigrant working-class Jewish community was separated from the middle and upper class Jewish community in Toronto. Middle and upper class Jews may have shopped in the Kensington Market area, but they did not live there. The longer-established Holy Blossom synagogue had both Saturday and Sunday services and was attended by the older Jewish community. Rabbi Eisendrath, who presided over Holy Blossom for part of the 1930s, had a radio spot on a Toronto station and was often invited to speak at city functions. The Rabbis from synagogues around the Kensington Market did not seem to enjoy such acceptance or popularity. This separation may also have been related to country of origin and religious sect, such as the division between Chasidic Jews and other sects of Judaism.

<sup>114</sup>I presume it was the ILGWU, but she did not specify.

<sup>115</sup>Edelist, interview. For more on such strikes see Catherine MacLeod, "Women in Production: The Toronto Dressmakers' Strike of 1931," in J. Acton et al., eds., *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto 1974), 309-29.

<sup>116</sup>Edelist, interview.

that while an activist heritage was certainly important, gentile women enjoyed access to jobs, which, in turn, gave them economic stability. They enjoyed the “privilege” to reject unionization, if they wished, or, to move jobs rather than stay and fight.<sup>117</sup>

By the 1930s, Toronto’s Italian population, though by no means comparable to its post-World War II size, was the third largest ethnic group in the city: they numbered roughly 13,000 people.<sup>118</sup> During the early 20th century, a group of primarily sojourning men gradually became a settlement of Italian families: husbands, wives, children, and grandparents with a communal infrastructure replete with three parishes, grocery stores, and mutual aid societies.<sup>119</sup> Like Jewish women, Italian women frequently worked in the garment industry.<sup>120</sup> Mrs. Bassi emigrated from Italy’s north-eastern Friuli region to Toronto after World War I. Many wage-earning Italian women took in piecework, but Mrs. Bassi found a job in the garment district on Spadina finishing men’s suits.<sup>121</sup> There she encountered “English women or Canadian women” who took advantage of her language difficulties by blaming any faulty workmanship on “the immigrant.” To resist this treatment, Mrs. Bassi drew upon the language skills of her husband and children; the story that her daughter, Evelina Bassi, shared with her interviewer also confirms the impressive resourcefulness of immigrant women who had so little to work with.

She came home one night, and said “I want you to tell me how to say a couple of words” ‘That’s not my job.’ So she wrote it on a piece of paper, ‘That’s not my job.’ So the next day

<sup>117</sup>See Ruth A. Frager, “Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Eaton Strikes of 1912 and 1934,” in Franca Iacovetta and Mariona Valverde eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History* (Toronto 1992); Frager, *Sweatshop Strife*.

<sup>118</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census *Cross-Classifications Vol. IV* (Ottawa 1931), 912. The numbers reported on the Italian community varied widely depending on who was recording the numbers. This is in part a consequence of seasonal work patterns and migration. For further tabulation see: Enrico Cumbo, “As the Twig is Bent, the Tree’s Inclined”: Growing Up Italian in Toronto, 1905-1940,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1995, 461; John E. Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity 1875-1935* (Montreal 1988), 44.

<sup>119</sup>Donna Gabbaccia and Franca Iacovetta, eds. *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto 2002); Robert F. Harney and Vincenza Scarpaci, *Little Italies in North America* (Toronto 1981); Robert Harney, “Men without Women: Italian Migrants in Canada, 1885-1930,” in Franca Iacovetta, Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840-1960s* (Toronto 1998), 206-30; Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto*.

<sup>120</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census *Summary Vol. I*, (Ottawa 1941), 338. In manufacturing in Canada 77 per cent of Italian women and 90 per cent of Jewish women were in the textile industry. Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1931), 418-27.

<sup>121</sup>Please note that I am using Mrs. Bassi because this was the only way she was referred to in her daughter’s interview.

when the jacket came back and she saw it wasn't hers she said, 'That's not my job!' She decided that she'd put — this was really clever — they had a punch clock, you know, and everybody had their own number, so she thought she is not going to fool me just because I can't speak. She thinks I'm stupid. So she put her number on every jacket.<sup>122</sup>

This memory of conflict underscores how language barriers and ethnic discrimination could enter and shape the workplaces of Italian women in the garment industry.<sup>123</sup> Like many women in this industry, Mrs. Bassi was married, suggesting that marital status was not always a determinant of employment, at least not if one was working in the "right" job ghetto. Both Edelist and Bassi's experiences also highlight some of the ways in which immigrant and ethnic working women of the Depression resisted and protested class exploitation and other forms of injustice, whether through unionization or smaller workplace protest.<sup>124</sup> More specifically, Mrs. Bassi's story offers yet another challenge to the stereotypes of Italian women as reluctant wage earners and docile workers.

Nora Windeatt and Agnes Trot began their wage-earning careers as single women in jobs similar to those of Edelist and Bassi, and they too earned meager wages for long hours of work. In contrast to Edelist and Bassi, however, Windeatt and Trot did not remain in their positions on the shop floor until they left work for marriage; rather both became managers of their departments. Nora Windeatt immigrated to Toronto just before the Depression. In May 1927, she arrived in Guelph, Ontario, from England, not Poland or Italy. Having left her family behind, Windeatt had to support herself. With obvious pride, she explained how she did so. For a year, she worked in several positions including a house-worker on a local farm and a food service employee in a hospital. As neither job appealed to her, and as she "refused to clean other people's houses for a living," she sought out different kinds of work.<sup>125</sup> Fairly soon she found a job at a hosiery company. Between 1929 and 1938, Nora Windeatt worked for Well Dress Hosiery in Mount Denis, a suburb of Toronto. Her first job at the company involved "transferring the stamps onto the hosiery" for twenty-five cents an hour, not a task that Windeatt was particularly fond of doing, but fortunately, "it wasn't too long before I received a promotion."

<sup>122</sup>Evelina Bassi, interview, (MHS, ITA - 0661 - BAS). For further discussion of this type of resistance see Angelo Principe, "Glimpses of Lives in Canada's Shadow: Insiders, Outsiders, and Female Activism in the Fascist Era," in Franca Iacovetta and Donna Gabaccia, eds., *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives* (Toronto 2003), 349-385.

<sup>123</sup>For more on the position of Italian women in the garment industry see Guglielmo, "Italian Women's Proletarian Feminism in New York City Garment Trades, 1890s-1940s."

<sup>124</sup>As Franca Iacovetta and Donna Gabaccia establish in their important collection *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World*, the persistent stereotype of passivity does not hold for Italian women workers and must be replaced with a greater awareness of the different forms that resistance took in women's lives. Gabaccia and Iacovetta, *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives*.

<sup>125</sup>Nora Windeatt, interview by Katrina Srigley, June 1998.

She advanced from her position on the shop floor to a salaried position as head of fifty men and women in the finishing, mending, and boarding department.<sup>126</sup>

When Agnes Trot, a Canadian of English and Irish descent, began earning wages as a domestic her family was on relief. At the age of sixteen, she abandoned personal service for a job sewing blinds at a curtain factory. It was 1935 and Trot was not happy with her wages or long hours, so when the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union approached her to help unionize the factory she was more than happy to help. They succeeded in unionizing her floor in 1936. Although justifiably proud of her accomplishment, Trot had no other union stories to share with me. Sitting in her Scarborough home, her voice gravelly from years of smoking, she told me, "You see, I left the union shortly after they came. I was promoted to forelady and given \$75 a month to oversee 40 women."<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, neither of these women recalled whether their promotion or authority over men was considered abnormal in the 1930s. Still, their experiences point to the possibility that, notwithstanding dominant patriarchal structures and sentiments, certain women could attain higher status positions within manufacturing.

Mabel Duncan was born in England. When she was four months old her parents immigrated to Canada. Similar to Windeatt and Trot she started work on the shop floor of a factory when she was in her early teens. Hayhoe Tea Company employed Duncan from 1921 to 1962. She never married. Recalling her first job in our 2001 interview, she laughed perhaps a little self-consciously and said, "Well, I made boxes and packed jelly powders."<sup>128</sup> Not long after she started the company mechanized their tea line. She explained that "[w]ell you know machines came in and they started to put ... tea in bags so when I left there they had about four machines that they were using."<sup>129</sup> Duncan left the shop floor because she was promoted. "I got to the place where I was in charge of the female help." (By 1941 there were 17,993 women in the manufacturing sector, 340 of them Forewomen).<sup>130</sup> Like Windeatt, Trot, and Duncan, some women made higher wages and experienced authority over men and women. Ethnicity, religion, class, and language skills worked concurrently to privilege some women and exclude others in the garment industry. These social variables created situations of discrimination and resistance. And, un-

<sup>126</sup> For more information on women in management see G.L. Symons, "Her View from the Executive Suite: Canadian Women in Management," in Katerina Lundy and Barbara Warne, eds., *Work in the Canadian Context: Continuity Despite Change* (Toronto 1981), 337-53. Also of interest here is the power Nora Windeatt had over the men in her department. As she recalls it the men were from a similar ethnic and class background as Windeatt.

<sup>127</sup> Agnes Trot, interview by Katrina Srigley, December 2001.

<sup>128</sup> Duncan, interview.

<sup>129</sup> Duncan, interview.

<sup>130</sup> Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 218-9.

like the situation in clerical work, marital status was less of a barrier to work on the shopfloor.

Race and class also influenced white-collar work. During the Depression, as before it, women teachers entered a semi-professional world marked by a very clear gender hierarchy. Most women teachers worked at the elementary level where they were paid less than their male colleagues who occupied the better paying jobs in high school and administration. They received, on average, only “two-thirds of the salaries offered to men” and were required to give up their positions at marriage or alternatively by first child.<sup>131</sup> When they left their classrooms, women teachers, much more so than men, could expect to have their behaviour scrutinized. While regular church attendance was a point in their favour, stepping out in the evening or taking a drink in public could result in harsh punishment, including dismissal.<sup>132</sup>

The number of female teachers declined slightly between 1931 and 1941 from 2,854 to 2,811, but only .03 per cent of employed women had these positions in Toronto.<sup>133</sup> If women school teachers faced serious gender discrimination, as white and British women, they enjoyed a racial privilege that did not extend to black women and even to some non-British immigrant or ethnic women. Moreover, in order to become teachers they had enjoyed access to Teacher’s College or Normal School after high school.<sup>134</sup> The individual experiences of Mary Chenhall and Dora Wattie, single, white Canadian women of English descent, provide the opportunity to explore this interesting convergence of gender discrimination with racial and class privilege.

Mary Chenhall, a sprightly 90 year old who still lives in her own apartment and drives her own car, taught math at Markham District High School until she married in 1935. Sharing stories of her university education, Chenhall bitterly told the tale of she and other female classmates arriving at their Physics class at the University of Toronto one day only to find the door locked and their professor bellowing: “Go away, you little Victoria angels. Go back to Vic and enroll in the Household Eco-

<sup>131</sup>Erin Phillips and Paul Phillips, *Women and Work: Inequality in the Canadian Labour Market* (Toronto 1993), 28. Ruth Roach Pierson and Beth Light, eds., *No Easy Road: Women in Canada, 1920-1960s* (Toronto 1990), 209. Also see Alison Prentice, “Themes in the Early History of the Women’s Teachers’ Association of Toronto,” in Paula Bourne, ed., *Women’s Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto 1985), 97-120; For the American experience see Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed* (Westport, Conn. 1980), 66-85.

<sup>132</sup>For an apt and very poignant fictional account of this situation see Richard Wright, *Clara Callan* (Toronto 2001).

<sup>133</sup>Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1931), 236; Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations and Industries Vol. VII* (Ottawa 1941), 222.

<sup>134</sup>In the 1930s, teachers who taught in secondary school required Teacher’s College while elementary school teachers went to Normal School. Margaret Gairns, interview by Katrina Strigley, November 2002.

nomics course. We don't want you in Math and Physics."<sup>135</sup> It was with great pride that Chenhall also recalled the successful completion of her degree. By the time she joined the teaching staff at Markham Collegiate in 1933, she had overcome a great deal of gender discrimination. Yet, class and race also shaped her access to a relatively high paying stable teaching position. First of all, Chenhall had a university education. This was an advantage enjoyed by only four of the women interviewed for this study, which reflects the small percentage of men and women enrolled in university during the Depression years.<sup>136</sup> (In 1936 the Annual Survey of Education indicated that on average between 1920 and 1936 just 4 per cent of young men and 1.5 per cent of young women in Canada became university undergraduates).<sup>137</sup> Indeed, as Paul Axelrod notes "to the vast majority of Canadians the universities were inaccessible...."<sup>138</sup> The Hall family could afford Chenhall's tuition and had the economic stability necessary to forgo her wages during her four-year degree program. They were never on relief. Nor was Mr. Hall, employed in management at Bell Telephone, ever without work. "It was a hard time, we were careful, but we always had good food to eat."<sup>139</sup> Chenhall occupied a privileged position in comparison to women and men without access to such schooling.

Dora Wattie taught at Weston Collegiate throughout the 1930s and her memories of those years certainly include examples of wage discrimination and cutbacks. However, our understanding of these restrictions, which were largely a result of her gender, must be tempered by the advantages that she enjoyed. At one point noting, rather imperiously, "I lost one hundred [dollars] when they cut the [teaching] salaries," she said of women teachers like herself, "we were just plain lucky, I had eighteen hundred dollars a year."<sup>140</sup> In the midst of a severe depression, some fellow citizens were also keenly aware of teachers' privileges. Using the pseudonym Sock

<sup>135</sup>Chenhall was enrolled at Victoria, an affiliated college at the University of Toronto. Mary Chenhall, *Memoirs: Forever in My Heart* (Toronto 1998), 45; Mary Chenhall, interviews by Katrina Srigley, December 2001, April 2002. Mary Chenhall has generously allowed me to read the memoirs she wrote between 1988 and 1998 for her sons.

<sup>136</sup>The University of Toronto President's Report for 1931 conveys this reality. In a city of nearly 700,000 only 2,190 men and 1,680 women were enrolled in the Faculty of Arts. There were 1,385 graduates receiving, like Mary, a Bachelor of Science. 959 of these graduates were men. In 1936-1937 4,007 people were enrolled at the University of Toronto. *President's Report*, Toronto, 1931, 99, 135, 161.

<sup>137</sup>Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Annual Survey of Education*, 1936, p. xxvi. The University of Toronto had enrollments which generally hovered around 5,000 for men and 2,500 for women throughout the Depression years. See: *Annual Survey of Education 1929-1939*.

<sup>138</sup>Paul Axelrod, "Higher Education, Utilitarianism, and the Acquisitive Society: Canada, 1930-1980," in Michael Cross and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Modern Canada 1930- 1980* (Toronto 1985), 180.

<sup>139</sup>Chenhall, *Memoirs: Forever in My Heart*.

<sup>140</sup>Dora Wattie, interview by Katrina Srigley, November 1997.

Em Board, one writer to the *Telegram* complained that, “[t]eachers have had no wage-cuts or staff reductions,” and added:

can’t they be sports and take their medicine like the rest of us who have not had cuts but annihilation of wages to the tune of well on to 50 per cent, which may surprise them ... Teachers get an abundance of holidays and have only to ask for six months leave of absence for personal sickness and it is granted.... Their work is sure because there are always children to teach. So there is no depression in their class.<sup>141</sup>

Indeed, Dora Wattie used her wages to help her father build a new house on Church Street in Weston (where she still lived at the time of our interview), a suburb of Toronto. Chuckling, she also related to me the following story: “I had an extra hundred so I bought some stock in Palace Pier, lost every cent. I could have had units in the Maple Leaf Gardens, but I hadn’t the second hundred!” In 1935, Wattie spent the summer traveling in Europe with friends. “Can you imagine,” she exclaimed, “it only cost three hundred and fifty dollars for two months!” To be sure, with a regular wage and the deflation of the Depression years, people like Wattie experienced a higher standard of living and in some cases, upward class mobility. With a good salary they were able consume much more for lower prices.<sup>142</sup> Dora Wattie and Mary Chenhall’s memories confirm that class and race privileges shaped woman’s employment options and economic stability. Both Chenhall and Wattie had families that supported their education. They were also single, white women, as were most employed teachers working in an overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic city.

### *Conclusion*

When the women in this study made their way home at the end of their workday, they brought wages that in many instances were essential to the survival of their family. Understanding their role as a group of young wage-earning women in a city dealing with significant levels of male unemployment is important. On the one hand, their experiences and memories of them reveal a great deal about familiar themes in women’s labour history, including female job ghettos, gender inequality in wages and salaries, and sex discrimination based on marital status. But the stories of the women who feature prominently in this study tell us about more than that; they also reveal some of the ways in which race, class, and marital status created or sustained privilege and disadvantage. Whether one inclines toward Kessler-Harris’ argument about the greater legitimacy of female employment in a context of massive male unemployment and grave economic crisis, or towards Hobbs’ insistence that Depression-era arguments about economic justice for all did not reduce sexist opposition to working women, there can be no doubt, I argue, that gender based employment regulation must figure into our understanding of women’s Depres-

<sup>141</sup> *The Evening Telegram*, 3 Feb 1932.

<sup>142</sup> Wattie, interview.

sion-era employment and their reactions to it. This Toronto case study confirms that finding. Yet there is more to “the story.” An exclusive emphasis on gender can lead to a neglect or misunderstanding of the confluence of factors, including race, that served to privilege some women in the labour market while disadvantaging or indeed excluding others. As this study suggests, the labour market was not a cohesive whole but was variegated and uneven, and job options were determined in ways that gave some women the freedom to apply for relatively high-paying, stable positions as teachers, clerical workers, and managers and others the “choice” of jobs at the bottom of the heap. Furthermore, this study confirms the value of an oral history approach that pays very close attention to issues of subjectivity. My findings underscore the value of intersectional and dynamic modes of analysis; the intersectionality of class, gender and race-ethnicity, religion, and marital status, is not to be understood as a static equation with each ingredient (or social force) always weighing in equal parts. Instead, we need to make critical judgments about which identities emerge as more or less influential in shaping women’s working lives in a given time and place, and at a particular phase of their life cycle.

In Toronto’s labour market during the Depression domestic service continually occupied the lowest rung of the occupational ladder for women. It had the lowest pay, poor work conditions, and despite a labour shortage never drew the attention of the vast majority of Toronto’s breadwinning women. Thus, it remained a job ghetto for women who had few other employment options. Clerical work on the other hand was a much more desirable occupation. It had more social caché and it provided greater economic stability to women and their families. But, unlike in domestic service, fewer women had access to these jobs. Claire Clarke had all of the necessary qualifications: she was educated and single; her family owned their own home, an important class signifier, but she could not find a job. Certainly, Thelma Plunkett’s gender ensured that she would not have the privilege of working in a high power administrative job at Aluminum Goods Company, but it was more than luck that allowed her to transfer between clerical jobs with ease. Mildred Johnson found herself employed by the Anglican Church because Shaw’s business school realized she had a similar religious affiliation. Both of these women also enjoyed a measure of economic stability that should not be discounted in our understanding of their wage-earning experiences. Rose Edelist and Evelina Bassi’s memories underscore the importance of ethnicity, marital status, and class to our understanding of their work in the garment trade. Edelist and Bassi both resisted their poor working conditions, challenging conceptions of ethnic women, Italian women in particular, as passive. Nora Windeatt, Agnes Trot, and Mabel Duncan, white English and Canadian women, entered the manufacturing industry on the shop floor, but within years they had higher paying positions as managers of their departments. Dora Wattie and Mary Chenhall recognized and disliked the restrictions placed upon them because of their gender; but, in comparison to those for whom such jobs options were closed these limitations have a different impact on our understanding of

their labour market experiences. Not only did these women not drive men out of work, at a time when rising numbers of men were unemployed, they had job ghettos which could in fact be assets. Moreover, Claire Clarke and other West-Indian and African Canadian women attribute employment discrimination to the colour of their skin.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup>Claire Clarke, interview.

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