Talking pieces: Political buttons and narratives of equal rights activism in Canada

Norda Majekodunmi

"Individuals and organizations express themselves not just through the written and spoken word, but also through their interactions with their material world. The things that people throw away, the things they chose to keep, the gifts they give, the things they treasure – all of this material residue documents lives in ways that support, complement, extend and expand the written documentary record"
(Jill Severn, *Adventures in the Third Dimension*, 2009: 221)

Introduction

Memory institutions, such as archives, are charged with collecting and preserving historical memories, stories and evidence often found in the form of textual documents. An archive's ultimate goal is to ensure access to these memories for future generations. But, unfortunately, as suggested by Greene (2003), they are not neutral spaces; instead they privilege the stories and memories of the dominant society, often to the exclusion of marginalized and racialized groups. This practice results in inadequate representation of other social dimensions: race, gender and sexuality. The existence and accessibility of the Jean Augustine collection at the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection at York University, however, is an example of a unique collection that counters this hegemony. This collection is comprised of both textual documents, photographs, artifacts and other evidence of the work and life of black, female Canadian political figure.

The Honourable Jean Augustine is notable for being the first African-Canadian woman elected as a Member of Parliament (MP) in the Canadian House of Commons (1993-2006) as well as the first such Cabinet Minister (Multiculturalism and Status of Women) under the Jean Chretien administration. Originally from Grenada, Augustine immigrated to Canada in 1960 and soon after was active in the growing Black immigrant community in Toronto, Ontario. But long before becoming a parliamentarian,

Augustine was an educator, a community builder and a social activist. Her community involvement was informed by her identity and social location. Indeed, she founded the Grenada Association and the Ontario chapter of the Congress of Black Women of Canada. But Augustine was also an active member of numerous organizations, including the National Black Coalition of Canada, the first Canadian national civil rights organization addressing the social, economic and political barriers experienced by the African Canadian community. Politically engaged in diverse issues such as women's rights, urban education, black youth and the betterment of the black community, many of the materials in Augustine's collection chronicles her advocacy in these areas and reveals much about her political sentiments and her sense of community.

In 2007, a year after retiring from federal politics, Augustine donated her personal records to the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York University in Toronto, Canada. The Jean Augustine collection, not unlike other archival collections, includes administrative records, textual documents, and photographs. However, it is her unique collection of over 500 political campaign and activist buttons that is particularly fascinating**;** not only due to their role in marking critical moments in Canadian social and political history, but also because of their ability to evoke stories about historical events and help us understand Jean Augustine, the collector herself. Why did Jean Augustine collect these buttons? The act of Augustine collecting the buttons could be an example of *souvenir collecting* whereby the "object is prized for its power to carry the past into the future" (Windsor, 1994, p. 50) in a way that written documentary texts such as newspapers and campaign literature can not. As physical mementos, these buttons paired with an oral history account by the subject, are valued for their power to awaken memories and evoke emotions; making history come alive.

Activist and political buttons can *be* and *tell* stories. What stories can Augustine tell us about the buttons and, what in turn can we learn about Jean from the stories she tells about the buttons? In a recorded

interview with Jean Augustine the author unveiled several buttons from the collection and asked Augustine to recollect the events or stories attached to specific buttons. This paper will demonstrate the significance of political buttons, when paired with oral history, as a tool to help elicit narrative, awaken memory and physically connect us to the past. Using a case study of selected political buttons from the Jean Augustine collection and from interview footage, stories of gender and racial equality rights activism in Canada will be examined and contextualized. In particular, buttons representing stories about the International Women's Day, the National Black Coalition of Canada, the Congress of Black Women of Canada, and the anti-apartheid movement will be explored.

The Significance of Political Buttons

Political buttons are underrepresented in archival collections. After all, they are ephemeral artifacts with a temporal function and purpose, short-lived and transient. Cheaply made, they are easily discarded after use and thus are rarely considered for collection and preservation. However, despite their transient nature, political buttons possess intrinsic value as physical manifestations of political activism and therefore are worthy of collecting, and study. These metallic mementos expressed a citizen's choice of candidates and played an important role in political culture and campaigning in 19th century America. Candidates, wanting to appeal to the popular vote in an entertaining way, used buttons for political propaganda, satire and put-downs (Fischer, 1980b). With their catchy slogans and appealing symbols and designs, they were both pervasive and persuasive. Furthermore, research suggests that individuals who wear political campaign buttons are 40% more likely to vote than those who don't wear them (Copeland & Laband, 2002). So effective were their use that, over a period of time, grassroots activists and social campaigners adopted the use of buttons to be worn at demonstrations, marches and protests. As Fischer asserts, political buttons are "valuable in their own right, for they evoke the signs, sounds, feel and fervor of grassroots politics in a way that words on a page or numbers in a column cannot do"

(1980a, p. 717). Despite the importance of campaign buttons as political memorabilia, there is little research on these ephemeral object and what literature exists is primarily about the United States (e.g. Cross, 2009; Allen, 2007; Fischer, 1980), possibly because political buttons are an American invention.

It is obvious that, at some point in Canadian political history, campaigners and activists adopted the use of political buttons from the United States. At present there is a dearth of research about Canadian political and commemorative buttons. This is unfortunate because these buttons are markings of Canada's socio-political past, and are talking pieces about the nation's social activism history. This case study contributes to the literature by examining political buttons used in social activism in Canada, and some of the narratives (both visual and oral) associated with them.

Political Buttons as Narrative

A narrative is "an ordered account created out of disordered material or experience" (Abrams, 2010, p. 106). It has been argued that behind every political button there is a potential narrative or story. The buttons can tell a story of tragic events of the past as well as a community's reaction to the event. They speak of issues important enough to galvanize citizens to action. The buttons themselves are part of a story involving their use in political demonstrations and activism. They also tell us stories about the political struggles and social aspirations of a group or a nation. And telling stories is important. Telling stories is part of the human condition as narratives give form and meaning to our experiences (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001). In other words, we tell stories to help us construct our world and make sense of our experiences. Telling stories, then, connects people and helps to build community. In an interview in which she discusses her button collection, Augustine discussed how the political buttons in her campaign office functioned as "talking pieces" for visitors:

> "But the interesting thing about the button collection was as people saw the button, they remembered that they had a button in the drawer some place at home or they had more than one.

> So they would bring an extra one and they would pin it on there. And so it became…dynamic, interesting at the same time… I saw a grandmother once pointing at one of the political buttons saying "he was our Member of Parliament when I was growing up" … and she gave his whole story and history. And so it was a kind of teaching, learning from something as simple as collecting buttons." (J. Augustine, Interview, April 24, 2014).

The buttons served as memory cues for Augustine as well as for other members of the community, eliciting memories, stories and conversations. Interestingly the display of buttons was dynamic, its meaning and story changing as the community contributed to it – adding to the conversation. As an educator, Jean recognized the importance of the political buttons as a teaching and learning tool.

Not only do stories help us construct our world, but through narratives the narrator's "personal identities and social relationships are constructed simultaneously" (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001, p. 12). The stories that Jean herself tells are poignant. But what do the various buttons tell us about the collector herself? The buttons offer a glimpse into Jean Augustine's life story, personality and identity. Her identity as a Black, immigrant woman and later, politician, at the forefront of the struggles for gender and racial equality in Canada, is interwoven into the collection. The stories behind the buttons provide subtle clues to the genesis of a social activist who would later become a parliamentarian, advocating for equality rights for women and visible minorities. Though she might not describe herself as such, Jean Augustine is a feminist -- championing the rights of women-- as well as a civil rights and social activist.

Although these political memorabilia provide a diverse range of narratives --community engagement, political mobilization, political memory, the women's movement in Canada, multiculturalism, and the African diaspora in Canada, it can be challenging to contextualize political buttons, given their ephemeral and visual nature. Key information such as the creator and date of creation is often missing. Obscure acronyms or a long forgotten legislative bill number (e.g. "STOP THE S10") requires much detective work to piece together the puzzle of events behind a button. For this reason, it is beneficial, when possible, to hear the stories directly from a collection's creator to help contextualize the events

surrounding the buttons. Indeed, the political buttons paired with oral history invigorates past events and experiences. Accordingly, the author conducted and recorded a semi-structured interview with Jean Augustine in which structured questions were asked about the history and background of the political button collection. During the unstructured part of the interview, the author revealed 40 buttons related to the themes of multiculturalism, women's issues, political campaigns and the Black community in Canada. One by one, these buttons were introduced and Augustine was asked to tell the interviewer about that particular button. Augustine was recorded as she touched, examined and recollected events and stories of these selected buttons, a number of which intersect race and gender, and their role in the fight for equal rights. For the purpose of this paper, the buttons discussed were selected based on the level of detail Augustine recollected and emotions exhibited during the interview. As a result, many of these buttons relate to her activism around equality, a common recurring theme in the collection. Many of the buttons represent Augustine's community activism before she became a politician and her accounts are therefore less guarded than the stories attached to buttons collected while in office.

Gender Equality Narratives

Women have struggled for gender equality throughout Canadian history. Indeed, women in Canada were not considered "persons" under the law prior to October 18, 1929. The "Famous Five" Albertan women (Emily Murphy, Louise McKinney, Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby and Henrietta Muir Edwards) successfully challenged Section 24 of the *British North America Act* to give women *persons* status, and thus the eligibility to be appointed senators. Despite being considered "persons" under the law and theoretically granted equal rights in the 1960 *Bill of Rights*, in practice Canadian women did not receive full citizenship rights. In 1966, a coalition of Canadian women's rights groups effectively lobbied the Canadian federal government to examine the status of women in Canada. Their efforts would eventually result in the establishment of the *Royal Commission on the Status of Women* in 1967. Many individuals

and groups, including women's groups, provided briefs or spoke as witnesses at the public hearings. The *Royal Commission's* 1970 report recognized that Canadian women continued to face gender-based discrimination, earning considerably less than men despite equal pay legislation, facing occupational and education barriers, experiencing discriminatory immigration and citizenship policies, and disproportionally living in poverty. Unfortunately the experience of marginalized Canadian women such as those from racialized communities, were largely ignored by the *Commission* and the mainstream women's movement during the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, while the larger community of Canadian women celebrated International Women's Day, it appears that, prior to 1986, Black women did not personally identify with International Women's Day (IWD) celebrations. In a 1987 article published in the Congress of Black Women of Canada's *Speak Out!* newsletter, Benjamin wrote that "the women's movement and the organizers of IWD celebrations [had] made little or no attempts in the past to actively involve black and other visible minority women" (1987, p. 3). Past feminist movements and activism often failed to account for the intersection of gender, race, social class and other social categories. Perhaps in response to similar sentiments, the IWD theme of 1986,"Women Say No to Racism from Toronto to South Africa", highlighted the issue of racism and sexism faced by visible minority women. This theme reflected a shift in the participation of visible minority women as well as the recognition of the "double jeopardy" faced by racialized women, including African Canadians.

The Jean Augustine button collection provides many examples of buttons related to the women's rights movement in Canada and internationally: for example, buttons issued by the United Nations celebrate International Women's Decade, International Women's Day and International Women's Year. In other cases, some buttons were issued by labour unions, professional associations and political parties. Although some creators are nameless, we can assume many were issued from grassroots groups. Regardless of the creator, all buttons complement and expand textual documents about the gender

equality rights activism in Canada.

Racial Equality Narratives

Not surprisingly, given her identity as a Black, immigrant woman, Augustine's collection holds buttons representing her involvement in the Black and Caribbean community in Canada. Likewise these buttons represent stories about the struggle for racial equality in Canada, particularly for racialized Canadians.

Following changes to Canadian immigration policy in 1967, there was an increased influx of non-white immigrants arriving from the Caribbean into the country. The reformed policy introduced a point system based on one's skill and education rather than discriminating by one's country of origin. The 1961 *Canadian Census* listed 32, 127 negroes (the term used at the time to describe all people of African descent) living in Canada but by 1971, *the Census* counted separately 34, 445 negroes and 28, 025 West Indians (Walker, 2006). The arrival of West Indian, or Caribbean, immigrants would later warrant a separate census category. The increasingly large number of Blacks in Canada settled mostly in Montreal and Toronto. However as the black population increase, exacerbated by a recession and high rates of unemployment in the 1970s, increased so did racial tensions. The social problems encountered by Blacks, resulted in the formation of several Black organizations, including the Canadian Negro Women's Association, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Jamaican-Canadian Association, the National Black Coalition of Canada, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Congress of Black Women of Canada.

United by their racialized identity as "Black" and their shared experience of racial discrimination, the diverse Black community (Canadian-born, American-born, West Indian, and African), became more politicized and community organizing ensued. Many Black organizations' goals included community development, improving the living conditions and treatment of Blacks as well as advocating for their

civil rights in Canada. These organizations worked to address social issues such as racism, police relations, education, affordable housing, lack of employment and the future of Black youths.

Jean Augustine was active in community work in the African-Caribbean community in Toronto and Canada, particularly through the National Black Coalition of Canada (NBCC), the Congress of Black Women of Canada (CBWC), the Grenadian Association and the Jamaican-Canadian Association. Interestingly, the Toronto police secretly compiled a list of Black groups (e.g., National Black Coalition of Canada, the Albert Johnson Committee Against Police Brutality, Freedom Ride Against Apartheid and the International Committee Against Racism) they characterized as "radical" and conducted covert surveillance of these organizations and individuals (English, 1994). Augustine participated in many of these organizations or possessed their buttons.

Many buttons in her collection were created by Black community organizations and other groups who fought for racial equality nationally and internationally. The following selection of buttons represents significant issues, organizations and events around the struggle for racial equality rights in Canada -- the National Black Coalition of Canada, anti-discrimination buttons, Congress of Black Women of Canada and the anti-apartheid movement.

National Black Coalition of Canada

[Insert image 1 here]

> The vision was to have … a national organization through which we would filter social programs… We would advocate on behalf of the concerns of Black people right across Canada because what we knew at the time, what we know now, is that the situation of African-Canadians, wherever they are in this country, is more or less the same. We face racism; we have difficulties in empowerment; we have difficulties with our young people; we have challenges. Whether you're in Halifax, you're in, Calgary, or you're in Vancouver or Toronto, we found that

> our situations were the same…We felt that a national organization will give us an opportunity to bring our voices together. (J. Augustine, interview, April 24, 2014).

"*National Black Coalition of Canada/Identity/Unity/Liberation*" reads the slogan of one particular button, representing an important organization in Canadian Black history. The red, black and green colours of the organization's buttons represent the colours used in the Pan-African flag.

The National Black Coalition of Canada (NBCC) was formed shortly after the computer centre occupation at Sir George William University (now Concordia University) in Montreal in 1969 (Walker, 2014). Known as the Sir George William Affair, several West Indian students protested the university's lack of action concerning allegations of racial bias toward Black students by one particular biology professor. Computer equipment and the computer lab itself were damaged, and a fire ensued, resulting in the arrest of forty-one black students.

The NBCC was an alliance of twenty-eight Black organizations, including church groups, cultural, athletic, community development and political groups, and was the first Canadian national civil rights organization which attempted to address the social, economic and political barriers of the Black community. Led by its founding president Howard McCurdy, its mission included advocating for the rights of Blacks to participate fully -- socially, political and economically-- in Canadian society, and to fight racism and discrimination in Canada (Walker, 2014).

Jean Augustine was an active member of the NBCC, serving on the Board as Treasurer for the Toronto chapter and as Co-Chair of the Media Committee and according to her, the organization was "very, very vibrant". The NBCC was very active in its struggle to advance equal rights for Blacks in Canada. For example, the NBCC called for the suspension of the police officer who shot and killed Albert Johnson in 1979.

[Insert image 2 here]

"JUSTICE FOR ALBERT JOHNSON" reads a black, red and green button from the Jean Augustine collection (the same colours used for the NBCC button and Pan-Africanist ideology). Albert Johnson, as Augustine recalls, was one of the:

> earliest police killings in the Black community that got national [and]international attention…He had some mental illness. He was known to the police and whatever occurred, they went to see him… He was eating … and he had a knife in his hand. And … he was shot. ..So the community was… very upset, asking for justice. And that was before we had police-community relations. That was before we had SIU [Special investigative Units]. That was before we had all of the checks and balances, and so the community had to organize and demonstrate and push and get legal help. And get all kinds of voices. The whole campaign was called "Justice for Albert Johnson"… The fact that he had some kind of disability so he wasn't a swift bodied… man, and the fact that he was known to the police in the area as someone who walked the street talking to himself... It really ripped the community and there was a sense that he was killed in his house and that there was quite an injustice. (J. Augustine, interview, April 24, 2014)

Toronto's Black community was galvanized and a protest demonstration was organized by thirty-two groups (Hluchy, 1979, p. A3.). An estimated three thousand protesters, mostly from the Black community, demonstrated in front of the 13th division Toronto police station on September 1, 1979. The community demanded an independent inquiry into Johnson's death. Bowing to public pressure, Toronto police Chief Harold Adamson eventually asked the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) to investigate the incident (Beddoes, 1979), but ultimately the police officers involved in the shooting death of Albert Johnson were acquitted of charges. Despite this disappointment, unprecedented media attention concerning the cause promoted wider awareness of the issue of police violence with the Black community. At one point, feeling that the Metro Police Board "no longer reflected the mentality of an ethnically-mixed community" (Stasiulis, 1989, p. 69), the Toronto City Council passed a non-confidence

vote against the Board. Other positive outcomes, including the NBCC meeting with then Premier William Davis, demonstrated the potential for the Black community to mobilize and build public awareness and support to their plight.

The Albert Johnson case garnered much media attention, but the National Black Coalition of Canada (NBCC) diligently fought against racial discrimination in Canada in other areas. While they were active, the NBCC also partnered with the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and other human rights groups, to actively resist discrimination in all forms, including the recruiting efforts of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1980s.

[Insert image 3 here]

This is an example of an anti-KKK button issued by the Committee for Racial Equality.

The National Black Coalition of Canada (NBCC) advocated for African-Canadians in many different respects, but one of its most important contributions was providing a voice for the Black community before the joint House Senate Committee on the Constitution in 1981. This Committee's recommendations would eventually result in the adoption of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms.* Dr. Wilson Head, then president of the NBCC, testified before the joint House Senate Committee which was tasked with hearing from the public about proposed amendments to the Canadian constitution. The NBCC's participation was significant because "with the exception of Japanese Canadians, national organizations representing racialized or "visible" minorities had not participated in official Canadian constitutional discussions before" (James, 2006, p. 79). The NBCC testified to the violence and discrimination faced by Blacks and other racialized groups in Canada, and strongly advocated for the rights of minority groups (including First Nations. The Coalition also endorsed affirmative action

programmes proposed in section 15 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. In the same manner as the women's rights groups which testified at the constitutional hearings, the NBCC criticized the ineffectiveness of the Human Rights Commissions and the *Bill of Rights* in enforcing their civil rights against discrimination based on gender and race (Canada. Parliament. Special Joint Committee on the Constitution of Canada, 1981).

Unfortunately, the National Black Coalition of Canada did not always fulfill the "Unity" portion of their button's theme ("Identity, Unity, Liberation") as the organization eventually collapsed around 1984 due to funding issues as well as internal strife and divisions.

> We lost the impetus for various reasons. One is how do you fund a national organization where you bring people from coast to coast…and … the lack of necessary funding to support an organization. [There was] internal bickering around the question of leadership. There was a sense that those people who were in the leadership were a bit elitist…[T]here were voices that were saying "everyone who is an executive member is a doctor this and a doctor that [and that] we want our voices as the community to be in this organizing." But what was missed was the fact that those people with leadership were also in a position to pay their way or to piggy back on things that they were doing [in] their professional life so that they could do the work that was so important. (J. Augustine, interview, April 24, 2014).

The anti-racist movement by black Canadians mainly focused on race; almost to the exclusion of gender and class. Augustine alluded to the fact that failure to acknowledge class-based struggles may have also contributed to the infighting demise of the NBCC. Many black-focused organizations were led by educated, middle-class, economically secured members who could devote time and resources to advance the group's goals (Stasiulis, 1989).

Furthermore, the NBCC's disintegration was also attributed to the alliance's struggle with competing approaches: one, a social service delivery system, and the other, a human rights advocacy approach. Founding members lamented that "the NBCC was primarily suited towards lobbying the government for civic equality, it was not "a social welfare club" (Walker, 2014, p. 161). Despite its demise, the NBCC's goals and accomplishments are worthy of recognition because this organization was the first and only

organization to date which attempted to provide a national voice and advocated for racialized Blacks in Canada, at an especially important period in Canadian history. After the demise of the NBCC, Augustine would use her NBCC experience to help advance the agenda of a national organization formed to focus on the concerns of Canadian Black women -- the Congress of Black Women of Canada.

Congress of Black Women of Canada

[Insert image 4 here]

Jean provides an account of the genesis of the Congress of Black Women of Canada:

> After... the lack of success in organizing ourselves across the country as a national Black organization, it was felt that the women [could] organiz[e] ourselves as Black women… And so we had chapters all across the country and we had regional meetings…with our vision statement and our mandate…We knew exactly as women where we wanted to go with the organization. And it's still alive… (J. Augustine, interview, April 24, 2014).

Jean and the other founders' desire to start a new organization specifically for black women in Canada rather than work within mainstream women's rights groups speaks to the location of black women in the feminist movement in Canada. Many women's rights organizations in Canadian history were led by white, middle-class, heterosexual women, and lacked representation from visible minority and aboriginal women. While addressing, in 1987, the Coalition of Visible Minority Women on the women's rights movement in Canada, Dr. Glenda P. Sims, president of the Congress of Black Women of Canada, was critical of the hegemonic feminist movement:

> It has been very much, up to now, a middle-class, white women's movement…We have tried to put brown faces or red faces on their ideology…We have to construct our own ideology. We are saying to mainstream women: We will not be defined by you…We cannot depend on other women to do the job for us. (Wilson, p. A12)

Previously, many women's rights groups failed to account for the "intersectionality"(a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw) of gender with race, ethnicity and social class, and as a result the voices and experiences of Black women were often absent from the mainstream movement during the second wave of feminism in Canada. Consequently, Canadian Black women established their own organizations to fill this void. For instance, the Canadian Negro Women Association (CANEWA, formerly known as the Canadian Negro Women's Club), was founded in 1951 by a group of Black women in Toronto (Hill, 1996). Kay Livingstone, first president of CANEWA, was instrumental in organizing the first National Congress of Black Women conference held on April 6-8, 1973 in Toronto. This meeting was especially notable because it was the first time in history that Black women (African, West Indian, African-Americans, Black Canadians) from across Canada met to discuss issues of relevance to them. Subsequent meetings were organized in the following years and, at the conclusion of the fifth National Congress of Black Women in Winnipeg, delegates formally launched the Congress of Black Women (CBWC) in 1980 with 23 chapters nationwide. Jean Augustine was instrumental in founding the Toronto Chapter of the Congress of Black Women in 1973, seven years before the CBWC was officially established.

The Congress of Black Women of Canada's mandate included providing a "network of solidarity for Black Women in Canada, and to be a united voice in the defence and extension of human rights and liberties for Black Women in Canada" (Congress of Black Women of Canada pamphlet, p. 2).

As Vera Jackson, past president of CBWC, explains, the cactus was selected as the symbol for the organization:

> to show the strengths and resiliency of Black women. It is of a family of plants that thrives under adverse conditions. No matter how arid the soil, no matter that no care or attention is given, the cactus survives, multiplies, flowers and bears fruit. A fitting symbol. With or without assistance, the Black woman manages to educate herself; rears and educates her children; tends to her sick

> and aged; labours both inside and outside her home. She survives and the race survives (as cited in Small and Thornhill, 2008, p. 433-434).

Augustine speaks of the symbolism in many of the buttons she discusses, such as that of Congress of Black Women of Canada. The visual images are powerful and serve as rhetoric for the organization or cause attached to the button, communicating a movement's ideals and goals both within and outside of the movement (Goodnow, 2006). Goodnow found that symbols "serve important rhetorical functions for campaigns: explanations, awareness, identification and sanction" (2006: 166). The cactus was an apt symbol for the CBWC.

The Congress of Black Women of Canada sought to advance the rights of Black women and promote awareness of issues affecting their lives in several ways. To achieve this goal, the CBWC established the Social Action Committee and the Education Committee which advocated on behalf of Black women and provided educational opportunities for the Black community on problems and issues facing women and youths. The CBWC's most significant contribution to the fight for equal rights in Canada was its membership on the *Ad Hoc Committee of Canadian Women on the Constitution (Meech Lake)* in 1987. The *Ad Hoc Committee* opposed the Meech Lake Accord amendment to the Constitution and submitted a brief to the Senate Submissions Group on the Meech Lake Constitutional Accord. Reminiscent of the previous struggles for constitutional reform in 1981, the 1987 *Ad Hoc Committee* were also concerned that the amendment to the Constitution would jeopardize equality rights in Canada, specifically sections 15 and 28 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Canada. Parliament.Senate 1988, 3:26). The Congress mounted an awareness campaign within the Black community. This included co-sponsoring an *Educational Forum on the Meech Lake Accord* for the community and discussed its implications for immigrant and visible minority women.

Additionally, the CBWC sponsored several annual national conferences, each with a conference themed

buttons. Two such conference buttons ("On the Move…Forward Together" and "Let Black Children Talk") are held in the Augustine collection.

[Insert image 5 here] 

[Insert image 6 here]

Furthermore, the Congress of Black Women of Canada's Social Action Committee was particularly active in the anti-apartheid movement, campaigning and calling for government sanctions against the South African regime.

Anti-apartheid Movement

> There were label groups; there were church groups; there were religious people; there were community organizations. We had several marches. We had several demonstrations. We had several boycotts. I remember being [in] a Loblaws store…that had the oranges and…and telling people, showing people the bag, the kind of orange, look for what the name was and you should not buy that kind of orange. And then some people even being bolder, going into the store and standing by the oranges and as people were picking it up saying, "did you know that these oranges are supporting…" and you know, same with the wine, "did you know that this is a South African wine and by buying it you…" So there were all kinds of boycott. I participated in a number of them. A number of the demonstrations, the boycotts, letter writing, the seminars, the speakers that we would invite to come and talk about the situation in South Africa, the situation of South Africans. (J. Augustine, interview, April 24, 2014).

In her role as president and member of the Congress of Black Women of Canada (CBWC), Augustine was active in the fight against racial discrimination and apartheid, advocating for social justice nationally and internationally. During the 1980s, the anti-apartheid movement was particularly strong in Canada. For example, the Canadians Concerned with Southern Africa and the Anti-apartheid Coalition of Toronto mobilized to protest the oppression of the Black majority in South Africa. Activists pressured

the Mulroney government to divest from South Africa and created buttons for awareness campaigns, conferences and protests urging Canadians to boycott South African products. Augustine and other Canadian activists picketed establishments selling South African products, such as the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (locally known as the LCBO, government-owned liquor store) and the Loblaw's grocery stores in protest.

The following buttons in the collection provide evidence of Augustine's participation in the anti-apartheid movement.

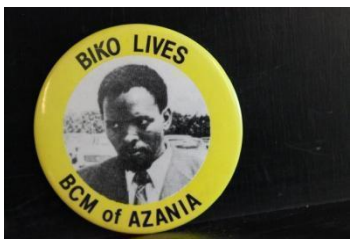
[Insert image 7 here]

[Insert image 8 here]

[Insert image 9 here]

[Insert image 10 here]

One button of particular note commemorates the death of Stephen Biko, a South African political activist and founder of the Black Consciousness Movement.



[Insert image 11 here]

Biko became a symbol of the brutality and cruelty of apartheid in South Africa when he was killed while in police custody in 1977. In her role as a Member of Parliament, Jean Augustine visited South Africa to observe that country's first democratic election in 1994. Over thirty years later, while examining the BIKO LIVES button, she recalls meeting Biko's family and visiting his grave site:

> This is a very, very poignant one for me because when we were in South Africa… we were in the area where Steve Biko grew up and where he lived…[W]e went to visit his mother and sat on the chair where he would usually sit in his mother's house, had a conversation with her, then ...one of his nephews took us to the hospital where his wife was working and she took us to the gravesite..[T]he grass was as tall as we are... And I remember…cleaning Steve Biko's gravesite (J. Augustine, interview, April 24, 2014).

Augustine's visit to South Africa as an observer of the historic presidential election of Nelson Mandela was a profound and fitting experience given her earlier anti-apartheid activism. She recollects with emotion:

> Yes, oh yes, oh yes, that night was an incredible night... We heard the results in Ciskei and we saw one flag come down and the ANC [African National Congress] flag go up, and you see people crying. Just the tears, I remember … (J. Augustine, interview, April 24, 2014).

Conclusion

Despite the loss of some of their significance in marketing political campaigns and increasing community mobilization, political buttons are nonetheless valuable texts as political memorabilia and agents of counter-memories. Although originally created for a specific time and purpose, political buttons simultaneously retain and reshape their meaning over time long after they have served their original function. The physicality of political buttons reflects a time and space when personal and physical contact was important to convey a message. At the height of their popularity, they were used for community organizing and door-to-door campaigning, representing tangible contact with community

members. People wearing a button felt a sense of engagement, whether they were protesting policy change, attending a live political event or canvassing for a candidate. Wearing these artifacts meant that you were *there*, you cared about the political process, you cared enough to fight for political and social change, and you supported a cause, an individual, and an ideology. In a sense it expressed your political identity and connection to community.

The physicality of these political buttons also help to connect future citizens and researchers with the political and social movements they were originally created for. Holding, touching and feeling buttons, which boldly declare "*I Decide*", "*Equality Under the Law*", "*Biko Lives!"* or "*Justice for Albert Johnson*", help us connect more intimately to the fight for equality in Canada in a meaningful way , which is a fundamentally different experience from reading a textual document.

But just touching the buttons is not enough; hearing the narratives behind the buttons is of equal importance. Political buttons paired with stories is a powerful counter-memory tool. One can hear, from the buttons discussed briefly, the stories of the struggle for the entrenchment of equality rights in the Canadian Constitution as well as the fight for racial and gender equality in Canadian society and abroad. These narratives – intersecting gender, race and social class -- contribute to the flavour of Canadian history. An oral history of Jean's activism paired with the buttons enhances the researcher's experience and interaction with the historical subject studied. History comes alive when we read a text about the anti-apartheid movement, and then touch a political button worn by Augustine to protest apartheid and, then hear Augustine reflect on her urging customers to boycott South African products outside a Loblaw's grocery store and, finally, hear, how a decade later, her experience witnessing the demise of apartheid with the first democratic South African election.

In addition to connecting the historian more intimately to the past, political buttons also offer us glimpses into the collector's personality and sentiments. A social activist, an educator, a community builder, a feminist, a radical --- however one would describe her---, Jean's activism in these organizations for equal rights and social change in Canada was significant. The organizations, both formal and grassroots, issuing the political and social campaign buttons are also important. Some grassroots organizations are long forgotten, but their buttons served as anonymous traces of the messages these groups felt were important to fight for. Some organizations represent the voices and stories of marginalized groups, such as the National Black Coalition of Canada, and are no longer in existence. But the buttons they produced are nonetheless important relics, complementing written documentary evidence of the history of social activism in Canada from a non-white and/or feminist perspective. It is for these reasons that collecting and preserving these buttons as well as their oral history are paramount to ensure access to other voices and stories for future generations of researchers and engaged citizens.

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