

**Megan Femi-Cole**  
**2023-2024 Recipient of Marty Memorial Scholarship**

Summary Statement of the Studies and/or Research:

My first visit to Queen's University in spring of 2007 included my parents and grandmother who was visiting Canada from Freetown, Sierra Leone, for the first and only time. Walking many paces ahead of them on Bader Lane, I sensed my mother and grandmother drifting into their own quiet cocoon of conversation as they often did. Although I was too preoccupied with excitement to pay attention to their words, I still sensed their hope radiating towards me in that moment. The desire that a child born in Freetown through the will and imagination of her long-ago ancestors would be free enough to grow in the direction of still nascent dreams. In the final year of my undergraduate degree at Queen's those dreams began to take form as I attended my first Gender and Politics seminar. For the first time, I imagined myself working as a researcher, scholar, and educator. Yet in that same class, I also developed a curious habit that stemmed from my extra-curricular activities and forays into student activism. The last paragraph of each of my major assignments would end with some iteration of "The aforementioned argument will be deeply nuanced by considering the impact of race. Future studies might..."

Through my experiences as the Coordinator of Queen's Coalition Against Racial and Ethnic Discrimination and a Program Associate for Ontario Public Interest Research Group, I had internalized the necessity of not just learning about inequality, but actively working to pursue social change in terms that respected the multiplicities of oppressed communities. My years in Kingston were deeply enriched by designing and delivering "Each One Teach One" educational sessions, writing for the campus publication "Culture Shock!", organizing volunteer drives and joining a planning committee for "Push it!", Kingston's annual hip-hop festival.

In September 2012, I returned to Queen's for a Master's degree, deciding to focus on Gender and Politics. Still, I recall the distinct apprehension I felt about making this choice instead of the 'safer' more established options such as Canadian Politics or International Relations. Despite the excitement of having identified my desire to build a career in higher education, I also felt the fear of fully integrating my activist concerns into academic work. Such fear was in response to the challenge of making gender central to my research when I was most accustomed to restricting my lived experiences of inequitable political systems and gendered anti-blackness to the very end of my writing. In time, I realized this habit stemmed from the ways dominant fields of knowledge determine both what and who is peripheral. As I battled health concerns, the blank sections on my official transcript came to punctuate this period of inner reflection. Yet, what those gaps cannot reveal is the necessity of returning to and being immersed in the communities that nurtured me into being.

While on a break from my studies, I accepted positions as a Youth Program Coordinator in Brampton and then a Youth Employment Counsellor in Rexdale. Both these areas are located on the outskirts of the City of Toronto, hold large newcomer populations, and mirrored the underserved neighbourhoods where I grew up. Working directly with young people, I was attentive to their ideas as we collaborated to design and develop programs. Despite many barriers, their confidence in the experiential as a source of knowing and acting revealed that it was possible to create research that centered the lived experiences of marginalized communities. I learned from how these young people crafted generous and incisive spaces of social critique that reflected their truths. Moreover, I noticed how these spaces emboldened their refusal of narratives that portrayed their neighbourhoods as spaces of blight in need of intervention. From encounters with newly arrived young people from continental Africa seeking

alternative paths to university enrollment, to newcomer Syrian refugee parents concerned about the safety of an evening youth program, my attention was constantly drawn to the rippling effects of relocating from one place to another. The seeds of my interests in the links between history, memory and migration were given new life. Bolstered by a renewed curiosity, I completed my Master's Research Project which was the final component of my degree. This work examined how discourses of multiculturalism distort the consequences of slavery in pre-confederation Canada and de-contextualize various histories of Black migration.

With this fellowship, I will be able to complete my PhD and work to join the ranks of Black women researchers and scholars tasked with building a better society by pursuing more equitable outcomes for their communities and themselves. So far, my work has been supported by a SSHRC Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship for doctoral studies, an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and an OISE Scholarship Recognition Award. I hope to keep fulfilling the hush toned hopes my mother and grandmother imparted in me more than a decade ago on Bader Lane.