

Black Racialization and Resistance at an Elite University

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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BOOK REVIEW

BLACK RACIALIZATION AND RESISTANCE AT AN ELITE UNIVERSITY

REVIEWED BY

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hampton, rosalind (2020). *Black Racialization and Resistance at an Elite University*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 224. Price: 68.00 CAD (hardcover).

There is a great deal of talk these days about history from the bottom. Instead of the royal “we” and the imperial “I” of traditional Great Man histories, or at least those that feature the worldviews and goings on of the powerful, histories from below shine a bright light on the lifeworld, thinking and insight of ordinary figures that are typically ignored or overlooked. In *Black Racialization and Resistance at an Elite University*, hampton explores twenty-one firsthand accounts of the Black experience at McGill, a historically white university. With a great deal of intellectual labor and scholarly discipline, she mines the riches of the everyperson while piecing together a coherent narrative about why they behaved and believed as they did, and how the history of the university contributed to their experiences of racialization and/or resistance. History, after all, is far more than a gesture of recovery; it is, as well, about reclamation and reconstitution, about restoration and reassessment. We can barely distinguish between the empirical and the ideological as we begin to unearth just how deeply indebted traditional history is to hierarchies of gender, race, and power.

One of the most intriguing and challenging developments of histories from below is that they prove the feminist dictum is true: the personal is the political, or, at least, the political is deeply rooted in the stories of those who narrate history. rosalind hampton offers a remarkably fresh and vibrant voice in her scholarly ethnography of McGill University, a prestigious institution that has been dubbed “the Harvard of Canada.” hampton’s aim

is to help us understand just what it means to be a Black person—teacher or student, activist or employee—at McGill, and what difference that makes to the university, and, of course, to such individuals themselves. As institutions seek to engage in the work of equity, diversity, inclusion and anti-racism, whether this engagement be politically or genuinely motivated, hampton’s study, conducted between 2012 and 2016, provides a sort of roadmap that guides institutional leaders through the complex considerations that must be confronted in order to effectively set out on that journey. Her findings prompt educational administrators to reconsider who and what they are problematizing and pathologizing in conversations around practices and policies that lead to more inclusive spaces within higher learning.

hampton covers quite a bit of ground in her provocative analysis. She probes the historical construction of settler colonialism and its effect on Indigenous and other racialized populations through an anti-colonial, critical race, feminist lens (p.11). Hers is no dry and deferential treatise about the greatness of a storied academic institution. Rather, she brilliantly grapples in complex and nuanced fashion with what a place like McGill stands for—and on (p.13), especially the neglected narratives and hidden histories of Black people who, as activists and grassroots intellectuals, work to reshape the traditions and trajectories of this signal institution.

One of the ways that Black people shaped McGill is through sustained activism, and hampton sketches the

sometimes-conflicting Black politics and belief systems that shaped McGill over the decades. The stories told are as diverse as their tellers, who, despite sharing the common threads of Blackness, each interpret their experiences at McGill through the various layers of their complex identities and unique realities. hampton draws on her sharp and soulful interviews with Black faculty, staff, students, and activists who engaged, shaped, and were changed by McGill over five decades. She is able to harness these remarkable interviews—and her subjects make this clear—because they trust her. This underscores the incredibly important role of Black professors, academics, and intellectuals in harvesting credible responses and eliciting testimonials from Black citizens who often possess sophisticated analyses of places like McGill. It also highlights the power of the presence of Black leaders—in formal and informal roles—to mentor, nurture and retain Black brilliance in historically white spaces.

hampton's book illustrates the importance of possessing a sophisticated theoretical vocabulary in deconstructing and reconstructing the story of Black influence within elite institutions of higher education to expose the systemic forces and factors that shape our societies. A great deal of what Black, and other racialized peoples, have had to grapple with is the logic and lore of white supremacy. hampton brings to light the undercurrents of white supremacy even as she underscores the persistence and moral creativity of Black people. By elucidating what to many is an unknown history, the sociopolitical foundation on which McGill, like most of our Canadian institutions, is built is revealed for what it is. Deeply founded on dominant culture values that permeate their way through the entire structure from the ground up.

By charting Black people's varied experiences and roles at McGill, hampton probes the class, gender and social dimensions of the Black experience. That last sentence doesn't quite cut it: there is no singular Black experience, but varieties of Black experience that are as wide and as complex as Blackness itself, something hampton keeps in mind in her exacting study. hampton's book invites us to think about cutting edge ideas as well, ideas like settler colonialism (p.15) and racial capitalism (p.155), and reminds us about how these ideas belong in any serious discussion about race in Canada, or in truth, in any part of the globe.

In the end, *Black Racialization and Resistance at an Elite University* is a powerful example of Black Studies

in North America. hampton's determined persistence in tracing the influence of Black thought on the contemporary West is a sublime reminder of just how important Black scholarship and intellectual production are.

This book is a sophisticated, nuanced, and complex grappling with what it means to be Black at McGill, and hence, what it means to be Black at elite institutions. It challenges the notion of institutions as neutral and reveals how whiteness appears throughout: in the student population, the largely homogenous faculty, Eurocentric content, nostalgic views of institutional history, racial abuses, and neoliberal discourses (p.157). In our time, when the insistence that Black Lives Matter has occasioned white outrage, the appearance of this book is a real boon for those interested in understanding what it means to be Black in a prestigious university, and by extension, in elite white spaces that never intended to accommodate Black bodies and minds in the first place. For institutional leaders who are looking to seriously engage in the work of anti-racism and decentering whiteness, it surfaces provocations that can lead to more robust policies and planning—and ultimately to spaces when Blackness is a recognized and equivalent currency within institutions of higher learning.