

## *Unsettling the Great White North: Black Canadian History* edited by Michele A. Johnson and Funké Aladejebi

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# Book Reviews

Autumn 2023

## *Unsettling the Great White North* *Black Canadian History*

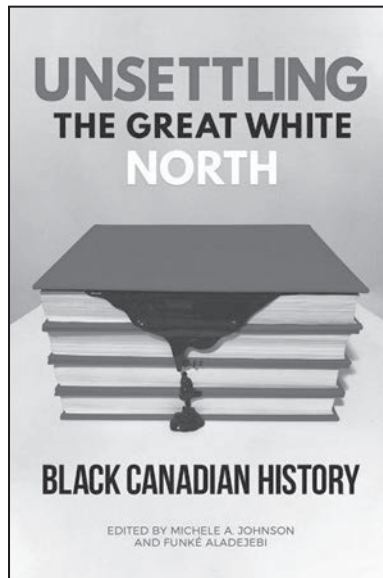
Edited by Michele A. Johnson and Funké Aladejebi

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 632 pages. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-4875-2917-8

Published in 2022 during a period of tense debates around Blackness and racism in Canada, *Unsettling the Great White North: Black Canadian History* draws together a remarkable group of scholars whose work deconstructs “the myth of benign Whiteness that has been deeply implanted into the country’s imaginary” (3). Editors Michele A. Johnson and Funké Aladejebi have compiled an extensive collection of research that centres the voices, experiences, and bodies of people of African descent throughout four centuries of Canadian history. *Unsettling the Great White North* effectively ‘unsettles’ several problematic (and enduring) assumptions about Canada’s history, namely “well-worn

accounts of peaceful Euro-settlement” and “racial and cultural tolerance” (3).

It is a hefty collection, coming in at 632 pages with two ‘bookends,’ eight sections, and twenty-one chapters. The contributors represent an interdisciplinary group of scholars at various stages in their careers. Johnson and Aladejebi recognise that the collection is not exhaustive but, rather, demonstrates where the field of Black Canadian history was, where it is, and where it can go. Prominent themes include enslavement, immigration, racism, activism, education, labour, community, culture, and the law. The interrogation of early studies of Black Canadian history and how these works shaped the



field is especially interesting and thought-provoking, particularly Barrington Walker's opening chapter, "Critical Histories of Blackness in Canada" (31-49).

The geographic scope of the collection is impressive, with studies of the west coast, prairies, central Canada, and the Maritimes included. There are six chapters that examine Ontario specifically, while others discuss the experiences of Black men, women, and families more broadly or focus on specific provinces/regions. This review will largely address the content pertaining to Ontario's history.

In Section One, Natasha Henry's chapter (85-112) examines the life of an enslaved woman, Bet, through the lenses of gender, race, and geography, and how she and other Black women left their mark (physically and otherwise) on Upper Canada. Henry utilizes sources such as a bill of sale and a runaway advertisement to show that when "the traditional gaze of the archives is shifted to the otherwise commodified and silenced enslaved Black women, and refocuses them as historical subjects, these archival documents achieve much more" (104). The result is a more complex, gender-focused, and Black-centred approach to the history of enslavement in Ontario.

Also examining the colonial period, in "Establishing Communities" (194-221), Amoaba Gooden uses Ontario as an example of how Black Canadians, over time, built communities and institutions in places like Toronto to fight against anti-Black racism and systemic oppression. While these organizations, such as the Home Service Association, faced their own internal conflicts and struggles, they have a long history of being a potent "social force" for Black Canadians "in their demand for socioeconomic and political rights and in their articulation of ways that the Canadian nation can move forward and transform" (213).

The significance of community is also prominent in Deirdre McCorkindale's consideration of segregated education in Kent County (333-56). The chapter demonstrates the extent to which anti-Black racism was embedded in the culture of Canada West by the early nineteenth century, resulting in White citizens using biased and unsupported arguments about biological difference to establish segregated schools. But as McCorkindale argues, Black children's ability to be educated and the support their schools received should be viewed as another critical example of community-building and resistance to oppression among the Black community in southwestern Ontario.

Similar sentiments can be gleaned from Carl E. James' chapter, though in the context of the later twentieth century. James' focus is Toronto in the 1970s and '80s when the Black children of Caribbean immigrant parents "navigated" a biased educational system in their quest to achieve high-level employment (357). Despite their aspirations and feelings that they must "strive for the best" (as the chapter's title suggests), Black youth faced the burden of prejudice which produced inequalities and barriers in their education. As James shows, however, students responded in various ways, including building self-confidence, so that they may achieve their goals.

Another contribution that examines migration and ethnicity in Toronto in the later twentieth century is Anna Ainsworth's chapter, "'The part of you that's Rwanda'" (403-429). Ainsworth uses oral history to investigate perceptions and constructions of identity among Rwandans in Toronto who were part of the diaspora that was created after the 1994 genocide. Despite "the promise of multiculturalism" (416) that Ainsworth's interviewees expected in Canada, the collective trauma caused by

the genocide, plus their experiences being racialized due to skin colour and ethnicity, means that “what constituted Rwandan-ness” (403) varied greatly both within Toronto and its Rwandan community.

Finally, in “Race, Community, and the Picturing of Identities,” (433-54) Cheryl Thompson and Julie Crooks examine “black agency and resistance” (434) using photographs taken between the 1860s and 1890s. Like Natasha Henry’s work, the photographs counter hegemonic narratives about Black lives by analyzing the sitters’ self-representation within the photographs’ composition. During a time when Black bodies were being commodified and fetishized to sell products and entertain White North Americans, the photo-artefacts offset stereotypical depictions, communicate the significance of having a photograph taken within the Black community, and demonstrate how the sitters wished to be represented in such a visual and permanent medium.

A common thread throughout the collection is the resilience vs. resistance dialectic, which is demonstrated in so many

compelling, diverse, and underexplored contexts. Indeed, *Unsettling the Great White North* reinforces how rich the field of Black Canadian history is, and why scholars must continue the critical work they are doing, especially “amid challenging and difficult public debate and conversation” (4). Every Canadian historian will benefit from this collection, especially its perspectives on colonialism, oppression, race, gender, and identity formation. The individual chapters can enrich conversations in upper-year undergraduate or graduate-level courses, especially where settlement, the state, and community are concerned. Altogether, this timely collection dismantles the ‘Great White North’ myth by recentring Black experiences and showing how Black men and women, as individuals and as communities, ‘unsettled’ or resisted the oppressive structures responsible for the “systemic and systematic erasure of Blackness/es from the Canadian narrative” (3).

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## *Heirs of an Ambivalent Empire*

*French-Indigenous Relations and the Rise of the Métis in the Hudson Bay Watershed*

by Scott Berthelette

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022. 353 pages, \$39.95 paperback.  
ISBN 978-0-2280-1059-3.

Scott Berthelette’s book offers new insights into the origins of the Métis in the western interior of Canada. Although the title of his book refers to the Hudson Bay Watershed, the focus is mainly on the

area from Red River north to Lake Winnipeg and west along the Saskatchewan River valley. Berthelette refutes claims made by other scholars that the origins of “Métissage” can be traced to the 1816 Battle of