

Schooling the System: A History of Black Women Teachers

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Schooling the System: a history of Black women teachers

By Funke Aladejebi

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 280 pages

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Reviewed by:

Veena Auruna King

In *Schooling the System*, author Funke Aladejebi, an Assistant Professor of history at the University of Toronto, depicts the experiences of 28 black female educators in Ontario from the 1940s to the 1980s. This book forms part of the Rethinking Canada in the World series of books supported by the Wilson Institute for Canadian history at McMaster University. The purpose of this series is to explore and highlight elements that have molded Canadian society, and society in broader contexts beyond the borders of Canada. Aladejebi focuses on the two themes of “national identity and black female (up)rootedness” (p. 6) while also shedding light on the education of black students and the development of Canadian education and society during this period.

As an African immigrant living on Prince Edward Island, a province where immigration is new, I was intrigued by this book. I hoped it could offer me the opportunity to learn of the experiences of those black women who arrived decades before me. Additionally, I wished to compare the experiences of these women to the recent experiences of racialized women in a province where the encouragement of immigration is a more recent political undertaking. *Schooling the System* lives up to and allows for such scrutiny.

Aladejebi documents this historical period of black education by exploring the dynamic changes occurring against the backdrop of the twentieth century Ontario education system.

This unprecedented text of black Canadian feminism uses oral history and captures readers attention through black womens' oral narratives from the Caribbean, Canada, and America. To elicit balanced viewpoints, the author took great effort to recruit diverse participants using numerous sources, including "free advertising over social networks and retired teachers' organizations, appeals to African Canadian community organizations, word-of-mouth, and the snowball technique" (p. 9). Using semi-structured interviews, the experiences of these black female educators are placed front and centre for the reader to interrogate against the prevailing socio-political structures, policies, and practices of the time.

The inclusion of a few black and white photographs of some of the participants at the beginning of the book takes readers back in time and provides an opportunity to imagine the voices of these black women educators. In the face of racial inequity, the book explores the different intersectionalities that black women educators experienced and the ways in which they navigated these challenges, resulting in the disruption of the mainstream white education system. The author references their contrasting roles and identities – isolation vs belonging, hypervisibility vs invisibility. Well researched, each chapter includes extensive notes for the reader to contextualize events as well as references for further information on policy, laws, and supplementary texts.

Each of the five chapters are thematically based and set according to a specific timeline, creating a flow that makes it easy to follow, while sometimes resulting in gaps between periods. Chapter one focuses on the period from the 1940s to the 1960s and explores the reasons for the entry of black women into the teaching profession in Ontario. Despite the scrutiny of their qualifications, challenges to securing employment, and their experiences of discrimination in mainstream schools, black women educators cemented their places within the Ontario education landscape.

Chapter two covers the period from 1965-1980, during which black women educators found themselves caught between the systemic discrimination faced by black students and the challenges faced by administrators. This chapter follows the development of black women educators into advocates of change – "cultural mediators" who assumed the task of bridging the gap between the prejudicial white education system and the needs of black students.

Chapter three uncovers the reaction of black women educators in relation to the Eurocentric curriculum they were required to teach. Culturally responsive pedagogy emerged with antiracist and antisexist approaches being implemented in some of their classrooms. Chapter reveals the role and engagement of black women educators in black radical activism in Toronto. One teacher reported, “There was some rumor about them [the RCMP] tapping lines. I mean they, [RCMP] felt threatened by us. They saw us as an activist group. Today, activist is a positive term, but back then, activist wasn’t a positive thing. We were like renegades” (p.136).

The final chapter unpacks black women teachers’ marginalized roles and identities in organizations such as the Federation of Women Teachers’ Association of Ontario. Although a member of the union, one teacher felt excluded, explaining, “I remember when I didn’t feel like I was being supported I told the union. I said, “you know that white dude who is harassing me. You are supporting him. Black women, you are not supporting me. We have a problem here” (p.165).

The author challenges her own thinking by analyzing and critiquing elements of her book against the findings of the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators (OASBE) 2015 report of the experiences and perspectives of its members. She proposes avenues for future research such as “the examination of other diasporic identities in the study of professional workspaces” (p. 182). *Schooling the System: a history of Black women teachers*, narrates the upliftment, empowerment, and advancement of black women educators under a system of institutional gendered racism and discrimination in Ontario. It can be enjoyed as a recreational read, an academic text for teacher education students, or a tool for professional development in schools.