

# *Schooling The System: A History of Black Women Teachers by Funké Aladejebi*

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# Book Reviews

## Spring 2022

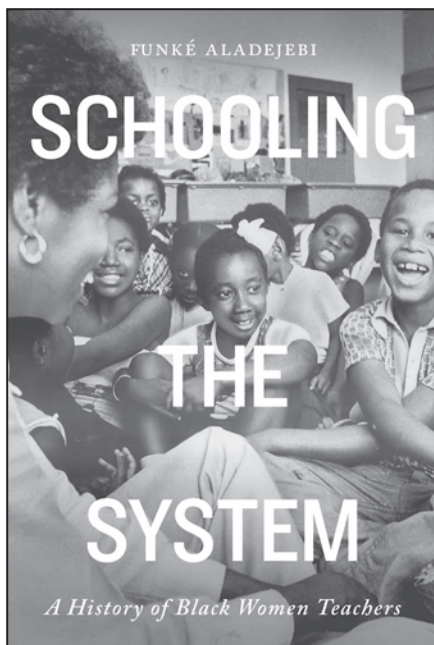
### *Schooling The System* *A History of Black Women Teachers*

By Funké Aladejebi

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 304 pages.  
37.95 paperback. ISBN 9780228005391. (mqup.ca)

In her insightful and long-overdue book, *Schooling The System: A History of Black Women Teachers*, author Funké Aladejebi sets out to write a “more inclusive history of Canadian women teachers,” (7) by inserting black women educators into the existing narratives of who are and have been teachers in the Canadian imaginary. As she notes, “While black women did not represent the ‘typical’ teacher in Canada, their experiences were an integral part of and, at times, parallel to the experiences of their white counterparts.” (7) To provide the reader with

a better understanding of the experiences of these educators, Aladejebi provides narratives based on oral history interviews (a process she terms “historical listening”). The narratives of twenty-six black female educators who taught in South-western Ontario from the 1940s to the 1980s give important insights into how issues of race, class, gender, geographic origin, and other markers of social identity worked to shape distinct experiences within the profession. The time-period is reflective of a gap the author noted “in the historiography of African Canadian education, and Canada’s education



system more broadly.” (14)

The breadth of scholarship in this manuscript is impressive. The author skillfully uses the existing literature on the history of education as well as an extensive historiography of black Canada to highlight the contemporary historical experiences of black women educators in Ontario. She frames each of the book’s five chapters with an “oral herstory” narrative, tracing the trajectory of black women teachers from their “entrance into teacher training systems in Ontario in the 1940s to their contributions towards antiracist educational policies in the 1980s.” (14) The presentation of these narratives through the oral histories of the women themselves provides a powerful examination of their lives, in terms of their personal identities, as well as their professional experiences. Aladejebi deftly highlights the history of systemic antiblackness in the Canadian education system as well as the battles won through the hard work of many black women educators.

This manuscript is definitely a welcome critical race intervention into the history of education and beyond. *Schooling The System* makes a major contribution to both the history of education and African Canadian history. It takes scholarship in the history of education in Canada beyond the cursory mentions of blackness as a contributing factor, to centring blackness and interrogating teacher training and work experience through that lens. By taking seriously the experiences of black women educators, it creates a better understanding of the ways the Canadian education system has held fast to a deeply entrenched set of ideas about race and knowledge. The author provides readers with an excavation of the chronology of race and education in Ontario (e.g. clearly outlining some of the ways in which streaming has been raced), and allows for a better understanding of the systemic issues existing

within this institution. This historic look at schooling in the province underscores the rootedness of some of the issues experienced by generations of black students and their teachers as well.

Chapter One provides an excellent historical overview of black life in Canada in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a focus on the history of black education and the work of black women. It lays the groundwork for understanding the systemic structures that continue to shape education into the present. The rest of the chapter provides a clear understanding of how and why many young black women entered the teaching profession. Chapter Two explores the period between the 1960s and 1980s, which saw great change in Canadian immigration, resulting in a much more diverse population. The chapter’s discussion of the role of black women being sought out to be cultural mediators in the newly expanding system of multicultural education provides a fascinating perspective on experiences of multiculturalism in Canada. As Aladejebi notes, these women were approached because (white) school administrators “believed that because they were non-white they could better understand racially diverse student populations, some of whom were black.” (54) With the advent of multiculturalism, black teachers were no longer seen as those who should teach black students; they were expected to address the needs of diversity. Chapter Three explores the everyday experiences of black women teachers as “outsiders-within” the education system. It highlights the ways these women experienced everyday (micro)aggression as well as overt forms of prejudice. According to Aladejebi, despite this, “several of them searched for ways to combat historical erasures within the curriculum, prepared minority students for the social challenges they would encoun-

ter... and merged educational practice with community engagement.” (84) Chapters Four and Five look at experiences outside of classroom spaces, examining participant involvement in black liberation in Toronto in the 1960s and ’70s and the women’s liberation movement of the late 1970s and 1980s. Whether in response to the needs of their local communities, or as a result of being inspired by the growing unrest in the United States, “black women teachers helped to create and participated in social justice activism in ways that were unique to the city and its specific urban issues.” (115) Most importantly, Aladejebi states that “education became one of the primary ways in which black Canadians, including many black women teachers, took politi-

cal, and at times radical, action.” (116)

While there are books and articles exploring the experiences of teachers in Canada, there is a dearth of literature, historical or contemporary that highlights the experiential realities of black educators. *Schooling The System* is a wonderful addition to the existing literature, providing insights into facets of black life that remain invisible, silent and underexplored. Aladejebi contributes a great deal to our understanding of the extent and significance of black female educators in shaping schooling in mid-twentieth century Ontario.

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### *Seen But Not Seen*

#### *Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*

By Donald B. Smith

Toronto, Ontario, University of Toronto Press, 2021. Xxxiii, 451 pages. \$32.95  
paperback. ISBN 978-1-4426-2770-3 (utorontopress.com)

Readers of *Ontario History* will be most familiar with Donald Smith’s lifetime of work on the province’s Indigenous peoples, particularly the Mississauga peoples of Southern Ontario. *Seen But Not Seen* represents an outstanding culmination of a lifetime of work as one of the first Canadian historians to enter the field of Indigenous history.

Drawing upon decades of research, Smith meticulously documents the marginalization of Indigenous people in Canada since the mid-nineteenth century. Smith traces settler Canadian ignorance and apathy towards Indigenous peoples through a uniquely biographical approach, examining sixteen prominent Canadians and their in-

teractions with Indigenous peoples. Included in the pantheon of influential Canadians are obvious figures such as Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald and Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott whose policies towards Indigenous peoples Smith describes as “ruthless” and often “vindicative.” But Smith is also clear that even those who held favorable attitudes towards Indigenous peoples, such as Queen’s University Principal George Munro Grant and Methodist missionary to the Stony Nakoda Cree, John McDougall, strongly supported assimilationist policies. Like many of their time, Smith argues, they believed that all societies followed a trajectory from barbarism to civilization and