

Book Review

Reynolds, G. (2016). *Viola Desmond's Canada: A History of Blacks and Racial Segregation in the Promised Land*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing (218 pages). ISBN: 9781552668375

A common greeting on the East Coast of Canada is to ask, “Where ya’ from”? I often feel that my reply of being from North End Halifax or Nova Scotia seem inadequate for locating my place as a White, cis-gendered female settler born and raised on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq People. Both are true and yet my responses tell different stories about location and identity. Likewise, *Viola Desmond's Canada: A History of Blacks and Racial Segregation in the Promised Land* authored by Graham Reynold with contribution from the younger sister of the late Viola Desmond, Wanda Robson, makes visible the inadequacy of the dominant response to who and what is part of Canadian history. Reynolds and Robson’s account of Anti-Black oppression and Black resistance in Canada addresses a gap in the literature about Canadian history and the history of Nova Scotia, specifically. Indeed, it makes sense that Nova Scotia, home to the largest indigenous Black population in Canada, serves as the anchor for Reynolds. The book opens with a foreword by writer and former Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate, George Elliot Clarke. The seven chapters are organized into two parts and come to a close with an Epilogue and transcript from The Promised Land Project Symposium. Interspersed throughout are copies of photographs, historical documents, and first-person narrative.

Part one maps the social, political and economic contexts that contributed to the arrival and departure of the Black diaspora in Nova Scotia. Reynolds points to the role of the slave trade and Jim Crow in Nova Scotia as well as Canada’s role in the underground railroad. Especially salient is his example of a community established by early Black settlers in Halifax, NS, called Africville that was forcibly demolished in the mid-twentieth century. This overt Anti-Black oppression disguised as White altruism in Nova Scotia provides the introduction for Ms. Desmond and her protestation of racial segregation in rural Nova Scotia.

Reynolds’ co-author, Wanda Robson, is the younger sister of the late Viola Desmond. She provides a holistic and intimate portrait of Ms. Desmond and the material realities of racial oppression in Nova Scotia. Her recollection of Black community and White only locales serve as a reminder that many heritage sites are celebratory remnants of the past for the White settler imaginary. Indeed, her experiential wisdom about the past remains salient as the Black and working-class neighborhood where Ms. Desmond grew up is quickly being gentrified.

The turn to material sites of memory continues as Reynolds exposes what is often rendered invisible in Canadian historical accounts. Reynolds peruses documents listing the belongings of a Black female business owner and former slave, various immigration papers, memos and newspapers from the early twentieth century. Reynolds’ examination of various historical texts from the early twentieth century show the contradictions between exclusion and inclusion on a grander scale. His analysis clearly illustrates the accomplishments, resistance, and complexity of race relations in Canada and the emergence of Black Canadian identity. The photographs, documents, and posters depicting a Canadian chapter of the Ku Klux Klan

members and White minstrel show cast members in Blackface included in the final chapter are not images ingrained in our memories by Canadian heritage minutes or school textbooks. Indeed, Reynolds's purpose may be for the reader to see what is made invisible in White dominant historical accounts. The closing chapter returns to a narrative style and includes a brief interview with an activist from Halifax, NS, Ms. Pearleen Oliver, followed by a short epilogue and a transcript of a roundtable at the Promised Lands Project Symposium.

Reynolds conveys the history of Black Canadians in content and process by using varied historical texts, artifacts, and narrative. It also makes the material somewhat accessible across age, literacy and interest levels. His Critical Race Feminist orientation emphasizing Black Female narrative and experiential knowledge along with photographs extended historical facts into an embodied memory. This is what made the book one that affected me intellectually and emotionally. Indeed, as I walk the streets of North End Halifax where I was raised, as were both my parents, it will be impossible for me to not intertwine my own recollections from those in Reynolds' book.

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