

A Review of Ibrahim, A., Kitossa, T., Smith, M. & Wright, H. (2022). *Nuances of Blackness in the Canadian Academy: Teaching, Learning, and Researching while Black.*

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The edited book, *Nuances of Blackness in the Canadian Academy*, by Awad Ibrahim, Tamari Kitossa, Malinda S. Smith, and Handel K. Wright, is made up of twenty-two chapters, each written by different authors who share experiences and insights of Black life in teaching, learning, and researching in the academy. The essays in this collection showcase narratives and accounts of how Blackness shapes scholarly life in the Canadian academy, as well as implications for Black communities that hitherto, have not been highlighted in such a rich examination of interconnected themes. The book offers stories about what transpires when working, teaching, learning, and even researching while being Black, thus exposing the various reactions and actions Black people have faced when they enter academia at different levels. The major ideas of the book have to do with exposing and confronting the concept of Blackness through a White mentality, especially the dehumanization of Blackness. The book is subdivided into four parts, each with its own focus, namely *Blackness: What's in a Name*; *Blackness and Academic Pathways*; *Blackness: A Complicated Canadian Conversation*; and *Black Pasts, Black Futurity*.

In Part One of the book (*Blackness: What's in a Name*), the reader is introduced to the concept of Blackness and why its study is critically important at this time. Blackness is defined as being entangled with concepts of history, freedom, liberation, colonialism, and imperialism; it is more complex and nuanced than one essentialized identity. Instead, Blackness is about the humanity of a people, a people denied and deprived of the opportunity to excel in all endeavors. In addition, the book examines the totality of the human who refuses to give in to the embedded racism of White stereotypical perspectives. Blackness is conceived not just as a colour but can be observed in action and resilience in a culture of Whiteness, and must be realized only in recognition of Africa and Africanness (p. 21), from where all Blackness evolved.

Also in Part One, the authors emphasize the importance of the study of Blackness because Blackness has to do with survival, which is the ability to stand and remain standing despite all the adversities that have come and could still come. This means standing in the midst of struggles. As the book explores, Immanuel Kant, a philosopher, associated Blacks with a lack of intelligence (p. 67), and this has contributed in part to why African-Canadian academics are still being misrecognized, and even further subjected to suspicions about their professional capacities and their ethical qualities. The authors argue that Blacks in Canadian academy always feel inadequate and under surveillance and scrutiny. This situation is even worse for Black females in the academy, for the simple fact that they are female.

In Part Two of the collection (*Blackness and Academic Pathways*), the authors delve deeper into Blackness in the Canadian academy to discuss the challenges that Black academics face in Canada in terms of contestations and contradictions. For example, chapters in this part explore structures and systems that are in place to deal with issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, often operating in principle, but, in reality, a lot of brazen inequalities remain in academic institutions and environments. Furthermore, this part deals with the underrepresentation of Blacks in the academy. Wisdom J. Teetey, the Part Two Commentary author, asserts after much study that “the Black presence within the Canadian academy was woefully inadequate” (p. 121). The book further states that the few Blacks who have reached a higher-ranking position within the hierarchy of the

academy often still feel marginalized, and are faced with barriers that limit their further progress in terms of appointments, promotions, and even nominations to positions in the academy. While the onus is placed on the institution of the academy to look into and revise policies and systems that support such discrimination, the idea of common purpose for all Black academics and the building of alliances is encouraged to ensure that Black colleagues find support and succor in one another.

The various forms of ongoing dehumanization are the main thrust of Part Three (*Blackness: A Complicated Canadian Conversation*) in this book. Questions that Black academics face while on their job are investigated. For example, the authors in this part discuss some of the questions posed to them that are perceived as being ridiculous and invasive and thought to be asked simply because they are Black, and often to subjugate Blacks by Whites into one generalized objectification of the ‘other’. The idea of trying to fit into the stereotypical prototype expected of Blacks is analyzed, as are the diverse expectations placed on them, including the expectation that they will think and behave in a certain way or manner. Encouraging observations made in this part of the book include the emergence of communities of Black academics that help to cushion the effects of interrogations made on minoritized bodies and the anti-racism that is faced. In this part, it is further highlighted that the Black community could be considered a family that can assist and encourage one another. Academics are encouraged to be part of such communities, wherever they find themselves.

Part Four (*Black Pasts, Black Futurity*), the final section of the book, forms a bridge between the past and the future regarding Black academics. The authors emphasize speaking up about the past while speculating on what might be done in the future in educational institutions to ensure an end to inequality so that Blacks feel included in the academy. The authors in this part express the opinion that issues of inequality and discrimination against Blacks, such as racist attacks and racism, are well-known by university administrators, yet nothing seems to have been done to remedy the situation. In Chapter 19, it is stated that “institutional whiteness is produced or reproduced when people know that they won’t be challenged on their action: they know they can get away with it” (Kelly, p. 396). The authors in this concluding section argue for putting an end to inequality and discrimination in Canadian institutions. Institutional change, however, happens too slowly, so the authors argue for addressing past suffering by rising up into action. For example, suggestions are offered for Black academics to speak up and refuse to remain silent, rather than be silenced. By recognizing the pain and denial experienced by Black people, the authors in this part encourage them to channel energies into defining their existence through the positive actions of teaching, learning, and research.

This book is a great resource and source of encouragement for Black academics in Canada specifically, and in the world in general. The book’s message resonates with the struggles of Blacks, not only in the academy but in every sphere of society. The book emphasizes that no Black academic should believe that they are going through a unique and peculiar experience, but instead, they should be aware that Black people suffer universally. At the same time, each Black academic experience contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Blackness. This book helps expose ongoing dehumanization of Blackness in the subtleties of ongoing White colonial aspirations in the Canadian academy. Within the pages of this book, solutions and remedies are proffered for situations in which Black academics encounter hostilities and inequalities in the line of their duties. The book is expository, aiming to open up issues faced by Black academics that have long been neglected and blatantly ignored.

In looking at all forms of Black academics— whether they are scholars, researchers, teachers, or even departmental chairs— this book is comprehensive. The constant and continuous struggle in the exclusion of Blacks is expressly highlighted in the book, as it serves as a source of encouragement to Black academics regarding their survival, resilience, and refusal to back down. Examples are provided of people who have excelled in their chosen field in the academic system. Drawing on the dynamics of interrelated communities, the authors across the chapters of this book emphasize Black futurities emerging from this united force, while also recommending practical survival techniques and strategies to flourish in the midst of ongoing anti-Black racism. The book encourages Black people to speak out and not die in silence or inactivity.

The book is well-researched and well-written, particularly because it comes from the perspectives of various authors and researchers. The editors of the book aim to make everyone, especially academics, begin to look inward by asking themselves if they are contributing to the discrimination being faced by Blacks. The aim is also to encourage institutions to review their policies, structures, and systems to make concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion more real in academic institutions. In my view, the aims and objectives of the authors of this book regarding complexifying and sharing Black experience in the academy have been achieved. I highly recommend this book, not only to Black academics in Canada and globally but also to all White academics. It has the potential to evoke in readers awareness and feelings that otherwise may have been dormant or silent in their hearts. The collection is a must read for anyone who desires to understand what Black academics are facing in the dominant White Canadian academy. The popular expression that ‘change begins with me’ is quite apt, as everyone is encouraged to look inward and make that change.

References

- Ibrahim, A., Kitossa, T., Smith, M., & Wright, H. (2022). *Nuances of Blackness in the Canadian academy: Teaching, learning, and researching while Black*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487528713>