

NINA REID-MARONEY, *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1868-1967* (Rochester: U of Rochester P, 2013), 186 pp.

In 1971, historian Robin Winks wrote the authoritative book on the African Canadian experience, covering three and a half centuries of the history of black people in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Although Winks's survey has remained the most extensive work on this topic until today, it has also been a challenge to the emerging field of Black Canadian Studies: while on the one hand, it brought the history of Blacks in Canada to the fore and accused the falsified Canadian self-image as the 'safe haven' for black refugees from U.S.-American slavery, Winks's book also offered disappointing conclusions. Winks subscribes to the myths of black lethargy and passivity as well as to an alleged lack of a "national heritage" to build a stable African Canadian identity (477), thereby ignoring and misinterpreting his own findings on black contributions to Canadian history. Therefore, historiography on Blacks in Canada has also meant writing in response to generalizing assumptions such as those propagated by Winks.

Reid-Maroney's *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1868-1967* can be read as such a response. It represents an effort to shed light on one chapter of Canadian history that, as a whole, has remained at the margins of national historiography for centuries. In fact, only in recent decades have scholars such as James Walker, Afua Cooper, George Elliott Clarke, and many others come to unearth the contributions of Blacks in Canada, claiming a place for them in Canadian textbooks, university curricula, and, on a larger scale, public memory. With this first full-fledged study of the Reverend Johnson's life, Reid-Maroney engages in a process of "restoration" (x), of bringing back to our attention the story of one individual who, despite her unusual life (in more than one respect), has consciously been 'lost' in history.

Jennie Johnson was born in Dresden in 1868, one of the small settlements established in the first half of the nineteenth century by black refugees from U.S.-American slavery in Canada West, with deep roots in abolitionism

on Canadian soil. By settling there, Johnson's grandmother and grandfather, a fugitive himself, were at the heart of that "transatlantic debate about the political meaning of immigration to Canada West" (5). Johnson's growing up in a tightly-knit community of former slaves and their descendants marked her and her struggle for black civil rights as an adult. From her extraordinary "resurrection" (58) as a seemingly stillborn child at birth, Jennie Johnson went on to lead a most unusual life for a woman in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Her early experience of conversion and the call to the ministry along with her resolved pursuit of a higher education in the African Methodist Episcopal seminary at Wilberforce University set the context for a self-determined life against all expectations for a young single woman held by her family, peers, and congregations. Jennie Johnson became the first ordained full-time (black, woman) Baptist minister in 1909. Traveling back and forth across the border, she kept up ties to both her congregation at home in Canada and her friends and connections in the United States, where she came to work in Flint, Michigan. Throughout her working years, she was continuously involved in interracial work and cooperation, at a time when race was still the determining factor in society both in the United States and Canada. Johnson died in Detroit in 1967.

With *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1868-1967*, Reid-Maroney has written a dense work at the crossroads of life writing, Black Canadian and North American histories, religious history, and women's history. In line with other notable scholars such as Karolyn Smardz Frost and Bryan Prince, Reid-Maroney turns to a 'bottom-up'-like approach to Black Canadian history, which focuses on the story of an individual as the means to make that history palpable. The book also reads as a homage to Johnson as a person who never conformed to external pressures concerning her own life and theology other than her own. If Johnson emerges as an outstanding individual—a modern and emancipated heroine—it is because she is presented as being ahead of her time: as an educated, working, single black female in a male-dominated institution, the Church, she challenged notions of patriarchy and a top-down theology, grassroots community work, and interracial cooperation.

<sup>1</sup> Winks, Robin, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1971).

In tracing Johnson's life, however, Reid-Maroney's study is also paradigmatic of the challenges scholars of Black Canadian history are facing. The lack of sources and the lack of acceptance in society create obstacles in the process of reclaiming these stories. Reid-Maroney is forced to content herself with only very few personal accounts by Jennie Johnson or other people and thus, even though the book is "about Johnson's life," it "cannot be called a full biography" (1). The book follows Johnson's way chronologically and spatially as best as it can and manages to create a cohesive portrait. However, the *lacunae* that exist require Reid-Maroney to fill in a substantial amount of background information in order to create a context for Johnson's life. These digressions, for example, into the historical setting of black fugitive migration to Canada, the history of the debate about women's ordination, and a nascent feminism are as necessary as they distract from Johnson's story line. Nevertheless, trying to keep a narrative balance between focusing on context and Johnson's life is no less what the title of Reid-Maroney's book promises: it is both about Johnson and Black Canadian history. It is the achievement of the author to manage this balance between a biography of a black Canadian and a written history of Blacks in Canada.

This link also establishes Reid-Maroney's book as one of the key examples for Black Canadian scholarship, as it is evocative of the central point that can be made regarding the nineteenth-century African-Canadian experience, namely the dominant relationship between the individual and the collective.

In fact, despite her exceptionality, Johnson becomes a stand-in for the larger community. Two prime examples are Johnson's cross-border life and the focus on her self-determination. For one, traveling back and forth between Canada and the United States, working and living in both countries, and keeping the connection to family and friends on both sides illustrates the reality of many black lives, fugitive or free, in the nineteenth century. Johnson's personal biography emphasizes "the 'fluid border' between Ontario and Michigan" (5)<sup>2</sup> that Blacks helped to create and maintain. Secondly, Jennie Johnson represents a self-determined individual. Her pursuit of an education and work at the heart of a community is symbolic of black agency in general and the often symbiotic relationship between the individual and the collective. Individual success becomes the expression of the collective hope for success.

Due to the time span it covers, *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1868-1967* is no introduction to the history of Blacks in Canada, but rather gives a very solid overview of the black experience in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. It provides the amount of history necessary to establish the context for Johnson's life and thus holds true to its title. It is no full biography and no full history but combines the two genres into a densely written and thoroughly researched book centering on major aspects of Black Canadian scholarship.

Mainz

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of the fluid frontier between Michigan and Ontario has been established by Afua Cooper in her article "The Fluid Frontier: Blacks and the Detroit River Region, 1789-1854, A Focus on Henry Bibb," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 30.2 (Winter 2000): 129-149.