

Erin L. Isaac

2023 UELAC Loyalist Scholarship Award Recipient

Erin Isaac is a PhD candidate at the University of Western Ontario. Her doctoral research examines the ways in which displaced loyalists, focalised in Shelburne, NS, attempted to assert belonging through their bodily engagements with their new environments.

Isaac contends that loyalist ideas about “fitness” or “suitability” to certain climates were a crucial reason for the once-promising settlement of Shelburne’s rapid decline in the face of environmental concerns like forest fires, unusually cold winters, and inhospitable soil. Through the first decade of settlement there were many factors that led white and Black loyalists to leave Shelburne, but the perceived danger that the climate posed to the body has not been well explored as one of those factors. Isaac argues, ultimately, that the ways loyalists understood their bodies and the environment’s (supposed) direct effect on them were central to contemporary beliefs about racial difference and used as a justification for white supremacist policies or behaviours.

Loyalists adapted beliefs about the body to better articulate “unfitness” in a manner that served their colonial ambitions, mainly by conceiving (free) Black bodies as unsuited to northern climates and Mi’kmaq bodily practices as “uncivil”. These beliefs contextualise, in part, loyalist preferences for foods, fashions, and folk remedies that were culturally British but often unsuited to the Shelburne’s climate. Loyalist engagements with the environment initially sought to change it to be conducive to their expectations—in small ways like building gardens or large ways like deforesting—but through the first decade, white settlers were forced to compromise and adopt customs better-suited to this climate. Loyalist responses to these adaptations, or refusals to make accommodations, reveal a great deal about the relationship between environment, race, and social rank.



Isaac received her BA in History (Hons.) from the University of Saskatchewan in 2018 before moving to Fredericton, NB to pursue a Master’s degree. During her time in the Maritimes she developed strong interests in British Atlantic World history and museology. Isaac has had the opportunity to instruct courses in Public History and Black Canadian history, as well as a role in the interpretive renewal project for the Ross-Thomson House & Store Museum in Shelburne, NS. She hopes to continue to make her research on lived experience in Shelburne publicly accessible through collaboration with the Museum and public history projects.