

February is Black History Month And I am Thinking About it Differently This Year



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During the swell of Black Lives Matter protests this summer, I realized I did not truly understand what it means to be Black in Canada in the 21st Century. I had not appreciated how pervasive and deeply embedded anti-Black racism is in our culture, media, systems, and institutions. I now see this blind spot as a symptom of my White privilege.

I had read Ta-nehisi Coates' memoir in the form of a searing letter to his 15 year old son, [Between the World and Me](#) in which he talks about the visceral brutality of being Black in America, as well as many other accounts of the racial divide in the U.S. But things were better in Canada, or so I thought. While we have our unique history, Canada shares the sullied legacy of slavery, segregation and discrimination against Black people. In recent years, there has been increased discussion and awareness of the overt and systemic racism Indigenous people face in Canada, but it is only in recent months that we have begun to widely grapple with the racism faced by Black people.

Although not highly publicized, in 2016, the United Nations' Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights confirmed that anti-Black racism in Canada is systemic. It highlighted enormous racial inequities in income, housing, child welfare rates, access to quality education and healthcare and the application of drug laws.

Systemic racism manifests in the legal profession too. The Globe and Mail examined the issue in the article [‘Why Are There Still So Few Black Lawyers on](#)

[Bay Street’](#) published in July 2020. It chronicles the paucity of Black lawyers on Bay Street and reports on the experiences of the few who do make it, including “drawing scathing rebukes for minor errors that White colleagues don't seem to face; being mistaken for an assistant rather than a litigator; enduring comments about their hair and clothing, or blatant accusations of tokenism; being ignored in a circle of White colleagues, and left out of after-work drinks and client meetings.”

There is a void in high school curriculums when it comes to Black history. I was not taught that slavery was legal in Canada for approximately 200 years and that thousands of Black and Indigenous people were enslaved until the British Parliament abolished slavery throughout the colonies in 1883; nor did I learn that segregated and unequal schooling was practised in parts of Canada until the late 20th Century.

Over thirty years later, neither of my children were taught about this in school either.

In her book [Policing Black Lives](#), Robyn Maynard summarizes research showing that at the time of the transatlantic slave trade, the social construct of blackness was created to justify enslaving blacks. Black people were not thought of as fully human but as commodities who possessed a limited ability to feel pain and were represented as animalistic, hypersexual and dangerous. Despite the abolition of slavery, the meanings that had been ascribed to Blackness persist to this day, as Black people continue

to be unjustly associated with criminality and danger*.

Discrimination assumes many guises. As Canadians we like to believe we are a tolerant, multicultural society, in which those who work hard can succeed. That is the Canada that some of us are privileged enough to live in. We have work to do to make it the reality for all Canadians, particularly those who are Black, Indigenous and members of other marginalized groups.

Black History Month is a time to celebrate the significant contributions and accomplishments of Black Canadians in all aspects of life in this country. Personally I have also committed to continuing to educate myself about the many ways systemic racism appears and what steps I can take to help make change.

Link to this
[Anti-Racist Checklist](#)
as a starting point for
personal reflection.

* Maynard, Robyn (2017). Policing Black Lives.
Fernwood Publishing. p.9

