

The Skin I'm In

Did you know that black lives matter, too? I will ask that you think on that for a moment. Yes, I know race is an uncomfortable topic for most to engage with, but it is also necessary if we are ever to understand why racism exists; why some races – well, why one race enjoys more privilege than any other. Jackson Katz made some very insightful remarks in a discussion with Jeremy Earp when he said: “When most people hear the word ‘race,’ they tend to think about people of colour, not whites, because white people are the unexamined norm we measure other racial groups against” (Katz, Earp, 2018). Now that Katz has laid out some facts with his comment, I ask that you join me on this journey to examine the notions of facts and opinions in relation to racial biases.

Racism is a structural institutionalized system that dates back to colonialism. Our history tells a jarring narrative of the lived experiences of black people during those times. But what is even more telling is the fact that a lot of the racialized prejudices of that time have remained ever-present in our culture, albeit in a subtler form. Black people continue to be racially profiled and a constant target for police brutality without any form of prosecution for these [white] police officers, might I add. And this kind of injustice has increasingly been making top news headlines in recent years because technology has allowed for many of these incidents to be captured on smartphones. Which begs the question: “For how long will this kind of injustice prevail?” Because certainly this is not a new problem – and, if video evidence of blatant discrimination and brutality of young, black men still allows police officers to walk free – then what kind of culture are we really living in? Just some more food for thought.

Now remember I asked you at the beginning of our conversation whether you knew black lives matter? Let me tell you my story. It was December 2013, and I was returning to the Caribbean after attending a conference in Poland. I remember being singled out by airport security for secondary searches. They frisked me and swabbed my carry-on baggage for traces of illegal substances. After the search was non-resultant, I was free to board my flight. Then came December 2016, at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. The exact procedure was repeated, except this time, the authorities in Paris took it a step further by requesting I do a body x-ray to prove I had ingested no illegal substance.

After both demoralizing experiences, I got to thinking: “What was it about me that warranted a secondary search?” Then it struck me, I was in Europe – a predominantly white continent. It didn’t matter to the European airport authorities that I had received two fellowships to attend the conferences. Instead, I was to them a young, black man who shouldn’t have had the means to afford trips to Europe, especially being from the Caribbean. When I inquired the reason for my extra scrutiny, I was told that it was usual procedure and that it was all part of their random search operations. Because I didn’t see a lot of diversity in the people they singled out for secondary searches, and especially because white people were not part of this “random routine operation,” I have since surmised that these incidents only happened because I am black. Or, is this really just a matter of my opinion? If I wasn’t racially profiled, then what was it? Perhaps you need a moment to think about it.

bell hooks, a black feminist theorist, has given some poignant insight to the structural systems of racism. Black people have always been regarded the “invisible Other.” Their only visibility was as a pair of hands serving their white masters on a silver tray, she says (hooks,

1992). Although we have come a far way from slavery itself, the structures of colonialism have transcended time and results in the unjust discrimination of black people – particularly young, black men. Desmond Cole lends credence to the notion that young, black men are unfairly discriminated against [more often than not] by white police officers. Cole recounts in his article, “The Skin I’m In [...]” the more than 50 interactions he has had with Canadian police – and as he puts it, it is all because he too is black. So, for a black man who has had no criminal record, how can his sheer number of interactions with police be justified, if not for calling a thing exactly what it is? Racial profiling.

It was on these grounds that the Black Lives Matter and the Black Lives Matter Toronto movements were birthed in 2013 and 2014 respectively. Black people needed to start a modern movement to bring awareness to the fact that injustice against young men of their kind is prevalent. But with every advocacy movement that has ever been launched, the Black Lives Matter movement too has had its share of opposition. Donald Trump is perhaps one of the most notable figures who has challenged the Black Lives Matter movement when he said, [insert audio] “You’re gonna hear this once: All Lives Matter.” Well, of course they do, Mr. Trump. But as Jenna Graham is keen to note, the problem is that black people are being publicly murdered at the hands of [white] police officers without repercussions [for the police] (Graham, 2017).

She goes on to use a metaphor of breaking her leg and visiting a doctor. She would not want her doctor telling her that all legs should be healed – she would want her doctor to fix it. And, that’s exactly why the Black Lives Matter movement exists. It exists because racial profiling and brutalizing of black men by [white] police officers is a problem in our society that

needs urgent fixing. Many people concerned with this issue have asserted that it is hard to hear “All Live Matter” when it is the lives of black people that are in danger.

American comedian, Dave Chappelle, sheds some light on the relationship between black people and the police. In one of his stand-up sketches, Dave talks about how he would not call the police if his house is ever burglarized. On the surface level of Dave’s position, it does seem to be that he is a bit extreme. But as he goes on to clarify – he would not call the police for fear of the police thinking his house is too nice to be a black man’s and treating him as the burglar of his own home instead. At the end of Dave’s sketch everybody in the audience laughed, but was Dave really joking? This problem of racial profiling is so bad that young black boys growing up today are constantly lectured on the importance to always show police the utmost respect [even if they feel their rights are being violated]. Because an alternative could lead to them being another fatality by the hands of police. The fear of police is no way for young, black boys to grow up with – and that’s why we are having this conversation.

For a long time, Canada has projected an image of diversity and inclusivity to the wider world, making the history of slavery in Canada what Afua Cooper says is the country’s “best-kept secret” (Cooper, 2018). When you think of bigotry and discrimination against black people, the United States might be one of your first conjectures. But Canada too has deep-rooted systems of oppression against black people. A December 2018 report by *The Globe and Mail* reveals that black people are more likely to be injured or killed by Toronto police officers. The report conducted by the Ontario Human Rights Commission was launched to investigate allegations of racial profiling by the Toronto Police Service. Seven out of 10 fatal shootings by Toronto police involved black men. The report also indicates that black people, specifically black men, were

overrepresented in everything from investigations of force and sexual assault by police, to inappropriate or unjustified searches and charges. And these are just some additional facts.

You may remember we spoke about – well, I was the one who commented on racism being a structural institutionalized system. Jane Doe, in her article, “The Ultimate Rape Victim,” helps us to understand the existence of racism. I have asked my friend Elissa Keeling to give some colour to a fragment of Jane Doe’s assertions.

Elissa as Jane Doe: “Racism exists because it works. As a white woman who is anti-racist, I work hard to understand the cause and effect of racism.”

To begin the eradication of such a prominent fixture in our culture, it would certainly help if more people sought to understand the effects of racism.

Elissa as Jane Doe: “I understand that I benefit socially and economically from racism, especially the systematic, institutionalized, polite form that Canada has perfected.”

The social and economic benefits of racism that Jane Doe talks about is what Peggy McIntosh associates as the “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks,” et cetera. Also known as white privilege. I will allow Jane Doe to list some of the privileges that come with being white.

Elissa as Jane Doe: “I am more employable. My menfolk are not incarcerated or stopped by the police at the same rate. My children are not taunted, or subjected to discriminatory treatment based solely on their skin colour.”

This makes me think of how much more “cool” it would be we had something called “Black privilege,” or “Asian privilege,” et cetera. It would at the very least make the lived experiences of all races a bit more fair. But that’s not where we are yet, and we have got to stay present in reality, if we are to influence positive change against the institutionalized system of racism.

So, since we just decided to stay in the reality of racism being a real problem, I recently sat down with a journalist and copy editor in Toronto for him to share his story, his interactions with Toronto police. I will let him introduce himself.

Robert: Hi. My name is Robert St. James, I am a journalist and copy editor, in Toronto.

When I asked about his interactions with Canadian police, Robert’s response was not at all surprising.

Robert: I have had many interactions with the police. I have had good interactions, I have had bad interactions. The good ones happened because they occurred on the phone – the bad ones happened on my way home from work. I happen to work late at night sometimes and on at least three occasions I was stopped by the police and questioned about what I was doing on the street that late.

So, Robert was stopped at least three times by Toronto police – a vast disparity between him and Desmond Cole, but was he racially profiled by the police? Or were the police really concerned for his safety for being out late at night. I guess we will never know the answer. Or, do we? I asked Robert to tell me what he felt about these interactions with police.

Robert: Not good. Less than a human. Targeted. I felt, you know, like this was happening simply because I am a black person.

There was one word that jumped out at me in Robert's response. He said he felt "targeted." So I wanted to know why he felt this way. And his response was....

Robert: Because I'm black. It's as simple as that. I have friends who are white, who walk the streets just as late as I do, I have never heard any of my white friends sharing that they have been stopped and questioned by the police. And this has happened to me at least three times in the community that I live, walking home from work, late at night I was stopped and questioned. And it's not a good feeling at all.

So when I combine the experiences of Desmond Cole and Robert, the common thread I have identified is their feeling of helplessness against a system that is oppressive to the lived experiences of black people – particularly black men. A CBC report from April 2018 indicates that black people in Canada represent just 8.3 percent of the population, yet 36.5 percent of fatal encounters with Canadian police are those of black men. While the numbers in Canada are not nearly as high as it is in the United States, the statistics offer a sobering reality check to the plagued system in which we live.

In doing a bit of research before I joined you in this conversation, I stumbled across Carl James' commentary on a case dating back to 2003, in which he speaks of the consequences stereotyping has on racial minority youth. The specific case in James' article was of an 18-year old black man who was stopped, searched and given a drug possession charge by Toronto police. The young man's record was subsequently cleared by an Ontario Superior Court judge who cited

that the two police officers had no reasonable grounds for stopping the accused in the first place. What I found intriguing was that the judge went on to write in her ruling that the accused was singled out by the officers who decided to search his car “because he was a Black male driving an expensive Mercedes.” Judge Molloy said that. So, do we call it a matter of her opinion, or do we view her statement as fact, because she is a judge? We can decide on what is opinion and what is fact in a short moment from now.

Having discussed some of the causes and consequences of racial profiling and stereotyping of black men, what I am hoping we can agree on is the fact that racism in Canada and around the world is well beyond the individual. It is part of a greater system. Systematic racism is the policies, regulations, values, norms and sanctions of institutions within our society that inform and structure the individual’s attitudes and practices towards black people. And so I reiterate that fixing the problem requires not only a few like-minded individuals fighting to challenge the system, but we need an overhaul of our culture as a whole. But how do we ever achieve this when the system is centuries old and works to the social and economic benefit of the already privileged?

Now that I have shared my story with you; we have discussed some of Desmond Cole’s thoughts about his almost unprecedented number of interactions with police; and he have heard from Robert St. James of his feelings whenever he is stopped by police. We also discussed some statistics that show black men are more likely than any other race to be stopped, searched, brutalized or killed by police. All because of the perception that black men pose a greater threat to society than any other race. But how is this perception objectively proven if black men are the constant target of police, while other races are given a blind eye? And we spoke about the

systemic nature of racism and how it goes back to colonialism – not forgetting that we touched on white privilege and who the beneficiaries of racism are.

So, this brings me back to two of my earlier questions: Do you think systematic racism is a thing? Was I singled out at the airports in Europe because I am black, or is it really just a matter of my opinion? I will give you my answers. Systematic racism is most certainly a thing, or we wouldn't be talking about it now. And because I know racism exists, I continue to believe that I was singled out at the airports because of it – that's my truth. Those are my facts. Your turn to answer....

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