

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Poetry Examining the Edges

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Abstract

White privilege allows white people to benefit from systems of oppression that work to disadvantage people of colour and Indigenous people. The author has written a selection of nine poems that create a dialogue surrounding the various forms of privileges, ignorance, and impacts that are created as a result of whiteness in Canada. These poems create a dialogue about different aspects of systematic discrimination including how discrimination exists through the law, media, and education systems as well as on an individual level. These poems are a result of personal reflection of the author.

Keywords: White; Colonialism; Whiteness; Race; Discrimination; Privilege

Maggie is an upper undergraduate student at York University completing a bilingual iBA in Gender and Women's Studies and Multicultural and Indigenous Studies. She is actively involved in her home community of Brant. Her poems have been featured in local newspapers, on the radio in Jamaica, and places in between.

My body was not built for an institution

my body was not built for an institution
put inside spaces to be contained
complacent to roles set in place

my tongue was not contrived for royal
language
stuttering the twisted imperial speech
separated into categories acceptable or
disabled

my brain was not assembled for school
standardized tests across the nation
intelligence equated to numbers and
sameness

my skin was not formulated for the
university
researching to fulfill the academies needs
specimen observed as an object and field of
study

my face was not brewed for artwork
painted upon canvas through the gaze
portrayal of pleasure and grace

my feet were not shaped for the military
brave heroes execute the country's duties
kill for patriotism and return with PTSD

my spirituality was not discovered for
religion
salaries placed on offertory plates
prayers incorporated with rules and
regulations

my hands were not constructed for
corporations
exploited labour for economic purposes
increased income for slave owners and
CEOs

my sexuality was not designed for marriage

validity exclusive to traditional ways
constituting restrictions of love and approval
of rape

my lungs were not concocted for the police
ordered to restrain from breathing
protecting privileges and criminalizing
differences

my image was not developed for the media
plastered across front page headlines for
profit
reported being suspicious and exotic

my bones were not conceived for the
courthouse
verdict of precedents before justice is seen
debating normalcy of deviants and victim
blaming

my heart was not fabricated for prison
sentenced to uniforms chained for correction
mugshots and confinement replace
community connection

my stomach was not produced for charity
hungry bellies seen as helplessly needy
poor being subsidized by rich and warm-
hearted giving

my mind was not made for psychiatry
evaluated for abnormalities then instructed
to cure the crazy
surrounded by white walls and concrete
ceilings

my blood was not manufactured for the
hospital
doctors give diagnoses with pharmaceuticals
treated with science and plastic bottles of
chemicals

my buttocks were not invented for museums
entertaining freak show put out on display

exhibited for fascination and animalistic traits

my identity was not created to be governed
boxes and borders patrolled by the colonial nation
state of mind dominated by conformity and limitations

my body was not built for an institution
i refuse to perform the roles imposed
i cannot fit inside your definition of worth

institutions cannot fix what is not broken
i am not broken
i am healing from capitalist legislation

i am resilient
narrating my stories
living my life

break through the bars containing me
break through the chains restraining me
break through the borders blocking me

i create my art
i sing my songs
i dance my dances

my abilities are my gifts
my knowledges are my passions
my wealth is my community

institutions are not built for survival
institutions are not built for resistance
my body was built for defiance

In Other Words

White male prime ministers have been elected since Canada became a country
Democracy: giving a failed perception
“He deserves it! I voted for him.”
Another story of the divine right to rule
The divine white of being a white man

Capitalism: belief in the myth of meritocracy
I worked hard so I deserve it
“Affirmative action is reverse discrimination”
Another way of saying “only white men deserve jobs”
#alllivesmatter is another way of saying “When people talk about anything mattering besides whiteness I want to silence it”
American dream the dream of being wealthy on the backs of Others
Nationalism: My country is the best even with war and genocide and slavery
“Not all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims”
Another way of saying “I cannot see the way that I am terrorizing you”
“You don’t look Indigenous to me”
Another way of saying “I have the right to define you”
Standing by is another way of saying hate is welcome in this space

Ocean Trawlers

Colonialism is like a deep ocean trawler out at sea
Scraping the bottom of the earth for all it is worth
Uprooting plants that have lived there for thousands of years
Uprooting the people that have lived there since time immemorial
The only worth of this destructive practice is in one type of fish
The only worth of this destructive practice is in one type of person
The other life being thrown back dead into the ocean
Being eaten by predators
Habitats destroyed permanently
Cultures destroyed permanently
But even the fish that are the valued type
End up dead early on in life
The only people profiting from this practice

Are the people who control the boat from on top of the sea
 Not caring about the ecocide they are committing
 Not caring about the genocide they are committing

Everyday Setting

If I got a dollar for every time I heard
 A white person make a racist comment
 And follow it up with “But I’m not racist”
 I could pay for my university tuition
 Take one:

Setting: Driving with my cousin in the GTA
 Car locked, windows rolled up, a hot summer day

Cousin: “Let’s play a game! ‘Spot the Turban’ But I’m not racist! My sister is the racist of the family”

Because in her eyes if someone is more racist than her then she is off the hook

Take two:

Setting: Twitter account of famous celebrity Ellen DeGeneres after Rio summer Olympics

Ellen: Sends picture of her on the back of Usain Bolt with the caption “This is how I’m running my errands from now on”

Response to backlash: “I am highly aware of the racism that exists in this country. It is the furthest thing from who I am”

Because in her eyes if she acknowledges racism’s existence she can make any comment she pleases

Take three:

Setting: Eating at the dinner table with my family

Uncle: Makes a comment with racial slurs. “I’m not racist, that is what they were called when I was your age”

Aunt: “Your uncle is a good man, he’s not racist”

Because in his eyes unless he joins the KKK he is not racist

Because racism equals mean and bad and that is not how anyone wants to be seen
 Allowing white people to define
 “This is what racism is... and this is what it is not... one thing I know is that it is not me”

Fast forward: White guilt of liberals who think they understand whiteness

“I’m so sorry for being white, I feel so guilty”

Allowing their feelings and whiteness to take up more space

Than a person of colour’s voice and experiences

Allowing whiteness to continue to dominate conversations on race

School Curriculum

In school we studied *the great ones*

In English we studied the work of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Twain

In Math we studied the work of Einstein, Newton, and Descartes

In Science we studied the work of Darwin, Galileo, and Pasteur

In Music we studied the work of Mozart, Bach, and Tchaikovsky

In Art we studied the work of Picasso, Van Gogh, and Dali

In History we studied the work of Columbus, Bonaparte, and Machiavelli

In Politics we studied the work of Washington, Lincoln, and Churchill

In Philosophy we studied the work of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates

In Law we studied the work of Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes

In Sociology we studied the work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim

In Psychology we studied the work of Freud, Pavlov, and Piaget

In school we were taught about *the great ones*

I thought these classes had nothing in common

Until I learned the truth

The Colour White

I used to think white was just a colour
 Fluffy clouds in in the sky on a nice day
 A glass of fresh milk in the morning
 A dove flying to bring peaceful news
 Goodness like an angel from heaven
 A bright light blinding perspective
 A blanket of snow on a cold winter's night
 Covering the freezing ground preventing
 anything from growing
 A ghost invisible to some, denying its very
 existence
 Haunting every space it enters
 A hungry polar bear devouring everything it
 can and always wanting more

Growing Unwanted

Weeds are just the word for anything that is
 growing unwanted
 If beans grew in a cornfield where they were
 not wanted
 Even if they were enriching the soil
 Even if they were nourishing the growth of
 the corn
 Even if they were the richest beans that ever
 grew for that farmer
 They would be considered weeds

Discrimination Continuation Repetition

Innocent homeless youth cries a tear
 He only loved now others fear
 Hated, disowned for being born queer

Born with a heart that was much bigger
 They burnt a cross, called him a nigger
 Neighbours smiled as they pulled their
 trigger

Mother taken from family, told what to do
 Deadly gas filled the air she had no clue
 She was instantly killed for being a Jew

Kidnapped child sent to residential school
 No native ways was the enforced rule
 Spoke for his rights, got abused, treated
 cruel

From his birth he was a discard
 People passing remarked retard
 As if his life wasn't hard

Although his brain was far beyond able
 No one believed for his legs weren't stable
 He lived his life with a handicapped label

A caring doctor the young girl desired to
 seek
 But she was told an immigrant's future is
 bleak
 For the 'proper' language she 'couldn't'
 speak

Stop that disgusting discrimination
 It is not acceptable in our nation
 Let's make that clear through our generation

Our differences we should be proud to
 embrace
 Through our mind, sexuality, religion, and
 race
 Let's help make our world an equitable
 place

Lost in Translation

Saying you can translate a language is like
 saying you can translate a culture
 Can you pass the haggis?

Here are the potatoes...

Saying you can translate a language is like
 saying you can translate a religion

Can you pass the rosary?

Here is the Bible...

Confused and unable to find the right
 meaning

Growing up with a Canadian Irish Catholic
 mother and a Canadian Scottish protestant

father
Two Anglo Saxon Celtic cultures
And somehow the translation still doesn't
work
Je t'embrasse
I don't understand you speak English
It means I kiss you
No not that way
Maybe more like I hug you
Wait that doesn't exactly cut it
Because in French culture we don't hug we
kiss but you don't kiss you hug
This translation game getting confused in
my head
These words do not exist outside their
culture outside their religion
Philosophy, way of life, way of knowing
Code switching
I was with a friend in India who was
speaking Malayalam English Malayalam
English Malayalam
I was with a friend in Canada who was
speaking Somali English Somali English
Somali English
Tongue twisted switching between the
language of the heart and the language of the
head
The language of the head being the one you
have been taught to value and learn to speak
The language of the heart being the
language of home of safety of self
Why is it we have interpreters in courts
having to translate justice to people who
have been here since time immemorial
The people of power don't speak the
language of the people
Not knowing your colonizers language
Accused: Not speaking English
Verdict: a sentence of lifetime imprisonment