

Intervention Symposium – “Black Humanity: Bearing Witness to COVID-19”

Organized by Elaine Coburn and Wesley Crichlow

The Original Sin of Anti-Black Racism

Gertrude Mianda

Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Studies

York University

Toronto, ON, Canada

gmianda@yorku.ca

Abstract

This essay considers the interlocking systems of discrimination that reproduce anti-Black racisms, ranging from police violence to higher rates of death during the COVID-19 epidemic. This essay focuses, in particular, on the mediating role played by the labour market in reproducing poverty, precarity and so higher risk during the pandemic. The disproportionate number of Black persons who work as personal support workers in health care, with high exposure to the pandemic, highlights the greater risk borne by Black persons. If Canada has been reluctant to publish data about race and the pandemic, the evidence from other countries and major cities in Canada suggests that Black persons are dying at higher rates than the rest of the population. Such deaths are one face of anti-Black racism, while the murder of Black men and women, boys and girls by the police are another symptom of systemic anti-Black racism. To address these realities, what is required are not minor reforms but a transformation of a White supremacist capitalist system built on underpaid Black labour.

Keywords

anti-Black racism, Canada, labour market, pandemic, personal support workers, poverty

I am writing this paper at a time of devastation, both because of COVID-19 and because publics around the world witnessed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States under the knee of a White police officer, on 25 May 2020. Through his steady gaze at the camera, the White officer affirmed his right to kill a Black man with impunity. The long eight minutes and forty-six seconds that the officer knelt on Floyd's neck brought to the surface all the wounds of systemic anti-Black racism in the United States and around the world. The original sin from which anti-Black racism is born and then sustained by interlocking systems of discrimination is evident both in the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately kills Black and racialized persons, and in Floyd's murder.

In Toronto, Ontario, in Canada, from where I write, the institutionalized racisms of the labour market are an important mediating factor in the reproduction of inequities in the pandemic and an instance of the structural discrimination that accompanies raw expressions of anti-Black violence. The Canadian labour market is segmented on the basis of gender, class and ethnicity and further characterized by discrimination against racialized persons. In particular, Black women occupy the lowest paid, lowest status positions in the Canadian labour market (Block and Galabuzi 2011; Javdani et al. 2012; Mensah 2002; Musisi and Turriffin 2006).

Labour market inequality, rooted in gendered race inequities, creates sustained economic precarity among the Black population, a situation so dire that the United Nations' Human Rights Council has called attention to, and condemned, the poverty rate among Blacks in Canada's population, which is "more than three times the average for Whites" (UN Human Rights Council 2017). These facts about institutionalized labour market inequities and associated poverty, take on dangerous new meanings during the pandemic.

Nationally, the Canadian Medical Association observes that 85 per cent of an individual's risk of illness is linked to their socio-economic status in society and their access to good health care (McKenzie et al. 2020). Indeed, there is a strong association between higher rates of COVID-19, low income, low

level of education, employment and being a visible minority. The association between these factors is even stronger in neighbourhoods with higher concentrations of Black populations, whether in Toronto or Montreal (Bowden and Clain 2020).

The case of personal support workers (PSWs), a form of employment where Black women are disproportionately represented, is tragically instructive about the intersections of race, gender, class and the risk of death from COVID-19 (Bowden 2020). Many PSWs labour in long-term care facilities in Canada, where the rates of exposure to the virus and death are particularly high. Worse, many PSWs do not have access to the necessary personal protective equipment (Carter 2020; Knope 2020). Of the six PSWs who have died from COVID-19 in Toronto alone, five are Black (Cooper 2020).

Although Canada has so far refused to collect race-disaggregated data about deaths from the pandemic, all of these factors strongly suggest that Black people are at greater risk from COVID-19. In nations that have collected this data, like the United States and the United Kingdom, we know that Black people are dying disproportionately from the virus (Bain et al. 2020; McKenzie et al. 2020).

Black deaths through raw violence, like the murder of George Floyd and so many others at the hands of the police in the United States, and Black deaths because of the pandemic, like that suffered by Personal Support Workers in Toronto, may appear to be separate concerns. This is not the case. Rather, they are linked expressions of deeply entrenched anti-Black racisms. Challenging them demands that we dismantle White supremacy, including its expression in a labour market built on Black labour at poverty wages – and this means transforming a racist capitalist system at its core.

References

Bain B, Dryden O and Walcott R (2020) Coronavirus discriminates against Black lives through surveillance, policing, and the absence of health data. *The Conversation* 20 April
<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-discriminates-against-black-lives-through-surveillance-policing-and-the-absence-of-health-data-135906> (last accessed 20 November 2020)

- Block S and Galabuzi G-E (2011) “Canada’s Colour Coded Labour Market: The Gap for Racialized Workers.” Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives and The Wellesley Institute
<https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/publications/canadas-colour-coded-labour-market-the-gap-for-racialized-workers/> (last accessed 30 November 2020)
- Bowden O (2020) Canada’s lack of race-based COVID-19 data hurting Black Canadians. *Global News* 2 May <https://globalnews.ca/news/6892178/black-canadians-coronavirus-risk/> (last accessed 20 November 2020)
- Bowden O and Cain P (2020) Black neighbourhoods in Toronto are hit hardest by COVID-19 – and it’s “anchored in racism”. *Global News* 2 June <https://globalnews.ca/news/7015522/black-neighbourhoods-toronto-coronavirus-racism/> (last accessed 20 November 2020)
- Carter A (2020) “She is a hero”: Family mourns health-care worker who died after contracting COVID-19. *CBC News* 30 April <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/covid-19-coronavirus-health-care-worker-death-1.5550861> (last accessed 20 November 2020)
- Cooper A (2020) Canada, COVID, and police brutality: The experience of the Black community. *Moore Institute* 9 June <https://mooreinstitute.ie/2020/06/09/canada-covid-and-police-brutality-the-experience-of-the-black-community/> (last accessed 20 November 2020)
- Javdani M, Jacks D and Pendakur K (2012) “Immigrants and the Canadian Economy.” Working Paper No. 12-09, Metropolis British Columbia: Center of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity
- Knope J (2020) Family of Toronto PSW who died of COVID-19 says his death was due to lack of PPE at his workplace. *CBC News* 7 May <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/personal-support-workers-dies-covid-19-toronto-1.5560686> (last accessed 20 November 2020)
- McKenzie K, Boozary A and Roberston A (2020) We need data to protect those most vulnerable to the coronavirus. *The Toronto Star* 14 April
<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/04/14/we-need-data-to-protect-those-most-vulnerable-to-the-coronavirus.html> (last accessed 20 November 2020)
- Mensah J (2002) *Black Canadians: History, Experience, Social Conditions*. Halifax: Fernwood

Musisi N and Turriffin J (2006) Knocking at the door: Professional African immigrant and refugee women's experiences in the Canadian labour market. In K Konadu-Agyemang, B K Takyi and J A Arthur (eds) *The New African Diaspora in North America: Trends, Community Building, and Adaptation* (pp 209-233). Lanham: Lexington

UN Human Rights Council (2017) "Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its Mission to Canada." <https://ansa.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/files/report-of-the-working-group-of-experts-on-people-of-african-descent-on-its-mission-to-canada.pdf> (last accessed 20 November 2020)