Dismantling White Privilege

The Black Lives Matter Movement and Environmental Justice in Canada

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On August 12, 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, alt-right/White supremacy groups and Black Lives Matter (BLM) supporters came face-to-face regarding what to do about public monuments that celebrate key figures from slavery and the Jim Crow era. White supremacists and White nationalists did not hide their racist ideologies as they demanded that their privileged place in history not be erased. The BLM movement, which challenges state-sanctioned anti-Black racism, was ready to confront themes of White discontent and reverse racism, critiques of political correctness, and the assumption that racialized people should know their place and be content to be the subordinate other.

It is easy to frame the events in Charlottesville as indicative of US-specific race problems. However, a sense that White spaces should prevail and an ongoing history of anti-Black racism are not unique to the United States. The rise of Canadian activism under the BLM banner also signals a movement to change Canadian forms of institutional racism in policing, education, and the labor market. This article responds to perceptions that the BLM movement has given insufficient attention to environmental concerns (Pellow 2016; Halpern 2017). Drawing on critical race theory as a conceptual tool, I focus on the Canadian context as part of my argument in favor of greater collaboration between BLM and the environmental justice (EJ) movement in Canada. This article also engages with the common stereotype that Blacks in Canada have it better than Blacks in the United States.

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Black Lives Matter in Canada

Labeled as perpetual immigrants, Blacks have been positioned outside the realm of belonging in Canada (Amadahy and Lawrence 2009), although Black Nova Scotians can trace their ancestry back to Loyalists of the 1700s. Black British Loyalists, who settled in Africville on the coast of Halifax starting in the 1840s, experienced a range of environmental assaults in addition to social, economic, and spatial segregation. Today, Blacks in Canada represent 3.5 percent of the total Canadian population; they constitute 8.9 percent of the population in Toronto, 16.7 percent in Ajax, Ontario, 10.3 percent in Montreal, and 7.5 percent in Shelburne, Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada 2016). Notable historically Black settlements exist in Africville, Halifax; Dresden, Ontario; and the Little Burgundy neighborhood in Montreal.

Theorists such as Barrington Walker (2010) and Robyn Maynard (2017) have documented the history of anti-Black violence in Canada. Colonial legacies set in place systems of oppression that account for why Blacks today constitute slightly less than 4 percent of the Canadian population but 10 percent of the federal prison inmate population (Dettloff 2016) and experience disproportionate police shootings. Blacks in Canada, as in the United States, are categorized as subhuman and are denied the right to their own subjectivities, identities, and knowledge (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015; Pellow 2016). BLM is a social movement to acknowledge that Blacks do matter, as does their struggle for recognition as humans (Lebron 2017, xiii).

The Canadian chapters of BLM have supported US actions, and they call public attention to the similar patterns of anti-Black racism and racial violence that exist in Canada. BLM vigils have taken place in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Montreal, Halifax, and Toronto with a shared goal of transparency and accountability regarding state violence in Canada. BLM Toronto was founded in October 2014 by Yusra Khogali and Janaya Khan, in response to the shooting of a local Black youth by a Toronto-area police officer during a routine traffic stop (Khan 2018). A significant gain of BLM Toronto was a protest against the carding practice officially called the "Community Contracts Policy" by the Ontario police (Dettloff 2016). Under this policy, predominately racialized people are approached in public spaces and asked to provide ID to police officers without any offence having been committed. The ID information is then maintained in police databases. Blacks in Toronto were 8.5 percent of the city's population in 2016, but constituted 27 percent of those targeted for carding incidents (Dettloff 2016). In part due to BLM's activism, Ontario's Police Services Act is under review and restraints have been placed on the practice of carding (Gillis 2016). With the goal of having an impact on education, BLM Toronto also organized a Freedom School during the summers of 2016 and

2017, which focused on teaching Black history and profiling Black voices (Black Lives Matter–Toronto 2017).

BLM protests organized through social media and reflected in the rise of street protests have used public spaces as a means to disrupt normal behavior during busy street events and rush-hour traffic. For example, on August 15, 2017, BLM Toronto delayed the flow of traffic at the busy Yonge and Bloor intersection to protest the death of a Somali Canadian man in Ottawa following an encounter with police. Another street protest on September 19, 2017, highlighted the injustices associated with the imminent deportation of a Jamaican woman who was a new mother (Jones 2017). BLM's disruption of public space in this way is in direct opposition to the state's use of space and legal practices to control race through forms of state-imposed segregation. Historical Black communities in Canada, such as Africville in Halifax, experienced both spatial isolation and exclusionary practices via municipal government policies that denied these communities access to essential municipal services, such as garbage pick-up. In these cases, Black communities became rundown as a result of governments' systematic disinvestment in them rather than the actions of the people living in the communities (Razack 2002). The ongoing history of policing Black bodies in public space is tied to the narrative of Canadian nation building that relies on undervalued racialized labor, where Blacks are overrepresented in poorly paying occupations and experience fewer opportunities for upward mobility (Walker 2010). BLM's efforts to claim space and to demand that Blacks in Canada be recognized as citizens have much to offer the EJ movement in Canada.

Environmental Justice in Canada

In Canada, problems of environmental injustice and the corresponding EJ social movement have manifested differently than in the United States due in part to factors such as the colonial experiences of Indigenous communities, differential incorporation of Blacks and racialized people, Canadian policies to address social inequality, and the low incidence in Canada of US-style race-based segregation (Teelucksingh et al. 2016; Gosine and Teelucksingh 2008; Agyeman et al. 2009). Canada also lacks a strong civil rights movement to serve as a platform for organizing and protesting environmental injustices. Instead, in Canada, EJ activism has tended to remain locally oriented in specific racialized and Indigenous communities without significant uptake in national or public discourses. The lack of large-scale Canadian EJ mobilization has limited the potential for building broad coalitions with health, race, labor, and immigrant movements such as have occurred in the United States.

In urban centers like Toronto, environmental justice has also provided a framework to question and move toward solutions to the uneven processes of urban development. It invites the interrogation of many structural and spatial

forms of racism linked to the systematic disinvestment in racialized lower-income communities: less green space, fewer healthy food options, a lack of affordable housing, less access to public transit, and greater amounts of policing and social stigma. Even the allocation of municipal services, like garbage pick-up, varies significantly across racialized and nonracialized neighborhoods.

The uneven access to resources that disadvantages Black communities is tied to the rise in occurrences of everyday racism in Toronto, a city where the majority of the population is foreign-born, many are racialized, and there is an espoused culture of multiculturalism. White privilege is associated with economic, social, and environmental advantage. The workings of White privilege are rarely problematized or acknowledged, although Whiteness is the category through which difference and otherness are constructed (Pulido 2000). White privilege is invisible and allocated structurally without Whites necessarily requesting it (Lipsitz 1998). The workings of White privilege are spatial and environmental, such that it means different things to be White in a lower-income neighborhood than it does to be White in a middle-class, upper-class, or even gentrifying neighborhood (Pulido 2000). The challenge in Toronto and across Canada is to shift to a different version of multiculturalism that allows for equity and social inclusion (Teelucksingh 2017).

A Canadian EJ and BLM partnership would provide the EJ movement with tools to mobilize large-scale activism in favor of transparency, accountability, and a critique of White spaces. In turn, BLM would benefit from an understanding of how the social relations of oppression affecting Blacks also include environmental marginalization. Social justice for Blacks is dependent on healthy and resilient ecosystems, which include both social and natural processes (Pellow 2016; Agyeman et al. 2016). EJ researchers in Canada (Haluza-DeLay 2007; Agyeman et al. 2009; Waldron 2018) have highlighted that social groups understand and engage with their environments based on factors relating to their class, race, gender, and immigration status. Rather than treating EJ and BLM as separate social movements that impact Blacks in Canada differently and require different forms of activism and intervention, it is crucial to see linkages across organizing, activism, and action in order to press for both racial and environmental policy reforms and compliance by state and nonstate actors (Teelucksingh 2017; Pellow 2016). David Pellow (2016, 2), who also examines the connection between the BLM movement and EJ as part of his "critical environmental justice" framework, argues that the two movements "are in fact closely intertwined and . . . we must explore their myriad connections in order to excavate the roots of racist violence no matter the form it takes." The practical and conceptual methods of critical race theory are a way to see areas of intersection between both EJ and BLM in Canada and a means to counter White privilege and White supremacist discourses about White discontent, reverse racism, and political correctness—discourses that hinder both movements.

Critical Race Theory: Black Lives Matter and Environmental Justice

Critical race theory seeks to "transform the relationship among race, racism and power" (Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 3) by examining how Eurocentric perspectives have perpetuated racist policies and practices. Acknowledging that racism is an inherent component of any society is its core starting point. This is an important reminder in Canada, where there is a tendency to see policy initiatives such as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), the Employment Equity Act (1995), and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) as providing legal frameworks for ensuring the end of racism in Canada. The problems of environmental racism and the mandate of Black Lives Matter in Canada illustrate that despite these significant policy gains, status quo power relations remain, maintaining racial minorities in subordinate positions. As Laura Pulido (2015) and George Lipsitz (1998) argue, a pervasive neoliberalism, which prioritizes free-market players, such as corporations, at the expense of meaningful state intervention and the needs of marginalized communities, has contributed to ongoing structural racism even with ideologies and policies of multiculturalism. The three components of critical race theory are (1) a critique of colorblindness and race neutrality, (2) a refutation of the claims of meritocracy, and (3) the recognition of interest convergence as a valuable tool for critically considering why racial progress has stalled and why White privilege persists in places such as Canada (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Crichlow 2015; Razack 2002). As anticipated by Pulido (2015), renewed racial unrest, signaled by events in Charlottesville as well as in Canadian cities, points to White privilege taking a more aggressive form of White supremacy connected to anti-immigrant sentiments and White nationalism.

The ideology of colorblindness implies that racial difference should not be seen; instead, it claims, all people are the same regardless of race (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Colorblindness has become a normalized practice in Canadian institutions such as schools, the legal system, and workplaces, where those with power espouse the idea that raceless practices offer the ideal way to treat all students, workers, and those encountering the legal system (Crichlow 2015). In this sense, colorblindness and race neutrality are compatible with a view of equality and liberalism that allocates the same resources to all actors as a way to be fair and just. These ideologies are also embedded in the policies and practices of multiculturalism. In short, the colorblindness and race neutrality adopted in Canadian institutions allow powerful stakeholders to ignore racial concerns and to continue to privilege Whiteness, and these normalized ideologies are barriers to racial and social change. Colorblindness is also part of the rationale for why Canadians have been hesitant to see the role of race in the spatial allocation of environmental benefits and disadvantages. Rather, the distribution of land use is often attributed to the workings of a marketplace assumed to be neutral, which

seemingly privileges economics over race (Gosine and Teelucksingh 2008). By drawing attention to anti-Black state practices, such as carding and the invisible mechanisms of involuntary segregation, BLM has made race an issue. For these efforts, BLM has encountered pushback from those invested in colorblind ideologies who argue that "all lives matter." As Pellow (2016, 11) argues, making room for the proposition that Black lives matter requires the destabilizing of a Whiteness "that ha[s] required that blacks . . . be constructed as expendable."

Meritocracy is a system that assumes that hard work will be rewarded regardless of race, class, gender, and other categories of oppression. Schools and workplaces have reinforced notions of meritocracy, assuming a match between ability/training and achievements. Embedded in these notions is the assumption that everyone has the same opportunities to harness their abilities and to gain access to education or training. "Boot-strap" arguments that urge individuals to simply be more diligent ignore the structural barriers that prevent some groups from accessing the opportunities available to others. Canadian federal government policy under the Employment Equity Act directly acknowledges that meritocracy does not function the same way for all workers in all workplaces, stating the need to include measures to accommodate those who have been historically disadvantaged. In fact, the labor market left to its own devices systematically disadvantages Blacks and other racialized people in gaining employment and advancing in workplaces. Employment equity initiatives, like many of the strategies advocated by BLM, are commonly criticized on the grounds that they are a form of reverse racism, seeking to subordinate Whites. However, claims of reverse racism disregard the opportunities and power that Whites have systemically enjoyed across all institutions, and they offer few strategies to remedy the historical inequities experienced by racial minorities. Such claims are also consistent with arguments that it makes sense for Black and racialized lower-income communities to bear the burden of environmentally undesirable land uses.

Richard Delgado (1995), Wesley Crichlow (2015), and Richard Milner (2008) argue that racial equality will be pursued only to the extent that it converges with the interests and needs of Whites. Such racial convergence means that efforts to address racism will only go so far. In Canada, policies to address racial inequalities have stalled: they have not resulted in substantial improvement for Blacks and other racialized people, who are still vulnerable to environmental risks, racial profiling, precarious employment, and racial stereotypes. BLM has sought to highlight the systemic White self-interest that maintains and normalizes anti-Black racism. Similarly, governments' and corporations' lack of consistent compliance with environmental policies under the guise of economics is a form of self-interest that contributes to environmental racism (Pulido 2015).

Recent iterations of critical race theory have included the recognition of intersectionality—that is, the interconnection between racial identities and sys-

tems of oppression such as capitalism, patriarchy, and heterosexism (Crenshaw 1989). In 2016, BLM Toronto faced opposition when its members intervened at Toronto's 2016 Pride Parade, critiquing police presence at the event. Since then, BLM has shifted to a more collaborative relationship with Toronto's LGBTQ community (Black Lives Matter–Toronto 2017). Likewise, earlier debates in the EJ movement focused on the primacy of race or class as determinants of environmental injustice. However, theorists like Pulido (1996) intervened to highlight that race and class oppressions are outcomes of the same political and economic systems of capitalism and globalization. Critical race theory advocates for policy changes and mobilization in keeping with the principles discussed.

Moving Forward

The EJ and BLM movements in Canada must collaborate to counter rising factions of White supremacy and dismantle the firm hold of White privilege by introducing new policies and practices that will actually address the needs of Black people. As David Barre (2016), chief program officer at Greenpeace USA, states, bringing racial and environmental justice to Black communities requires a radical change to existing power structures that maintain privilege for some at the expense of others. In addition to endorsing the BLM-US's (Blacklivesmatter 2016) six-part policy platform (end the war on Black people; reparations; invest-divest; economic justice; community control; and political power), Greenpeace USA proposes its own three-step vision of integrated EJ and BLM transformation:

1. Divesting from fossil fuels and investing in community solutions
2. A clean-energy economy is a just economy
3. Putting people before corporations in our democracy. (Barre 2016)

The strategies advocated by BLM-US and Greenpeace are consistent with critical race theory's focus on addressing procedural injustices. Supporting community-based solutions and decision-making is a key mechanism for legitimizing Black voices. Across Canada there are many noteworthy examples. The City of Toronto Planning Department's Youth Engagement Strategy program involves Black and racialized youth from low-income communities in the process of envisioning their future neighborhoods. This type of community-oriented, bottom-up practice validates the local and experiential knowledge of Black youth and positions them as agents of change in their own neighborhoods.

Using critical race theory as a conceptual tool in this article, I have argued in support of greater collaboration between the BLM and EJ movements in Canada. Moving forward, it is essential to examine ways to extend and expand successful small-scale initiatives that support Black community-based solutions and inclusive Black decision-making beyond simply local neighborhoods. As

racial violence takes many forms (Pellow 2016), dismantling White privilege and creating cross-movements requires openness to strategies and policies that bridge multiple sectors and stakeholders.

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