

My Life Matters: The Cost of Being a Black Youth

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Abstract

White supremacy presents Black communities with numerous challenges. We are constantly being injured by the anti-black racism that is deeply entrenched in the policies and practices of dominant institutions. These establishments, including, if not especially, the criminal justice system, purport to be responsible for ensuring the well-being and welfare of all, but only ever protect the rich and white. The recent re-mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide has reminded the public of the urgency of tackling anti-black racism, but much work still needs to be done if we want future generations of Black people to live freely. Like Black adults, Black youth are not immune from racist encounters. In such a time of racial crisis, the experiences of Black youth need to be centralized in a movement that opposes racial injustice and white supremacy. Accordingly, this poem adopts the lens of a Black youth to speak to the cost of growing up Black immersed in the dominant anti-black culture of our society, underscoring the troubling realities of what it means to be a Black youth in today's world.

Keywords

Black youth, racial injustice, whiteness, systemic oppression

My heart raced as I stumbled upon an unfamiliar place,
Where I saw a multitude of youths from the same race.
Freely enjoying the privileges of their being,
Protected by the color of their skin,
Securely barricaded to keep them in.

These youths are free from the strain of societal pain
That breathes out the superiority of their reign.
Working to maintain a racial claim
Where Blackness is interpreted as insane,
And Whiteness occupies the entire human frame.

I fixed my gaze onto that unfamiliar place
Wondering how to step into this particular space,
To experience life, on the other side, of racial divide.
But suddenly, I found myself in a precarious position
Swimming alone in a bottomless ocean.

Suffocated by the confrontation of Whiteness
I gasp for air, as I slipped into darkness.
Conscious of the despair of my fear
I pleaded against my obstructed breath,
Just to escape an unthinkable death.

In great distress my world became still
As I lay hopelessly without my free will.
In the midst of a raging storm
I can't find a safe place to run,
Not even from the darkened sun.

Why is it so hard to breathe?
I just want to breathe.
To make sense of my own being
In a world that recognizes the colour of my skin,
As something less than a human being.

As a Black youth, I am imprisoned
But the systems fail to listen.
Your silence sustains your invisible chain
That stops the circulation of blood to my brain,
There is something for you to gain.

Can I just breathe and live?
My parents have to believe,
Someday they will have to grieve,
That I may not outlive
This is hard to forgive.

Walk with me and you will learn

The many ways I often get burn.

Everywhere I turn,

Not sure I will return,

This is an everyday concern.

I am not to be feared and brutalized.

My identity should not be criminalized

Neither my experiences trivialized.

I hope you will soon realize

The many ways I have been dehumanized.

Author biography

Fiona Edwards is a Ph.D. candidate in Social Work at York University, Toronto, Canada. She also received a Masters of Social Work from York University in the spring of 2012. Fiona has over eight years of professional experience in the field of child and youth mental health. This experience is the impetus for her doctoral research. Her current research explores the lived mental health experiences of Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth in Southern Ontario urban areas. Fiona's broader research interests include child and youth mental health, the racialization of mental illness, mental illness stigma, mental health and well-being, religiosity, spirituality, anti-oppressive social work, and race, racialization, and racism.