

**Book Review**

***Policing Black Lives:  
State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present***

Book by Robyn Maynard

Review by Kuir ě Garang

In 2012, a young South Sudanese woman, Ny (not her real name), who is now a fourth-year student at the University of Calgary, told me that a White teacher made her redo a math test because the teacher doubted her math capability. Ny, as a result, generalized her experience with that teacher as a “damaging” mainstream perception of Black Canadians: “What was done was damaging and a clear example of how Black Canadians are viewed in the education system.”<sup>1</sup> And in 2014, a mother from Jamaica told me how her children were placed in an English as a second language (ESL) class because of their accent and appearance. These devaluing experiential stories are just a few examples, among many others, that made reading Toronto-based feminist writer and social activist Robyn Maynard’s *Policing Black Lives* a personal reminder about the precarious social status of Black Canadians. Undoubtedly, Black Canadians are judged from preconceived racist ideas, not from their actual, verifiable realities, as Ny’s and the Jamaican mother’s examples show. This marginalizing attitude mirrors Maynard’s message about Black devaluation in *Policing Black Lives*, the devaluing ideas used to initiate and fuel state violence.

Maynard’s main argument is that “marginalized social groups” experience harm as “state violence,” which is mediated through government policies, actions, or inactions (p. 6). This violence is operationalized not only through the criminal justice system but also through institutions like schools, child welfare, social services, and medical institutions (p. 7). Such historical state violence, Maynard argues, now exists in modified (but still oppressive and marginalizing) forms through police surveillance and brutality, criminalization of students, and racialization of welfare services, among others. Regardless of the contemporary forms it takes, this state violence continues to have the same dehumanizing and marginalizing effect it embodied during slavery and past racist segregation (Chapters 2 & 3). Even when Canada is regarded as an exemplary land of freedom and is contrasted with the United States (p. 3), Maynard argues that Canada’s racism (past and present) and participation in slavery and slave trade is now manifest in the inequality of “racial capitalism” (p. 57).

An important argument Maynard makes—which needs reiterating—is that when scholars write about anti-Black violence, the literature makes it appear as if the violence is only meted out on Black men (p. 13). Admittedly, Maynard

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<sup>1</sup> Personal correspondence.

acknowledges the disproportionate violence against heterosexual, cis-gendered Black men but urges that state violence against cis-gendered and transgendered Black women should be highlighted, as it tends to “go unseen and unchallenged” (p. 13). Chapter 4 presents six cases of five women who were brutalized or unfairly treated by the police, including Chevranna Abdi, a transgendered Somali woman who died in police custody (p. 123).

To show the spaces of state violence and to prove that there has been an unbroken link between past and present anti-Black racism, Maynard provides practical examples of racist institutional practices. She shows how child protection and welfare offices target single Black mothers and characterize them as bad mothers and welfare fraudsters (Chapter 5). This criminalizes their poverty without considering their history of marginalization and lack of access to economic advantages that White people have. She also argues that racially selective immigration policies criminalize Black people who have no immigration papers instead of helping them (Chapter 6). Police brutality, racial surveillance, and racialization of crime make it difficult for the law to protect Black Canadians (Chapter 3). From such examples, the author argues that Black Canadians are more often treated as social threats than as Canadian citizens to be protected by the law. In the school, racist treatment of Black students portrays them as potential criminals instead of children to be nurtured (Chapter 8). Practices such as handcuffing a first grader (p. 230) criminalizes children. Children therefore become rebellious and develop lack of interest in school, fueling the school-to-prison pipeline paradigm (Alexander, 2010; Erevelles, 2014; Maynard, 2017 ).

For Maynard, the above contemporary racial attitudes toward Black Canadians have their roots in slavery and the early years of the Canadian federation (Maynard, p. 26). Essentially, slavery and slave trade considered “Black people’s lives and bodies as inferior, usable, disposable chattel” that should be “contained” and “controlled” (p. 18). After slavery, free Black Canadians still faced racist oppression and marginalization in a “Jim Crow”-type segregation (pp. 31–40), so freedom became elusive to them. Demonization of Black men and women (pp. 42, 117) as hypersexualized and deviant, and of their children as behaviorally dangerous (and corrupting) to White children (p. 34) became an essentialized nature. These erroneous assumptions now fuel contemporary anti-Black racism (pp. 41–48).

The undesirability of Black people in Canada necessitated racist immigration policies such as buying advertisements in American newspapers and paying doctors to dissuade “freedom runners” from coming to Canada (p. 35). At the same time, immigration policies encouraged European and White American settlers by promising them free farmlands in Western Canada (p. 35). Yet, the officials spun the narrative as a benevolent attempt to help Black Canadians avoid Canada’s harsh winters. Black Canadians who defied these racist immigration restrictions and moved to Canada would later face labour and jobs discrimination and segregation in Canada (p. 35–38).

Maynard’s major theoretical contribution in *Policing Black Lives* is the linking of contemporary and historical socio-economic marginalization of Black Canadians, a continuous occupation of lower socio-economic status that has historical origins

(Mensah, 2010). In other words, this racial proletarianization is not accidental or a mere function of identity differential. It is a purposeful, institutionalized dehumanization and debasement. This theoretical angle is not only important to social justice scholars and social workers in anti-oppressive practices, but also to Canadians whose work brings them into regular contact with Black Canadians and communities. Since Canada's current state policies are informed by neoliberalism, which tends to dehistoricize people's social realities (Contenta, 2018) and blame socially disadvantaged people like Black Canadians, women, and indigenous people for historical factors beyond their control, Maynard offers social workers, social justice advocates, and Canadians generally, extensive historical and contemporary data through which to help in combating racism, sexism, and settler colonialism. Moreover, Maynard offers policy-makers and social justice workers valuable epistemic tools to enrich the epistemologies and pedagogies that inform their work. Paying attention to the scholarly and activist work of Black writers like Maynard, whose work is most of the time marginalized in mainstream discourses, is an important reminder from *Policing Black Lives*. As Maynard herself argues, valuable work of Black scholars is either treated with silence or goes unnoticed (p. 3); so *Policing Black Lives* calls on social justice workers to listen and work toward combatting anti-Black racism by giving the work of Black writers the attention it deserves in social justice discourses.

Since Black people have a history of resisting oppression politically and through activist scholarship, *Policing Black Lives* is a valuable addition in the Canadian context. Official anti-Black racism goes back centuries, so Maynard's book is a welcome reminder of how far Canadians still need to go. It also reiterates how important activist Black scholarship continues to be in fighting marginalization. Canadians, Maynard argues, tend to see anti-Blackness as a foreign (American) concept, yet the police killings in Canada exist and are treated with silence. Canadians can name Americans like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown who were killed by the police, but not Canadians like "Andrew Loku, Jermaine Carby or Quilem Registre" (p. 3), who were killed by the Canadian police. After reading *Policing Black Lives*, social justice workers and scholars would not have an excuse to remain silent about anti-Blackness which continues to go "unspoken" (p. 3). In the stories that opened this review, the teacher who prejudged Ny's math skills and the assessor who placed the Jamaican students in an ESL class because of their accent, would, possibly, rethink their attitude before acting, if they realized that their attitude is informed by a distorted or fabricated racist history, not by facts about the people they devalue.

While I have been largely positive about the book, I must add my concerns. Since *Policing Black Lives* is an activist work meant to highlight historical injustices and the role of the state in perpetuating them, the author has not presented a strong solution-focused agenda. A chapter or two dedicated exclusively to solutions meant to either reform the system or overhaul it would have made the book more helpful to social services workers and to social justice discourse. Knowing the problem is one thing, but devising a solution is not everyone's cup of tea. *How could the police police Black lives better?* While what happened in the past is necessary as a part of the epistemic reservoir to Canadians in anti-oppression discourse, a comprehensive

presentation of solution models would go a long way in helping Canadians (especially social justice advocates) positively refocus their perceptions and role in supporting an oppressive system. Two out of the eight chapters should have been dedicated to solutions instead of briefly mentioning authors like Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander in passing within the conclusion section. People are more amendable to *what is to be done* instead of focusing mostly on *what is wrong*.

Despite the above-mentioned concerns, which should be understood as my subjective criticism, I highly recommend the book because of the breadth of the information it presents and the contemporary relevance of its message. Because many Canadians, even teachers in school, are not informed (or are not allowed to talk) about the historical ills of the Canadian state and society, this book re-emphasizes to regular White people and policy-makers at all levels of government to humbly understand that Canada has a sordid history of racist marginalization and purposed exclusionary practices that affected (and continue to affect) racialized people like Black Canadians, Indigenous peoples, and other racialized minorities. For those who are familiar with Canada's racist past and involvement in slavery and slave trade, the book may not add something startling or new—my rationale being that racism (Canon, 1995) and slavery in Canada (Cooper, 2011; Trudel, 2013; Whitfield, 2016) have been well researched.

However, Maynard reminds the child welfare worker, the school teacher, the social worker, and the police officer that their actions in the workplace might act as a continuation of historical devaluation of Black Canadians. Social workers should always re-evaluate their work and put historical contexts into consideration. Helpful social justice workers operationalize socio-historical contexts in their practice. Here, Maynard offers a rich source of information through which social justice workers, especially social workers, can resist decontextualized social work practice in the neoliberal era that focuses on statistics and “facts” devoid of historical considerations. After all, Canadians have their share of shameful history.

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**Reviewer Note**

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