



## Book Review

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

Maynard, Robyn. (2017). Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 9781552669792 (paper) CDN\$25.00; ISBN 9781552669808 (epub) CDN\$24.99. 292 pages

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The release of *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017 occurred between the defunding of the African Canadian Legal Clinic (ACLC) following accusations of financial mismanagement, and the province of Ontario releasing its first anti-Black racism strategy. While the former presents a void to the vulnerable Black communities served by the ACLC, which Legal Aid Ontario has promised to furnish with similar services to those formerly provided by the ACLC, the latter is perhaps a sign of progress that Ontario plans to tackle anti-Blackness. African descended people in Canada are acutely aware, however, that promises to curtail anti-Blackness have been aplenty for decades, and yet poor outcomes for African Canadians persist. As the title suggests, in *Policing Black Lives* Robyn Maynard (2017) aims to elucidate the troubling past of African enslavement in Canada and the persistence of anti-Blackness in contemporary Canada (including ongoing governmental promises to curtail it).

Unsurprisingly, Maynard finds that the relationship between the Canadian state and African Canadians is tenuous, and that from African enslavement into the contemporary Canadian milieu, Blackness is mediated by gender and ability. For example, Maynard dedicates large portions of *Policing Black Lives* to discussing how Black women and transgender people are subject to state violence with impunity, are hypersexualized, and are presumed to be inadequate mothers. Indeed, Black women faced a particular form of racism and sexism during African enslavement, which articulated them as un-rape-

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able and merely a labour producing commodity (both through work and having children). Markedly aware of the significance of African enslavement to this historical narrative, it is here where Maynard, who is a Montreal-based writer and activist, begins her analysis of the persistence of anti-Blackness in Canada.

Drawing upon various disciplines and texts such as, *inter alia*, history, political sociology, gender studies, psychology, newspapers, academic journals, and personal experiences, Chapter 1 of *Policing Black Lives* begins with the transatlantic slave trade to argue that African descended people in Canada were marked as targets for various forms of exploitation and violence. Here, Maynard emphatically rejects the myth that Canada either did not have slavery, or that Black history in Canada began and ended with the underground railroad. Rather, Maynard provides a historical context for ongoing anti-Blackness that includes the use of segregated schools, racist *de jure* and *de facto* practices, and deliberate associations of Blackness with criminality by social elites. In so doing, Maynard problematizes works by scholars that present the subordinate social position of African Canadians ahistorically, thereby rejecting the idea that historical and ongoing poor outcomes for African Canadians are due to their inherent inferiority rather than the consequences of actions taken by a racist nation, which have subordinated African Canadians since their sojourn in the “new world.”

In Chapter 2, Maynard demonstrates how, through the desire for a skilled labour force, it was in the interest of the Canadian state to let negatively racialized immigrants into its borders. Maynard demonstrates that Canada had been “successful” in effectively hermetically sealing its borders from negatively racialized people up until 1961, exemplified by 95% of the country being classified as white at this time (p. 54). Maynard argues that although the vetting process for “desirable” immigrants remained racist after 1961, the need for Black and brown people for labour production once again became a prerequisite for economic growth. Maynard makes a significant contribution here by demonstrating that the begrudging acceptance of negatively racialized immigrants was borne not of a desire to become a so-called multicultural nation, but instead of a desire to serve the interests of the economy.

In Chapter 3, Maynard investigates anti-Blackness in the Canadian criminal justice system by demonstrating how crime itself has been racialized through pathologizing Blackness. Troubling police practices, such as police officers being trained to associate criminality with dreadlocks and Montreal police in the 1980s using images of young Black men as target practice in their shooting ranges in lieu of traditional police targets, are indeed striking (p. 9). Specifically, they demonstrate that racist police practices are not confined to the United States, but plague Canadian policing as well. Indeed, much of *Policing Black Lives* may be read as a challenge to this notion, and the aforementioned examples compel the reader to think critically about how deeply anti-Blackness is embedded in Canadian society. Throughout this

chapter, Maynard draws on works by American scholars such as Angela Y. Davis (2003) and Michelle Alexander (2010) to critique drug prohibition, the use of prisons, and the Canadian criminal justice system more broadly. This critique allows readers to better apprehend Maynard's subsequent discussion of police violence, and demonstrates her effective use of an intersectional framework.

In Chapter 4, Maynard forces the reader to confront preconceived notions about who is perceived as the quintessential Black "other." In perhaps one of the strongest chapters of the book, Maynard dedicates most of the space to a discussion of state law enforcement violence toward Black women on a select case-by-case basis, fulfilling a promise made earlier in the book to bring to the fore violence directed toward the bodies of Black transgender people and Black women. A notable case is that of Chevranna Abdi, a Black transgender woman who was murdered by police under suspicious circumstances. Maynard states, "Abdi was handcuffed and dragged, facedown, down seven flights of stairs by law enforcement" and by the time the police reached the lobby, Abdi had died (p. 124). Noting that Abdi was described by media sources as an "HIV-Positive transsexual," Maynard demonstrates how the media is complicit in the degradation and ultimate erasure of Black transgendered people (p. 124). Here, Maynard is successful in conveying to the reader the extent to which African Canadians are considered disposable by the nation.

In Chapter 5 of *Policing Black Lives*, Maynard broadens her scope to look at other punitive state practices that disproportionately target Black women. Black women, Maynard argues, are presumed prostitutes, drug mules, abusers of welfare, and inferior mothers who thus are subjected to ostensibly justified heightened surveillance and related punitive state practices and institutional violence. For example, Maynard informs the reader that the construction of Black women as "welfare frauds" was contemporaneous with the retrenchment of the welfare state (p. 132). While illuminating the strategic demonization of African Canadian women, Maynard also gestures toward significant contradictions in the ostensible pursuit of small government. While welfare is slashed, penal institutions and practices are expanded significantly, as aptly demonstrated by children, landlords, and neighbours being interviewed for the purposes of catching "welfare frauds." It is through this process that crime becomes racialized, and Black women become the scapegoat for poor government policy. Maynard's structuring of the book here is significant, demonstrating how institutional racism is facilitated and reinforced by biased citizenry. In doing so, Maynard implicitly urges the reader to consider the variety of ways in which everyday people are complicit in the ostracism of groups deemed an underclass.

Maynard's analysis of African migrants in Chapter 6 is a significant illustration of how citizenship acts as the basis for rigorous racial discrimination and strips migrants of due process. For example, Maynard demonstrates that migrants and refugees are often incarcerated in detention

centres, even in cases where they are not formally charged with a criminal offence. Maynard explains that in these cases of administrative detainment, only five percent of which involve the detained being viewed as potential security threats, there is no maximum length of immigration detention (pp. 165-168). In this sense, Maynard brings to the attention of the reader the often-ignored intersections between this unjust state-sanctioned practice and anti-Blackness (qua anti-Muslim sentiments) in Canada.

In the final two chapters of *Policing Black Lives*, Maynard addresses contemporary efforts to destroy the Black family and the miseducation of Black youth. Regarding the first, Maynard provides a historical context for organizations such as Children's Aid Service and the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children, detailing their explicit anti-Black practices. Indigenous children, too, are mentioned briefly, with similar attempts to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children manifesting itself in what is referred to as the "60s scoop" (p. 191). It is worth mentioning here that Maynard grapples with accurately and sufficiently representing Indigenous peoples throughout *Policing Black Lives*. Although the book is primarily an examination of anti-Blackness in Canada, one would be remiss to exclude a discussion of Indigenous peoples. Maynard quite effectively manages these tensions by incorporating and drawing attention to comparable information about poor outcomes for Indigenous peoples where relevant. She includes discussions of African enslavement and Indigenous genocide, over-incarceration of Indigenous peoples and African Canadians, over representation of African Canadians and Indigenous peoples in "state care," and racism in schools. Through ongoing acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples in Canada, Maynard combats the very erasure of Indigenous peoples she critiques throughout the book, while also conveying the striking parallels between the historical and ongoing plights of African Canadians and Indigenous peoples in Canada.

In a similar vein, Maynard demonstrates that the pathology attached to African descended children centuries ago has proved immutable by reminding us that Black youth in Toronto are "in care" at five times the rate of their percentage in the population, and that the same demographic constitutes more than 40% of the population in youth care while representing only eight percent of youth in Toronto (p. 192). Maynard contends that these statistics stem in part from the over-policing of Black families, the conflation of neglect and poverty, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the demonization of Black mothers as abusers of welfare and as inferior caregivers. Using various statistics (e.g., 70% of homeless youth come from state care; p. 204), Maynard demonstrates the bleak outcomes for youth in care and forces the reader to critically evaluate how effectively the Canadian state is delivering care to those people who are among its most vulnerable.

Maynard uses this discussion of African descended children in state care as a bridge to her final chapter, which examines anti-Blackness in schools. Here, she uses a discussion of Canada's segregated school system as the starting

point to discuss contemporary racism within schools. She outlines how the right of Black children to be presumed innocent has been eviscerated by innocence being “raced white” (p. 210), and she cites research suggesting that Black youth are more likely to be perceived as older and as much stronger than they are (p. 211). As Maynard explains, these tendencies intersect with informal streaming, low expectations for Black youth, erasure from historical texts, and disproportionate punishment of Black students – all of which contribute to what Maynard refers to as Black students being “pushed out” (p. 222).

In this chapter, too, Maynard consistently stays within the bounds of her remit, addressing how Black girls are discouraged from pursuing academic ventures in math and science and are otherwise uniquely disadvantaged. For example, Maynard maintains that where contributions of African descended people are acknowledged in Canadian schools, those recognized are disproportionately Black men, thereby leaving Black girls without gender-appropriate academic role models (p. 223). Moreover, Maynard informs the reader that Black girls face higher rates of sexual assault than white girls both inside and beyond the school context (p. 224). For all of these reasons, Maynard admonishes academics to further pursue how African Canadian girls are uniquely discriminated against in school settings (and beyond) and builds a strong case for doing so.

In reviewing this ambitious book, it is noteworthy that Maynard is forced to contend with limited race-based statistics due to the Canadian state’s reluctance to collect them. Indeed, this is an unfortunate and all too familiar barrier for scholars and activists researching anti-Blackness in Canada. Nonetheless, Maynard presents a cohesive piece of work that makes an important contribution to the Canadian literature through linking African enslavement to contemporary anti-Blackness with an emphasis on women and non-gender conforming people. What is more, Maynard provides an accessible, scholarly work that bridges the divide between works produced in academic institutions and the everyday efforts of activists nationwide. In other words, Maynard skilfully crafts a narrative that both contextualizes anti-Blackness within Canada and acts as a call for action.

*Policing Black Lives* provides readers with the necessary knowledge and tools to better apprehend how the project of European colonialism has been deployed and concealed over centuries in Canada. Maynard effectively conveys that the issues examined in *Policing Black Lives* ought not to be interpreted as merely a “Black problem,” but rather as a Canadian one. Indeed, for those of us interested and committed to anti-racism work and to social justice more broadly, this work implicitly poses some poignant questions to the reader. How successful has Canada truly been in evading racism within its borders? Who reaps the benefits of having African Canadian history erased? What do we owe to African Canadian people? How might we, as individuals, contribute to the eradication of anti-Black racism, and in what ways are we complicit? If we as Canadians have any sincere interest in living

up to the multicultural/anti-racist values purported to be at the core of Canadian identity, in *Policing Black Lives* Maynard provides a solid foundation from which to pursue the self-reflection and critical examination of the past and present socio-historical milieu that are required to meet this task.

### **References**

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