

**Policing Black Lives:
State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present
by Robyn Maynard
Halifax: Fernwood (2017) 292 pp.
*Reviewed by Chad T.***

The subtitle of this book, “state violence in Canada from slavery to the present” is an accurate thesis of this book. The author illustrates how Eurocolonial Canadians’ negative views of slaves (Black and brown people) has been maintained to present day through government policies, policing initiatives, media, and schools. The author also draws attention to the often overlooked and under-reported treatment of Black women in white society.

Robyn Maynard breaks the book down into eight chapters to deal with specific areas of discrimination against Black people. From chapter one, we gain a history of slavery and the establishing of Black people as property and not as equals; thus, devaluing their worth. Black lives are demonized as something to be feared, as stronger, less intelligent, hypersexual, and deviant. “One must be careful when around Blacks”. This early attitude towards Black people was (and still is) a global phenomenon starting in Europe and spreading with colonization of the world. The abolition of slavery only changed the methods used to devalue Black lives. Switching from slavery to segregation, “Canadians produce their own distinct language and rationalizations when propping up white supremacist ideology and practices” (p. 33). Racist policies covered all areas: education, immigration, employment, and housing. “African schools” often received less funding causing disparity between Blacks and whites. Of course, poor education fuels unemployment and trapped Blacks in low paying manual labour jobs, which leads to poor housing. The subsequent chapters explored these areas in greater detail.

Chapter 2 covers the creation of Black poverty and maintenance of segregation from white society. With poor education, Blacks are trapped in employment where work is hard, hours are long, and pay is less than white workers. The use of Black migrant workers creates negative situations for Black labourers and benefits to white employers. This is part of the immigration issue discussed with more detail in a later chapter. Black women, no matter education or experience, are channeled to be domestic

workers and given the title “mammy” while European domestic workers are called “nannies”. Similarly, working conditions varied as well. “Mammys” face long hours, no days off, and frequently were subjected to physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. This is an example of the “property” mentality of slavery carrying on, with little sympathy or protection even from police.

Law enforcement policies, arrests and violence against Blacks and specifically Black women is the focus of chapters three and four. Chapter 3 reports the heightened surveillance of Blacks by police, leading to more arrests and exposes Blacks to the justice system in prison where the devaluation of Black people continues. The police approach Black people as criminals and “up to something” where similar behaviour by whites goes unnoticed. Toronto police have used the policy of “carding” to collect information on Blacks creating a “known to police” database (p. 89).

These policies also pertain to Black teens, where small groups will be stopped under the suspicion of gang activity. Again, the author makes note of Black women receiving similar treatment. However, the media, when reporting at all on mistreatment, focus on Black men. Maynard argues that the war on drugs became a further tool to marginalize the Black population by labeling Black people as drug dealers and resulting in more police stops.

The courts and prisons are also tainted with the devaluation of Black lives. Often Black people are poorly represented in court and receive harsher penalties than whites with similar charges. Black people in prison are subjected to physical and verbal abuse from guards than non-Black prisoners. Perceptions that All Blacks are in “gangs” and stick together on the inside create a more violent approach to dealing with prisoners of colour. The book also shows the disproportionate numbers comparing the percentage of Blacks in prison compared to the percentage of Blacks in the total population. Black people are incarcerated at a much higher rate since they are subjected to heightened police surveillance. More criminals are caught in “random checks” – checks that white people see much less frequently. This is a case of ‘the harder you look, the more you see’.

Chapter four provides specific examples of Black women being threatened with verbal, physical, and sexual assault by police when being stopped “randomly” or having committed minor offences. The book establishes how Black women who speak up for themselves are perceived as hostile and argumentative, and require aggressive approaches by police. When out on the streets, Black women are perceived as prostitutes and

treated as criminals when no crime has been committed. Maynard frames these experiences as mysogynoir and shows the double discrimination faced by Black women, trans gender, and nonbinary individuals. Although Black women face discrimination at higher rates than Black men, it is Black men that capture all media attention and are the face of racism. As mentioned previously, Maynard argues that Black women are perceived as prostitutes and thanks to the war on drugs. Black women of Jamaican descent, when traveling, are presumed to be drug mules, receiving greater interrogation by customs officials and are subject to searches at a higher rate than white female travelers. Black women are assumed to be sexually deviant and have powers over men and hence receive frequent police surveillance in the form of carding. This assumption also results in less police action when Black women report sexual abuse or assaults. Maynard also points out that Black women are more likely to receive harsher police responses and are handcuffed or restrained more frequently; she writes: “state violence against Black women exists within a larger continuum of harms resulting from the intersecting oppression of gender, class, race, and often nationality” (p. 156). This statement summarizes the points of chapter 5.

The 6th chapter deals with immigration discrimination. Maynard discusses the government policy of “climatization”, which states that Canadian weather was too extreme for people from warmer climates and the racialized policies targeting seasonal migrant workers. She demonstrates discrimination in the form of years of service requirement for Black “mammys” before they can apply for citizenship, while European “nannies” had no such requirements. Black non-citizen criminals face long-term detainment awaiting deportation, after serving jail time, for small crimes like possession of drugs or shoplifting, whereas white non-citizens might only be fined and no deportation. Black families are torn apart by racialized immigration policies which cause children to be separated from parents. Deportees are often sent back to countries they do not know, with no family or other supports, putting them at risk for violence or persecution in the receiving country. The immigration department’s practices and policies have made Black people easily disposed of and sends a message of unwelcome.

The destruction of the Black families explained in chapter seven. The high surveillance of Blacks by police leads to increased run-ins and higher arrest rates and this alerts child welfare of potential negligence and unsafe homes. Children of colour are removed from their homes at higher rates than

white children living in similar conditions. Black children are most likely placed with white families when put in foster care further separating the children from their culture. Racism in school leads to Black children being “guided” to physical skill jobs and away from higher education, creating a cycle of poverty. Black youth become discouraged with school and drop out to avoid unpleasant and abusive conditions in the classroom. Black youth, not at school face, more “carding” stops by police and further involvement by child welfare. Single Black mothers have received the label of “welfare Queens” and are more likely to be investigated for welfare fraud than single white mothers and more racializing by government services.

The eighth and final chapter educates us on the miseducation of Black youth. Although Black youth were not subjected to the residential schools of Indigenous youth, they have not escaped devaluation of their lives. Early segregated schools received less funding than white schools and therefore less opportunities for a good education. Full integration has not done Black youths much better. No Black curriculum is offered. No in detail study of Canada’s history or slavery is taught. Few Black teachers are present in the classroom. Black youth are steered to manual labour jobs, and they are discouraged from attending university or college. All these practices continue to marginalize the Black student causing many to drop out. Again, we see Black students are more likely to not graduate high school than white students. This is yet another example of slavery views still impacting Black lives.

In conclusion, the author’s main point of how heightened surveillance of Black people by government services, police, and white society has caused the number of Black people to be involved in crime, dropped (or kicked) out of school, deported and children removed at a disproportionately higher number based on slavery perceptions that are maintained through present day. It is also acknowledged in the book that this is not only a Black issue; other races have similar experiences, but Black and Indigenous people are at the forefront.

Robyn Maynard shows clearly how attitudes towards non whites, developed from slavery are present today and continue. Many civil action groups are championing the cause of equal rights, but Canada has a long way to go to change the embedded racist views instilled in our laws, policies, and general beliefs. As a 55-year-old white male, I found the book informative and enlightening. I was unaware of how widespread the problem was and

how government policies have maintained the devaluation of Black lives. This book gives context to the racial slurs directed towards Black prisoners behind their backs and the derogatory comments made about transgender prisoners. If you are interested in social justice, racism, or a marginalized person of any race or gender, this book would be an interesting read for you.

Also, some bad editing has left a few places where a word or two is erroneously repeated making the sentence awkward to read. However, these are minor and in general I found the book increased my understanding and awareness of how systemic racism is occurring and maintains a state of violence towards Blacks in Canada.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Chad T. is a federally sentenced prisoner at Joyceville Minimum Security. He is currently serving a four-year sentence and is eligible for parole in February 2023 and he is looking forward to returning to his life.