

By being born.

National Indigenous History Month, June 2020



Our Stories



Indigenous people in Canada who have experienced racism shared the stories published here.

These stories are told anonymously to show that racist experiences have and can happen to any of us, simply because we were born Indigenous.

The Black Lives Matter movement has received much support from the Indigenous community in solidarity,

and it has helped shine the spotlight on racism in Canada, when it has mostly been hidden in the shadows.

At this time, many Indigenous people are being inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement to speak out and share their experiences with racism to help talk about our hurt and let it go, but also to show our non-Indigenous friends, allies, and acquaintances what racism looks like through our eyes.



The heart never knows the colour of the skin.
- Chief Dan George, Tsleil-Waututh Nation

When I was in Grade 1, in a small city called Swift Current, in Saskatchewan, my teacher had the whole class outside and was “teaching” us about First Nations and some of their customs. First Nations people were at that time known as “Indians”. She said: “You’re Indian, do a rain dance for us.” I said: “I don’t know how to do that.” She said: “Well you’re Indian, so just try.”

I again said I didn’t know how to do that and had never done or seen anyone do that before. She forced me to try by putting me in the middle of the circle of the entire class, and she told me to just dance around and act Indian. I was already upset and afraid at that point, so I did what I was told. I’ll never forget how humiliated I felt.

I am from English River First Nation in northern Saskatchewan. This is just one of many stories of racism that I have been subjected to in Canada.

- English River First Nation

I used to work for an Aboriginal cultural education/museum. We had all different ethnic backgrounds come and visit to get Indigenous perspectives on our history. For the most part it was a positive experience, but every so often it was negative.

One day in particular we had two walk-in visitors, an elderly Caucasian couple. I noticed right away the man was uneasy and his body language was off. Like he was upset coming in. His wife was so ‘matter-of-fact’ type of attitude.

Anyways, they go in and look at the galleries. She comes back in like 10-15 minutes and asked me to come in because she had some questions about an exhibit on display: Indian Residential School.

I ask her: “What can I do for you?” She says: “How can you say that Indian school was a

bad thing?” She goes on to talk about Roman Catholic and Christianity and how glorious the religion is. I told her that it was a place filled with abuse and hatred.

That all our people that attended were robbed of their language history, culture, family, and many more things. She didn’t experience it so she has no right to speak on our people’s truths. She just didn’t get it.

Her husband apologized and started hurrying her out the door with her waving her finger at me. I can see why he was anxious at the arrival, now. He was so embarrassed and angry at her.

I couldn’t help but feel personally attacked that someone would question the validity of my elders and knowledge keepers’ recounts of residential school experiences.

- Okanagan



*There was a feeling in him like waiting for
a punishment.*

- Richard Wagamese, Ojibwe

I remember for elementary school I went to the catchment school in town for all the kids from the reserve. The white kids were always calling us names. They called us girls squaws, they called us all wagon burners, and accused us of being incest.

Every one of us took a turn scrapping some kid at that school. The day my turn came, I was in Grade 3. Some lippy red-headed girl was calling us names and I was told by an older girl in our group that this one was mine.

I remember being so scared. She was a year older than me. I had never been in a fight before, but I also remember thinking I had to do my part - at 8 years old, and I didn't dare back down.

So, I walked up to her, across the blacktop, watching her ugly face contort as she hurled insults at me - and I slapped her across the face as hard as I could, then I ran away. Haha.

Seriously, though, I'll never forget that girl, her red hair, or the stunned look on her face after I slapped her.

That was the beginning of many fights, both literally and figuratively, and I don't expect that it will end anytime soon.

- Cree

As a young Indigenous child growing up with a non-Indigenous grandpa, we never talked about him being "white" and us being "Indian". Grandma would speak Nlaka'pamuxstin to him and he understood, I thought all families were like ours - blended.

I was shy and spent most of my time alone or with the few friends I had playing hopscotch, tetherball, jump rope or tag. One particular day I happened to be sitting in the classroom alone working and did not notice a few classmates had made their way back into the room. Immediately they started talking about me and making fun of me. Nine-year-old me braved up and asked them why they were doing that. One of the girls came right in my face and said: "You're an INDIAN!" She proceeded to laugh, her friends laughed and then yelled at me: "BLACKY!" I stood there shocked and mad. No one had ever talked to me that way.

I remember vividly feeling hurt and thinking I'm telling the teacher he will protect me and discipline them! The teacher walked in and asked what was going on. I proceeded to tell him, while the other kids just sat there; they did not even deny what happened and had smiles on their faces like it was no big deal. My teacher in turn played it off and told me I was being dramatic and that being called "Indian" and "blacky" was OK. No one was disciplined and it was there in Grade 4, I learned that men the same color as Grandpa were not like Grandpa. I learned that I was an "Indian" and having dark skin made me a target.

- Lytton First Nation

*How can there be any
reconciliation in a country where
this kind of inequality is
acceptable?*

- Chief Erwin Redsky, Shoal Lake

I would like to begin by saying, that stories of racism are deeply intimate and personal. That's the other side of sharing/reading stories and experiences of racism. They are deeply personal, often shared without meaningful reciprocity, and can even invite judgment from the listener. For some, stories like these are shared only in the context of a personal relationship, where trust, or at least familiarity, has been built. For others, there are even stories, of sharing stories, with the wrong people. I could share all kinds of stories, as they all layer on top of one another, and tell a story of structural violence. My first experiences with racism began in the elementary schoolyard where I was called all sorts of names including "wagon burner" and "Indian giver", among others while I was still young and innocent. Growing up in the City of Cowboys and Indians (Calgary), it was a pretty typical experience in an openly racist city.

When I was 13, I was at a party at my new boyfriend's house. I convinced my mom it would be ok for me to go and that I would be home by 9 pm. I was the only Native child there. I was making new friends (as I was the new girl in school), and having fun, until my boyfriend's brother's girlfriend, asked me, in front of everyone, if I was Native. When I replied yes, she said she could tell, because my skull was "so large". I was shocked and humiliated into a hot-faced silence and a nervous giggle. My new boyfriend took me aside and broke up with me 15 minutes later. It all blurs from there but I left pretty quickly when I realized everyone knew what he was about to do before I did. I sat in a park until it was late enough to avoid the questions from an early arrival home. There were rumors the

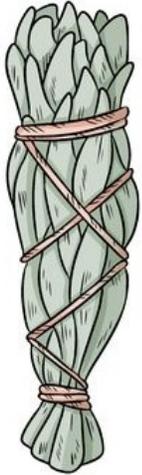
following Monday, and remaining school year, that I was a Lysol huffing Indian. Today, I understand deeply why the word "primitive" is even an insult and the role academics played in that. Discredited ideas of social Darwinism have been used to justify colonial expansion, imperialism, racism, eugenics, and social inequality. I cringe when I hear that word tossed about casually on social media to describe mainly black protestors, or really, just any human being or behavior, because feeling comfortable with that word is not a privilege that I have had in this life.

There was also the time when I was 14. I was picked up after a rave in a remote industrial area with my Native friends. We were stopped by cops and asked what we were doing out so late, if we had warrants, then asked for our names. The officers searched their database for warrants on us. We were not asked if we, a group of girls aged 14-16, were safe, or needed a ride. Bus service was closed for the night. One friend had a few unpaid train fines, and she was ordered into the vehicle, we all were. The police drove us further out, and dropped us off in a darker, more remote place, then laughed at us, as they told us to "have fun getting home", before taking our friend to jail. Our friend later told us she was strip-searched. I have had other experiences with the police and when I hear stories about the police from others, I believe them.



Learning about racialized policing and starlight tours in Saskatchewan was a triggering part of my university studies.

Then there was the time I was on my way home from my summer painting job with my dad when I was 16. We were on the train during rush hour. There was a group of Native people, pressing the emergency button on the platform and goofing off, having fun, swearing, and making jokes. Yes, they were even drunk. The train did not leave the stop after the crowd filed on. We just waited there, until the transit police arrived and ordered the Natives off the train. *Continued on page 5 ...*



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They were near one door, while I stood, down away, at another door, trying to blend in. I caught the eye of one of the transit cops, so he ordered me off the train too. I didn't move, I replied that I was on my way home from work and not with them. He demanded I get off the train. I replied: "Yeah, because we all know each

other, right?" He continued to order me off the train and I would not move, as he moved through the crowd towards me. My dad stepped forward, from the crowd, and said: "She's with me." It wasn't until the passengers around us spoke out on our behalf, that they left me alone.

I felt guilty for a long time for not wanting to be associated with "them drunken Natives."

There was also the day, in 2011, not so long ago, when I was on a bus in Vancouver with my children who have mixed ancestry. From my perspective, it should have been obvious that we were a family. A white woman from across the aisle, leaned forward to talk to the white lady who was not really that close to us, and who had been ignoring us and not engaging with us at all, and told her that she had beautiful children. The meddling lady was confused when the other lady said she was not, in fact, the mother of those toddler children on my lap. I replied to both that I supposed that I just look like a nanny to seemingly white children.

This story deserves to be told; all stories do. Even the waves of the sea tell a story that deserves to be read. The stories that really need to be told are those that shake the very soul of you. I prepare to be shaken.

- Lee Maracle, Sto:lo

I could tell a whole narrative of "shock and awe" tales and work through a timeline of stories that would bring us to the present day. I could tell you about being denied bathrooms while pregnant, or being followed while shopping. I can attest personally that some of the "friendliest provinces" in this country aren't so friendly, and yes, not even the Maritimes. I could outline stories revealing, time and again, instances of deeply embedded institutionalized racism with law enforcement, health care professionals, universities, and employers. I could tell you how poverty in urban contexts exacerbates racial trauma and what that might look like in an adolescent or play out in a family. I wonder if you can see through the glimpses I have shared, to know how much I hold back? Then there are the stories that I know of, that are not mine to tell.

I will tell you that educators did not expect anything from me in high school or think to ask me I was ok and safe before they judged me and streamlined me. I will tell you that racial trauma impacted my post-secondary education and I will tell you that universities have a role to play in supporting the successful transition of mature adult Indigenous learners. I will tell you that internalized racism affected my studies and that I somehow made it through my first degree without adequate support. I will tell you that intergenerational trauma and social context complex PTSD is very painful, for families and children, and that no child should have to live through all of that. I will tell you that culture and language are key social determinants of wellness that cut across all sectors and jurisdictions. I will tell you that elders and knowledge keepers have helped me and others like me, begin to heal and feel safe, in an often, unsafe world.

I would rather tell you how heavy my heart is, each time I hear about death, suicides, police brutality, and missing and murdered women. I would rather tell you how tired I am of being the only Indigenous person at school, work, or a party. I am tired of defending my values, beliefs, and experiences or being seen as an "advocate" and biased. *Continued on page 6 ...*



Truth is a seed planted deep. If you want to get it, you have to dig.

- Katherena Vermette, Métis

Continued from page 5 ... Indigenous rights are human rights and we should all be committed to addressing social injustices.

I would rather tell you about the importance of trauma-informed education and management practices, cultural safety, recruitment, hiring, leadership training, retention, and advancement and treated as a subject matter expert, with an appropriate position and salary to accompany that. Rather than tell you my deeply personal stories of racism, I would rather tell you about barriers to education and employment and why there is a shortage of qualified Indigenous applicants with specialized skillsets for certain jobs, especially science and empirical science, and how that impacts policy development, program delivery, program evaluation, or even meeting reconciliation objectives.

I could tell you a lot of things, but what I really want to know is, what will you do with my stories? How will you reciprocate?

- First Nations

The Government of Canada has implemented racist policies against Indigenous peoples for hundreds of years and the effects on my family have impacted generations.

Early in the foundations of colonized Canada civil servants were tasked with the responsibility to “get rid of the Indian problem” through aggressive assimilation policies. A primary focus for the federal government has always been to target First Nations children.

My grandmother was taken away from her mother at the age of 6 to attend Indian residential school. Next, were my mother and her siblings, who attended Indian day school. As a direct result of the experiences with these educational institutions, our mother tongue was silenced.

I chose the path of becoming a Federal Public Servant with the Department of Indigenous

Services Canada, because I believe that systemic injustices can be righted. We are at a turning point in our shared history to collectively make a stand against racism and I will use my voice because reconciliation begins with me.

- Cold Lake First Nation

I was 19, but probably looked 13, and was walking back from Blockbusters. It was midday and I was wearing normal teenage clothes: jeans with hoodie.

I was circled by a car driven by an older white male. Followed me for a block before finally pulling over and soliciting me for sex. I told him to fuck off and he sped away.

I don't know many white teenaged girls who have been solicited for sex.

- St'at'imc



I have reflected so much about the racism Indigenous people face in our country and the missing and murdered women, and I have spoken a great deal with my son this week about racism and the challenges people face simply because of the color of their skin.

I grew up in Saskatchewan and am a Métis person, so I don't share the same personal experience as many Indigenous people as I "look" different. Sometimes I wished I was darker so people would know I was Indigenous as people wouldn't look at my blond hair and blue eyes and ever think it, and I'm often met with looks of disbelief when I share this. However, I was raised with overt racism all around me, having lived near a reservation, and I witnessed it regularly. Even in my own family where my ancestry comes from, racism existed as many Métis people were not raised to be proud of who they were. I didn't really "fit in" among the nearby First Nations as I was a "mixed breed" I was told, and so I hid most of my life my identify as an Indigenous person.

This has been a long personal journey and I have ongoing struggles with feeling as though I don't fit in to either world, and don't deserve to share my identity as Indigenous, as I wasn't raised with the cultural teachings or as a proud Indigenous person. For anything you or other Indigenous peoples have faced, I am truly sorry. You don't need to share my story, as I understand I'm not someone who outwardly faced racism as an Indigenous person, but I did want to share it as that feels good.

- Métis

I am a member of the Fort Nelson First Nation, I am Cree, my experience with racism has always been more subtle than what we see in the States.

I was initially hired by CSIS in the 90s, I applied as an Intelligence officer, met all the requirements: university degree, polygraph, passed all the testing, had interviews with psychologists, and had my background checked in order to meet the strict standards for the top secret security clearance required.

I worked with CSIS for 10 years, I unfortunately was forced to quit and take on another job in the Public Service as some managers thought that CSIS HQ was making the region hire an Indigenous person. I could never shake this, and to this day am wondering if it was true or not.

Anyways one specific manager was out to get me and was in the process of firing me for what amounts to nothing, I was accused of bad driving, although I had never been in any accidents and had no traffic infractions.

It was only after I had left I realized that my position was filled by his son.

- Cree

Life, without the dignity of an intelligent being, is not worth having.

- Louis Riel, Métis



*We can **never** forget what has happened, but we cannot go back. Nor can we just sit beside the trail.*

- Chief Poundmaker, Cree

I was in Grade 6 attending Allen Matthews Elementary School. Throughout most of that school year I was tormented by a boy who yelled racial slurs: squaw, wagon burner, fu*king Indian, etc.

In the early spring, I finally had enough and with the help of two of my friends (both non-Indigenous), I beat him up during a gym class. I ended up getting the strap from the principal, but that boy NEVER bothered me again.

Interestingly enough in reverse racism I was often called 'candy apple Indian' during the early years I worked with Health Canada.

- Secwepemc

One night at the Indian bar a fight broke out on the dance floor. As happens in such instances, a few of us got kicked out. We were all First Nations girls in our early 20s.

We stood outside the bar, while the girl who started the fight inside yelled and screamed at the rest of us. We tried to ignore her, because she was clearly high on drugs and acting crazy, which was not unusual at that bar. She actually had a metal pipe hidden in her pant leg and she had pulled it out and was waving it around and threatening us with it. The bouncers had enough and kicked us all off the property, so we went across the street to use the pay phone at the 7-11 and try and get a ride home.

That girl followed us, still screaming and waving her pipe at us and threatening to kill us with it. It wasn't anything we hadn't heard outside that bar before. We stood with our backs against the store watching her and waiting for our ride, while she stood by the gas pumps. Eventually, we saw the lights and heard the sounds of police sirens. We

were relieved, because this chick was acting really crazy and was super messed up on drugs.

The police ripped into the parking lot and four cop cars surrounded us. The cops jumped out of their cruisers and quickly positioned themselves behind their open doors, guns drawn and pointed at all of us, screaming for us to put our hands up. We immediately complied, even though we were the victims. The girl, high on drugs, probably 90 lbs wet, did not comply and kept raving like a lunatic.

Some of the cops tackled her to the ground and handcuffed her, while the other cops kept us in their gun sights. Eventually, everything got sorted out and we were allowed to leave. For years we laughed about that crazy night.

Recently, I have begun to think more about that night and more and more about my interactions with police over a lifetime as a First Nations girl and woman. And, now, I don't laugh about that night, anymore.

- Cree



My Ma reported me missing. The VPD called my Ma and asked for my dental records, because they found a dead prostitute.

When my Ma reported me missing I was reported as a 19-year-old First Nation female just graduated from high school. The RCMP didn't want to use my smiling high school graduation photo for my missing poster.

The RCMP automatically assumed I was a prostitute because I was a young Indigenous woman. They believe the body of a young Indigenous woman was a prostitute. Horrible experience for my Ma.

Can you imagine all the other families that deal with MMIWG2S.

- St'at'imc

I had retired from policing and become a Loss Prevention Manager. One of the other managers kept bringing to my attention possible theft suspects who were Indigenous.

So I asked: "Ok, why are they suspicious? Is it their clothes?" No answer. "Is there something in their mannerisms?" No answer. "Are they avoiding eye contact? Are they refusing help?" No answer.

The answer was they were Indigenous, though she wouldn't say so, and she became visibly uncomfortable at where the lack of answers was leading. She stopped bringing these "suspects" to my attention after that.

These people were dressed nicely, were quite comfortable in the store (joking with each other etc), and were not engaged in any behaviour you see in shoplifters - at all. They were simply Indigenous.

This was the last time this manager brought Indigenous people to my attention simply for being Indigenous again. Hopefully, due to a change in optics.

FYI: Most of the thieves we dealt with, were not Indigenous, but of Euro descent.

- Tla O Qui Aht First Nation

My childhood I grew up in a single parent home with my mom, me, my brother, and sister. My mom was part of a slow pitch league and we were at the ballpark regularly.

One day we were at the ballpark and ended up playing at the park with other kids waiting for their parents to finish baseball. I vaguely remember we were arguing with a white kid. I don't remember what we were fighting over, it was a child's argument and not an argument we would start.



"Indians stink"
"You're dirty"
"Go back to the Rez"
"Your parents are just drunks"
"Squaws"

I remember being so hurt! I was scared, because my mom was in the outfield and couldn't hear what we were going through. This went on for the last half of the game.

Nothing ever happened to them.

- Secwepemc

It might seem gratuitous and dramatic, but the fact remains that, because of the existence and operation of the Indian Act - *birth is the first incidence of racism for Indigenous people in the land that we now call Canada.*

I have been treated differently, and not in a beneficial way – than other Canadians, simply **by being born** to my mother; and she has also been treated poorly, because of what government refers to as our “status” - and on it goes, back to the establishment of the Act, and arguably further.

A record of my birth as an Indian is made, I’m given my number, and the tenor of any communication that I have with anyone in Canada is already set. The government of this land says that I am an Indian first, and a citizen next, and a human being somewhere farther down the line.

Towards the end, I suppose, I become an individual person.

I can bore anyone who listens with sad and sordid tales of schoolyard bullying, patronizing conversations with academics, difficult encounters with law enforcement, or what have you. The specifics are not important – what is important is that the reason any indigenous person has had to endure these kinds of situations, is that learning that Canadians have been given, by their government – that Indians are different.

The status number we each carry, like the mark upon Cain’s brow – sequesters us to infertile land, quells our voices in political forums, divides our relations, limits our ability to sustain ourselves. I wear paint to engage in spiritual practices – and when we are done our work, we take the paint off. My status, my *Indianness*, the number I bear – is paint that never comes off. Not many Canadians will look through that mask, to see the person beyond.

We envision our society as a mosaic – and I would like to think that is possible. But a different status reduces our dynamic nature – we are no longer a plethora of cultures and traditions and histories and tongues; we are not Haida or Tsawwassen or Maliseet or Huron - we are all just Indians.

The colourful mosaic becomes grey monotony, and there is no reason to celebrate individuality any longer. That tone was set, even before I drew my very first breath. But it is my hope to see that diversity restored before I draw my last.

- Tsawwassen



The first memory I have of racism and violence would be Grade 4. I went to school in Surrey, after school I'd ride my bike to my friend Michelle's house. She had a brother.

On my way home, her brother and his friend Rory followed me. I tried to lose them. We ended up in the school parking lot where they blocked me in.

Rory pulled up beside me and tried to kiss me. I pushed him away and he said: "I know you like me." I pushed him off his bike and told him not a chance: "You're so ugly, don't touch me."

He came after me again and I pushed him again. He got up and spit in my face and said: "You stupid spic!" I wiped my face and pushed him again, got on my bike and took off. When I was riding away I yelled: "You dumb suma! I'm not a spic, I'm Okanagan and Shuswap!!!"

To this day I cringe and gag a little when someone spits around me.

- Okanagan, Secwepemc

May the stars carry your sadness away, may the flowers fill your heart with beauty, may hope forever wipe away your tears, and above all, may silence make you strong.

- Chief Dan George,
Tsleil-Waututh Nation



All photos were taken by Mikelle Sasakamoose

Our stories, as told by us

By Being Born is a project that was initiated by the Pacific Aboriginal Network (PAN) of Indigenous federal employees in the Pacific Region. The project extended beyond the federal public service, however, as members shared the call for stories with their families, friends, and communities.

This project would not be possible without those who shared their stories of oppression, discrimination, and racism. To everyone who shared, we hold our hands up to you and thank you.

This collection of Indigenous experiences with racism was curated by Mikelle Sasakamoose in solidarity, in friendship, and in respect.