

GLOBE AND MAIL: Opinion

Indigenous and Black communities have a shared past of injustice. They deserve a shared future of justice

Solidarity in the face of systemic racism and police violence is more than just symbolic; it's the latest stage in a common struggle against colonialism. What will the next stages be?

Joy SpearChief-Morris

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Joy SpearChief-Morris's mother is a Blackfoot woman from the Kainai Nation in Southern Alberta; her father is a Black man from California.

Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail

Joy SpearChief-Morris is an Indigenous-Black writer, athlete and advocate. She has a master's degree in political science with transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction from Western University and is currently training to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics.

Last summer, when the shock of racial injustice was brought to the world's attention, I found my own unique perspective in high demand.

As someone of mixed race, I am used to being asked to speak on panels about the experiences of being Black and Indigenous in Canada. This time, I felt more of a responsibility to be a part of these conversations, drafting statements of solidarity and presenting a united front of Black and Indigenous people.

Sometimes, I felt as though I were being positioned as a spokesperson for this particular biracial identity, which could be uncomfortable, because I really only can speak for myself.

I also had my own questions, as I felt that there was something missing throughout these particular conversations.

I grew up where being Black or Indigenous was the minority. Being Black and Indigenous, even more so. I have grappled with how to be a part of both of my cultures throughout most of life.

To be Black and Indigenous is to be part of a beautiful relationship, but one not without complexity.

It is sometimes tainted by a history of racism that has made us believe that we must fight for power between ourselves because there isn't enough to go around.

The discussions of the past year have made me reflect on the issue more, and I now find myself wondering: How do we push past these underlying tensions of colonial harm and positively redefine our relationships with each other -- and with Canada?



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Last summer, the weeks following George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis brought Black and Indigenous people together in protest: At top, Patience Evbagharu hugs a supporter outside Toronto Police headquarters on May 30, and at bottom, Mahlikah Awe:ri joins a Juneteenth protest in support of Black Lives Matter.

Photos: Carlos Osorio/Reuters; Nathan Denette/The Canadian Press

Last June, I attended a Black Lives Matter protest in London, Ont., that saw nearly 10,000 supporters of all ages, abilities and colour. I watched as people took a knee and vowed to change, and to recognize and stand up for racial justice. I saw solidarity from all people, including the Indigenous community. As people marched, I could see the flag of the Mohawk Warrior Society amongst the crowds.

The protest intersected with stories of police brutality toward Indigenous peoples. Last March, Chief Allan Adam of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation in northern Alberta was assaulted by an RCMP officer; a few months after that, Chantel Moore was shot dead by police in New Brunswick during what was supposed to be a wellness check. These stories, and all the others told since or told again, are evidence of a truth that many Canadians choose to ignore: that racism happens in Canada, too.

George Floyd's story was not a new one to me. Neither was Chief Adam's story. Rather, this is the continuing story of what happens to people of colour, and disproportionately Black and Indigenous people, when they are seen as a threat or even a liability in Canada. Indeed, at the same time as Mr. Floyd's killer was facing trial for murder charges in Minneapolis, a police officer in the same city shot Daunte Wright to death during a traffic stop – the officer stopped him for having an expired registration and an air freshener hanging from the car's rearview mirror in violation of state law. One year after Mr. Floyd's murder, we are still seeing the ramifications of the broken promises and gestures of solidarity to Black Lives Matter.

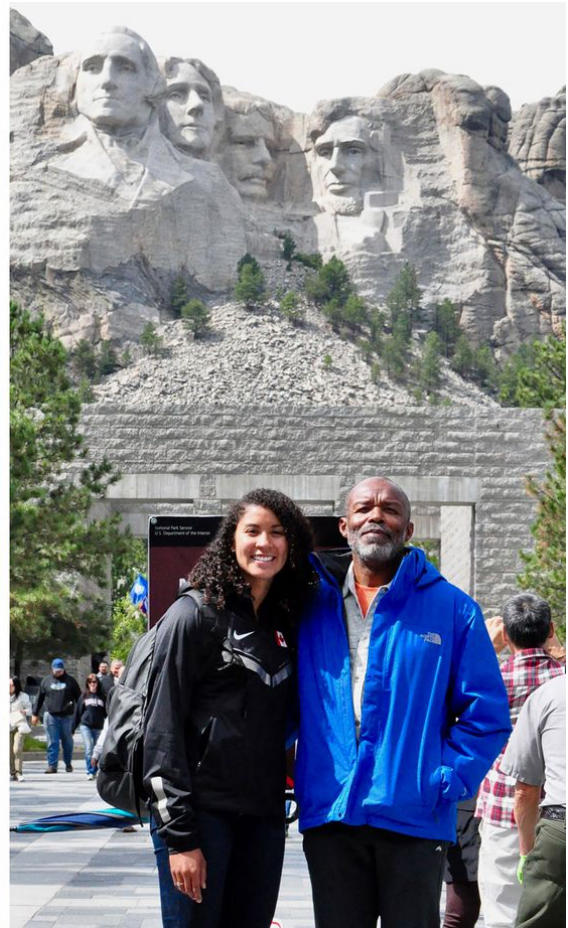
The Canadian media has presented images like that of the Mohawk Warrior Flag at George Floyd protests as a symbol of Indigenous and Black solidarity across Canada. But this image is too simplistic. When we take Indigenous and Black solidarity for granted, we diminish the particularities of Indigenous lives versus Black lives, which are sometimes quite different, and we diminish the power and significance of the gesture of solidarity.

I couldn't help but feel as if Canadians did not quite understand the sometimes difficult history and complexity of the relationship – and the lessons they needed to learn from it.

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*At top, a young Joy SpearChief-Morris poses with her parents and brother in 1994 in Lethbridge, Alta., where she grew up; at bottom, she and her parents take trips to Parliament Hill in 2018 and Mount Rushmore in 2014.
Courtesy of Joy Spearchief-Morris*

My father is an African-American man from California. He met my mother, a Blackfoot woman from the Kainai Blood Tribe of Southern Alberta, in San Francisco, where she was attending graduate school, and the two of them moved to Lethbridge, Alta., where my brother and I grew up. Because of the close connection to my mom's family and community, my brother and I were raised in many traditional Blackfoot ways by my mom and my grandmother. My connections to Black culture and community existed primarily through my dad and my dad's family, who live in the United States.

When I was growing up, it often felt like it was “us or them” – Black people or Indigenous people – when it came to identity and community belonging, or social and political justice. You could be Black or Indigenous, but not both.

Here in Canada, Indigenous and Black communities are effectively told that there is only “one seat at the table,” as El Jones, a community activist based out of Halifax, says. This oppositional relationship has created a tension among us – fomenting the idea that we have to compete with each other when it comes to having Canadians recognize our rights, our abilities, and the importance of the issues we care about and fight for. This can manifest in feeling like supporting Black issues in Canada means that Indigenous people are obliged to put aside longstanding demands, or that Black people might feel dishonoured if Indigenous people advocate for their own causes instead of those of others.

This unspoken tension exists between Indigenous and Black activism, whether people want to acknowledge it or not. I felt it myself, standing amid the vast crowd of supporters at the Black Lives Matter protest at the height of the pandemic. In contrast, another protest in London in support of Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs’ land claim in March, 2020 – before the pandemic even started – had only 200 people.

With the rise of [the broad term “BIPOC,”](#) I can feel this tension growing even more, not disappearing. The simplistic acronym groups Black, Indigenous, and other People Of Colour into a single and exclusionary category, disadvantaging and separating us from those who identify as white or Caucasian. Canadians may treasure the symbol of a multicultural mosaic that makes up the fabric of Canada, but it is harder to acknowledge that it is a facade.

The fact that widespread solidarity with Black Lives Matter has yet to mirror the same levels of support for Indigenous issues across Canada can be a source of resentment, and this tension could potentially drive our communities apart if we let it – even though it is not the whole truth of Black and Indigenous relationships.



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*Ms. SpearChief-Morris wears regalia at the Kainai Indian Days in 1998.
Courtesy of Joy SpearChief-Morris*

On a day-to-day, local level, not a lot of Indigenous and Black people have contact with each other in their everyday lives, and large-scale movements are harder to organize across Canada's huge expanse.

"Indigenous people on reserves have been fairly isolated politically and geographically, and so they have little daily interaction with Black people," said Murray Sinclair, a former Canadian senator and former chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This is changing, however: In urban cities, "the young politically and socially active Indigenous people and Black youth are more likely to be involved with each other in one way or another," Mr. Sinclair added. Yet a history of non-engagement makes it feel like "every time [Black and Indigenous solidarity] happens, it's like it's the first time," says Andray Domise, a community activist and writer.

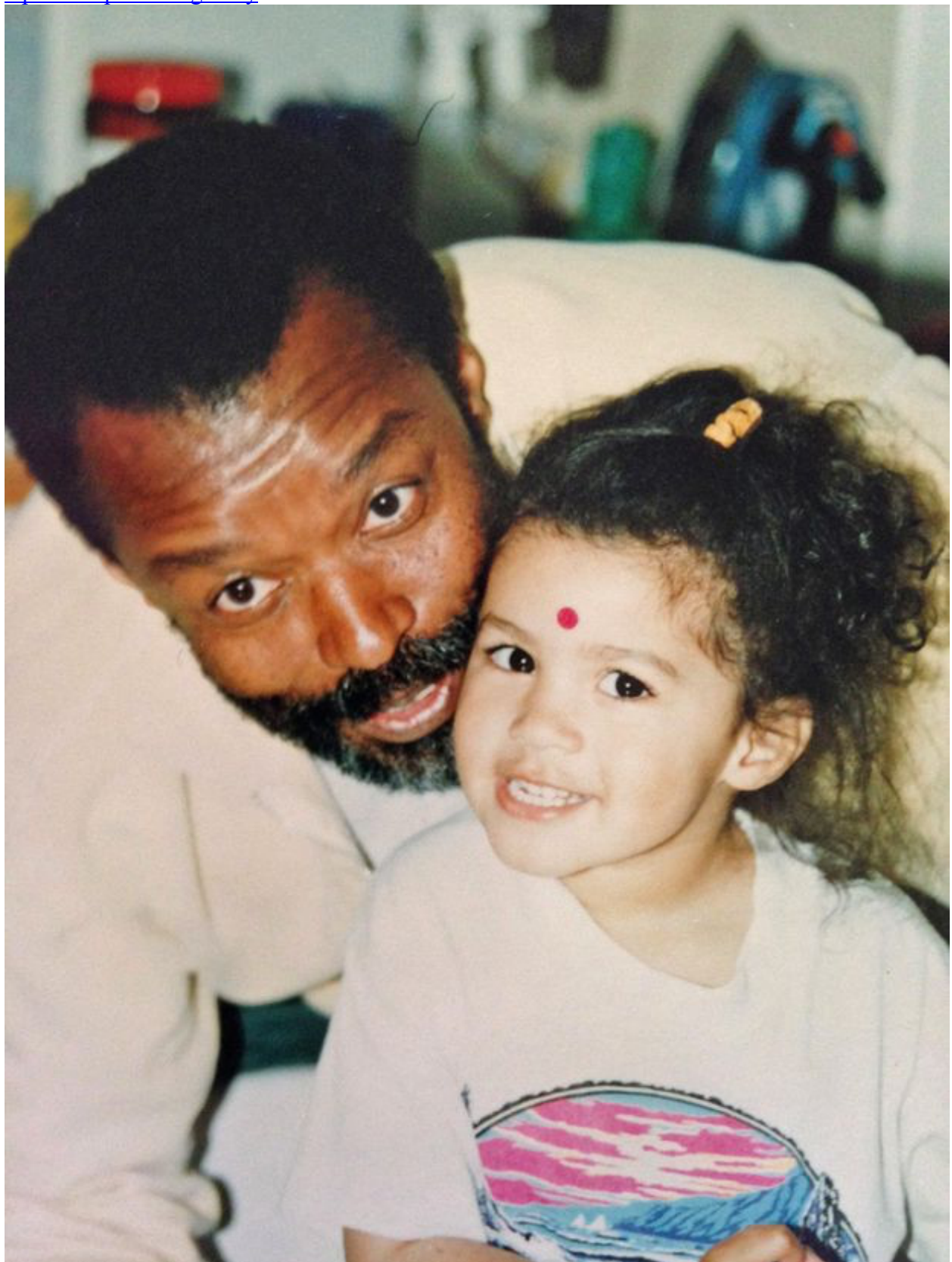
Today's solidarity, then, gathers strength in part from our long, interwoven histories. When Europeans arrived on Indigenous lands, they brought with them the African slave trade. African slaves and Indigenous nations formed connections through these early relationships. The Black Jamaican Maroons' brief settlement in the Maritimes in the late 1700s linked Black and Indigenous communities hundreds of years ago. Slavery in Canada is not limited to Black slavery either. "Indigenous people were enslaved as far back as in the 1500s by North American traders and Catholic missionaries," Mr. Sinclair said. "... All of that stuff was hidden from history and is now being uncovered."

We can also find solidarity in how our stories are taught, twisted and omitted, and how we have kept our stories alive.

In Canada, our schools seem content to teach Black history in Canada through the slave trade and a heroic lens on our country's contribution to the Underground Railroad, as well as touching on Viola Desmond and the civil rights movement, and leave it at that. Indigenous history never appears to intersect much with this history. But our connections extend beyond these stories, and the legacies of these histories have left lasting effects on our communities.

Unequal education, for instance, existed in the form of segregated schools for Black children in Canada until the 1970s, while the last Indian Residential Schools for Indigenous children didn't finally close until 1996. These institutions did very similar work in creating a racial hierarchy in Canada. Not only were these children taught to think of themselves as inferior to white people, but they were taught to look down on other ethnicities as well. Thus, their relationship to each other was defined by seeing each other as less than.

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Ms. SpearChief-Morris gleaned some details from her father about what it was like to be one of the few Black men in Lethbridge in the 1980s.

Courtesy of Joy SpearChief-Morris

My dad felt the effects of this himself. He is a man of few words, so it is often difficult to learn the details of his life as a newcomer to Canada. More often than not, he just said it was “different” back then.

I always remember my dad telling us how he was regularly confused with his neighbour one street over because they were two of the only Black men in Lethbridge in the 1980s. Or how we as a family could be walking in the mall when my dad would start exchanging small talk with another Black man, and how, when my brother and I asked how they knew each other, he would reply that he was “just another Black man!” These stories always carried with them the sense of my dad’s humour, making us laugh at the apparent absurdities in them.

As I got older, though, and as I delved deeper, he told me there was no one way he felt welcomed or unwelcome in our small majority-white town. He simply got a mixed reception – one that he says depended on the lived experiences and biases of race held by the people he encountered. And these biases were frequently the result of a racist educational system.

He found that the perception of him within the Indigenous community changed when it became known that he was married to an Indigenous woman. The manner in which he was treated grew cooler sometimes, but not every time. He also found a welcome in the community through a few respected Elders and members of my mom’s family. He was introduced to a number of elements of Blackfoot culture; he was even adopted and given a Blackfoot name. My dad blames the colder receptions on learned racism that were taught through years of a colonial education, one that continues to dictate the institutions governing the lives of Indigenous and Black people in Canada today.

Mr. Sinclair acknowledges that residential schools caused Indigenous children to be “raised in a racist environment, and that means not only racism towards them ... but they were also raised to believe in racial stereotyping against Black people.” He added: “There are significant elements within the Indigenous community who have not yet been able to overcome that. That has led to misunderstandings and sometimes callous sorts of thinking of Black people.”

Nevertheless, Indigenous and Black communities in Canada forged bonds over a shared struggle to be seen among white majorities as deserving of the same rights and opportunities in the face of over-representation in the criminal justice and child welfare systems. And these shared struggles have also been sources of community strength, with political movements feeding off each other.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the civil-rights movement inspired the Red Power Movement in the U.S., which drew on similar tactics to highlight inequality, including a high-profile occupation of Alcatraz Prison. The political and civil activism by Indigenous people in Canada in the second half of the 20th century was inspired by these movements, too. The Constitution Express was a

massive grassroots movement of Indigenous people across Canada travelling to Ottawa to protest Indigenous rights in the repatriation of the Constitution in 1980 and 1981. This is the solidarity we are seeing reflected again now after Mr. Floyd's death.

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People paint a Black Lives Matter mural on a boarded-up shopfront in Montreal last June.

Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press

The past and present allyship signals a strong bond for future Black and Indigenous activism in Canada. Shawn Johnston and Amy Smoke, organizers of O:se Kenhionhata:tie (Land Back Camp) in Kitchener, Ont., acknowledge that their movement could not have existed without the support of the Black community: “Indigenous sovereignty and Black liberation are bound together, our histories and rights and freedoms are intertwined here on these lands [Turtle Island],” Ms. Smoke says.

And while many Black activists see themselves as existing outside the settler concept owing to enslavement and forced migration, “we are still guests on this land,” Ms. Jones says. “If I am fighting our struggle on Indigenous territories, then I must also understand and be in solidarity with Indigenous struggles against colonization. To imagine our freedom without first recognizing and fighting for Indigenous sovereignty is impossible. How could we be free while denying Indigenous self-determination?”

Acknowledging the extent to which settler-colonialism has affected Black and Indigenous communities is the first step toward a more just and shared future.

Perhaps the reckoning brought forth by Mr. Floyd's death was the first step in acknowledging the extent to which settler-colonialism has affected Black and Indigenous communities; it could be a springboard for a more just and shared future. For former justice minister and current Vancouver Granville MP Jody Wilson-Raybould, the tensions sown by colonialism are becoming "less pronounced" through recent activism. "The awareness [of each other's lived experiences] is really good," she says, adding that this solidarity "goes beyond Black and Indigenous communities – it is [recognizing that] some segments of the society do suffer more than others."

Yet this recognition can only be one part of the solution. We must also address the ways that Canada's institutions affect our beliefs, prejudices and relationships with each other, and do the work of dismantling them. Trust needs to be rebuilt with communities of colour, whether it be through our public educational systems – the "vessel of colonialism," as Mr. Sinclair puts it – or our medical and justice systems. "Every institution in society," he says, "needs to be considered anew."

Addressing our institutional racism is part of what politicians are often quick to proclaim as the solution to the process of "reconciliation." That word in Canada tends to have a very specific meaning involving the recognition of and healing from the history of harm against Indigenous people, particularly in relation to Indian Residential Schools – but it is much more complex than that. For Ms. Jones, the government's definition of reconciliation is still an institutional one, and as such, it is a "surface practice" that "isn't about actually rethinking power or decolonization." Just as the government has promised to end boil-water advisories in the spirit of "reconciliation" but has failed to follow through, Ms. Jones worries that a similar phenomenon will occur on the heels of "meaningless solidarity statements about Black Lives Matter."

We need to adjust our understanding of reconciliation much in the same ways we are adjusting our internal and external education systems, without, as Ms. Jones refers to it, the impositions of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity. This may involve re-examining how we understand our relationships to one another in both personal and political spheres.



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Protesters block road access to Vancouver's port in February of last year in solidarity with Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs.

Jonathan Hayward/The Canadian Press

Where we go and what we do with this new education is the question we will all need to answer going forward. As racial injustices continue to come to light and as we as a country continue on with the process of reconciliation, we will all need to decide how we will fit into this reformed society. A new era of activism is upon us and we may feel pressure to make our allegiances known loud and clear. But not every act of solidarity must exist on the front lines, either. “Not everyone is an activist,” Mr. Domise says.

It’s a reassuring idea, to me. I’ve found myself intimidated by the widespread notion that fighting against social injustice means marching in protests and loudly denouncing it everywhere in your life. But by living and understanding our shared history, we can also pursue justice in other ways: through academia, through media and art, through meaningful conversations with our friends and families, but most importantly, by speaking up with the truth when it matters most.

While I have never felt deeply compelled to join marches and carry picket signs, I have a growing, clear-eyed understanding of the tension that’s been inflicted on our communities – one that has tried to teach us that we are less than, and less than each other – and from that, an understanding of how to build relationships between communities. That doesn’t make me any less of an advocate. Just as my parents never settled for anyone’s judgments or mistreatments toward them or others, finding ways to share our experiences and stand up for the truth when it matters can make deeper impacts on those around us – sometimes more than we realize.



In this past year, whether it be from the global pandemic or the uprising in social and racial justice, the relationships we have with one another are becoming increasingly more important. What bonds us together is more important than what sets us apart. This solidarity has existed between Black and Indigenous communities since we first became connected with one another, and it finds strength when we have been willing to learn from each other’s experiences. The question will be if the rest of the world is ready to learn these lessons as well.

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