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Colonial Aphasia and the Circuits of Whiteness in Inclusive and Anti-Racist Youth Social Policy

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This article maps how inclusive discourses aimed at addressing systemic racism and anti-Black racism circulate and operate within youth social policy in Ontario, Canada. Numerous reports and programmes attempt to understand systemic racism and propose new approaches to youth work in addressing youth violence, underemployment, underachievement, etc. This article demonstrates how efforts to counter state violence and systemic racism are pulled into the economic and political framework of racial neoliberal and colonial standards. Employing a Foucauldian genealogy of policy discourses (1992–2019) and semi-structured interviews with youth sector members, it traces how anti-racism discourses are altered by a colonial aphasia (Stoler, 2016) that in turn supports circuits of Whiteness, which continue to target, measure, train, and surveil racialised youth, limiting alternative ways of being.

Keywords: Youth social policy, anti-racism policy, anti-black racism, colonial aphasia, Canada.

Introduction

This article maps how inclusive discourses aimed at addressing systemic racism and anti-Black racism have circulated and operated within the province of Ontario's youth social policy and youth work over the last thirty years. Numerous reports, policies, and programmes have been rolled out by the state in attempts to understand and address systemic racism, Black youth violence, underemployment, and underachievement (Lewis, 1992; McMurtry and Curling, 2008; Ministry of Child and Youth Services, 2012a; Ministry of Child and Youth Services, 2013; Government of Ontario, 2017a). Progressive strategies that appear to be well-intended often risk reinforcing existing dominant logics of Western liberalism (Brown, 1995; Foucault, 2007; Ahmed, 2012; Coulthard, 2014). A deep-seated relationship exists between liberalism, modernity, and colonial rationalities, which has privileged Whiteness while denigrating Blackness and Indigeneity (Césaire, 2000; Stoler, 2016; Jackson, 2020; Mills, 2021). This article demonstrates how efforts to counter state violence and systemic racism are pulled into the economic and political framework of racial neoliberal and colonial standards. Foucauldian governmentality and critical race theory perspectives inform a genealogical mapping of central reports and policy discourses from 1992–2019 and it was bolstered by semi-structured interviews from fourteen key youth sector members. It traces how anti-racism discourses are altered by a colonial aphasia (Stoler, 2016) that in turn supports *circuits of Whiteness*, which continue to target, measure, train, and surveil racialised youth and limit other ways of being.

This article leans on Stoler's (2011, 2016) powerful concept of colonial aphasia that she identifies as forms of dissonance, enacted through the obstruction of colonial knowledges and the attachment to other concepts. Stoler argues:

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The term “colonial aphasia” is invoked to supplant the notions of “amnesia” or “forgetting,” to focus rather on three features: an occlusion of knowledge, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things, and a difficulty comprehending the enduring relevancy of what has already been spoken (2011: 125).

Stoler outlines three features of colonial aphasia: the obstructing of knowledge, the inability to speak and name things, and the challenges in comprehending what was already expressed. Colonial aphasia functions as an important tool in the maintenance of *circuits of Whiteness* that stifle the remembering and comprehending of a colonial past and present; it also contributes to the obstruction and co-option of subjugated knowledges inserted during sparks of unrest, violence, and resistance.

Circuits of Whiteness denotes how discourses communicate between paths and travel in a circular and closed system of knowledge and understanding. Whiteness here refers to the social and political construction of a white racialised ideal connected to the buttressing of colonial rationalities (Hunter *et al.*, 2010; Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2021). My findings show five main features of the youth policy circuit: 1) White panic around Black resistance and violence; 2) reports/investigations in relation to the disruptions; 3) new programme directives and temporary funding; 4) erasures often through electoral change; and 5) the setting in of colonial aphasia.

Anderson’s (2017) concept of white rage, a form of racial violence hidden in institutional practices designed to impede Black and other oppressed racial groups’ advancement, is useful in understanding the persistence of the circuits of Whiteness. Anderson argues that white rage can be found in the streets but more importantly is found in court rooms, in legislation, and in social policy. White rage and colonial aphasia enable the circuits of Whiteness to produce and respond to emerging discourses; while radical breakthroughs are noted, Black youth, families, and communities continue to bear the fallout of anti-Black racism.

The occlusion of Western liberalism’s colonial and racial foundations results in the uncritical adoption of rights and freedom-based discourses in society (Sokhi-Bulley, 2016; Samson, 2020), resulting in substantial dissonance within youth policy-making and the field of youth work. In response to liberalism’s dominance, Walcott (2021) and Mills (2021) point to the value of promoting the Black radical imagination for envisioning alternative worlds beyond the limits of liberal Whiteness. Despite ongoing struggles to propel new forms of living and being, there are persistent efforts to stifle the Black imagination and injure Black freedom. Utilising governmentality and critical race approaches to track the rise and fall of systemic racism and anti-Black racism in Ontario and Toronto and its impact specifically on the field of youth work, I hope to contribute to the counter history project (Rockhill, 2020).

Theoretical framing

This project understands Ontario’s youth social policy and the youth work sector to be influenced by both colonial and neoliberal governmentality logics. Governmentality refers to the broad form of practices that influence the conduct of the population; it does not utilise coercion as a means of conformity, rather it encourages freedom, which is a critical characteristic of capitalist societies (Foucault, 2007). The art of government intentionally aligns the conditions of freedom to enable acceptable choices (Burchell, 1991). Colonial governmentality as a political rationality includes the imperial and racial logics that promotes the dominance of Western universality and Whiteness (Scott, 1995). Neoliberal governmentality promotes an entrepreneurial and rational individual in support of the expansion of liberal capitalism (Lemke, 2011; Gane, 2012). Within a governmentality framework, inclusionary and exclusionary technologies of power remain part of the same logics; colonial and neoliberal governmental power works simultaneously through both invitations to participate and discipline.

Critical race theory utilises an intersectional approach that considers race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability in its examination of the systems of power that disadvantage people of colour (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado *et al.*, 2017). Critical race, Indigenous, and governmentality scholars argue that colonialism, European liberalism, and modernist rationalities are inextricably part of the same logics that promoted the rights of the universal man (Razack, 2002; Melamed, 2011; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Coulthard, 2014; Dhillon, 2017), while simultaneously relegating Blackness and Indigeneity to the category of non-human or sub-human (Coulthard, 2014; Jackson, 2020; Mills, 2021; Walcott, 2021). The neoliberal shift of the state from imperial to capitalist and self-regulatory logics inextricably remains tied to ongoing colonial power.

Settler colonialism is the specific form of colonial violence and state formation in countries like Canada that promote the ongoing genocide and dispossession of Indigenous people and includes the destructive practices of slavery that commodified Black people (Morgensen, 2011). These genocidal policies, in relation to Indigenous nations and Black peoples, persist as a governing approach that continues to target communities of colour (Thobani, 2007; Morgensen, 2011; Coulthard, 2014; Diverlus *et al.*, 2020). The subjection of Indigenous communities, especially children and women, to bare life and death persists through the traumatic effects of the residential schools and the sixties scoop, the growing murders of Indigenous women that have received little and delayed focus, and the denial of basic necessities such as clean drinking water (Coulthard, 2014; Razack, 2015; Sucharov, 2022). Similarly, communities of colour, especially the Black community, continue to experience exclusions and systemic violence under settler colonialism. Scholars have noted how a carceral industry of over-policing and a school to prison pipeline over-determine the limited life opportunities of Black youth (Alexander, 2010; James, 2012; Davis, 2017; Maynard, 2017; Saberi, 2017). This article acknowledges the limits on freedom to Indigenous and other groups within a settler colonial landscape but focuses predominantly on the governing of Black youth subjects.

Methodology

A genealogical approach aims to unravel the conditions of how particular narratives come into being, counter institutionalised knowledges, and bring subjugated knowledges to the surface (Foucault, 1971; Carabine, 2001). A Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was employed in the examination of racialised youth related social policy, key reports, and documents (1992–2019) to map discourses and practices over time. An FDA focuses on how discourses are ordered and maps the ‘repetition, recurrence or even disappearance in relation to the era’ (Tamboukou, 1999: 214). Ontario’s *Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development* (MCYS, 2012a), *Ontario Youth Action Plan* (MCYS, 2012b), *Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario’s Youth Succeed* (MCYS, 2013) are some of the official documents that govern youth work and youth policy decisions in Ontario and are mapped as part of the analysis.¹ However, for the purposes of understanding how inclusion and anti-racism circulates in Ontario youth policy, it requires an examination of the events and discourses that surround the *Ontario Race Relations Report* (Lewis, 1992), *Roots of Youth Violence Report* (McMurtry and Curling, 2008), *A Better Way Forward: Ontario’s 3-year Anti-Racism Strategy* (Government of Ontario, 2017a); *Ontario’s Anti-Black Racism Strategy* (Government of Ontario, 2017b) and Ontario’s *Black Youth Action Plan* (BYAP) (MCYS, 2017). These texts are deemed quintessential to understanding how colonial aphasia and the circuits of whiteness prevails within youth social policy and youth work.

In addition to the textual analysis, fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted using snowball and purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990); ethical approval was sought and granted to conduct this segment of the study. The interview participants were youth sector members from both government and key institutions, who play or have played critical roles within the youth

work sector to broaden the understanding and support of Black and other marginalised youth. The sample did strive to include the perspectives of Black youth sector members; nine of the fourteen interviewees identified as Black; three identified as white and two identified as racialised. Efforts were taken to ensure there was a diversity of voices from varied community and charitable organisations, as well as from different layers of government. The inclusion of Black and other racialised youth sector members in leadership and critical roles is scant and remains precarious; therefore, further details of the demographics of the interviewees are avoided. The author, a settler immigrant of South Asian origin, has over ten years of work experience as a member of the youth work sector, working alongside marginalised racialised youth; critical perspectives from the author's experiences also informs this work. The data analysis traced the circuits of Whiteness and the colonial aphasia that organises an ongoing dissonance and reinserts dominant perspectives through the sector's inclusion of racialised youth.

Situating youth and youth work in youth policy

I turn my focus to youth and youth work to show how appeals to social inclusion and anti-racism in youth social policy making enable settler colonial spaces, such as Ontario, to hold on to identities of benevolence. The category of youth is a social construction but generally includes ages twelve to twenty-five and focuses on youth dependency on adult support, and increasingly emphasises successful entry into the workforce (Woodman, 2012; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Tyyskä and Côté, 2015; Ritchie, 2017). Youth work, since the 1950s, has utilised social inclusion discourses to manage youth, especially the urban poor who faced exclusions from the workforce (Bessant, 1991; Kelly, 2006). Young people were not a major focus of social policy making in Canada or internationally but since the turn of the twenty-first century, young people have increasingly become a category of interest due to their future role as workers in a neoliberal economy (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008: 302).

The interest in youth heightened at a policy level in Ontario after 2005 under the Ontario Liberal party that sought to manage community concerns over urban youth violence and international concerns about the future workforce. Youth policy efforts that focused on assets and positive youth development (PYD) became more broadly institutionalised from 2012. Ontario's youth work sector's inclusionary efforts are governed primarily through knowledge frameworks related to place-based strategies, public health, youth development, managerialism, and participation. Furthermore, due to efforts by human rights groups and the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) there has been greater emphasis on including the lived experience knowledge of children and youth as well as other marginalised communities. However, social inclusion and social justice claims are often put forth in policy documents but are rarely tracked and noted for where and how they get stuck (Ahmed, 2006). This discussion unpacks these normative, feel good, yet elusive understandings of social inclusion and anti-racism discourses that circulate within the youth sector.

Managing the threat of the Black youth stranger

The Foucauldian concept of biopolitics argues that society is always in a state of war, not always relating to an external enemy but focused on biological purity and the survival of society; biopolitical war becomes an internal focus on the management of the population (Gane, 2008). Relatedly, shifts in *Canada's Immigration Act* (Government of Canada, 1978) resulted in the removal of its colour-coded system, which had historically privileged white immigrants from Europe.² This resulted in a surge of settlement by subjects from outside of Europe, such as those from the Global South, and profoundly disrupted the boundaries of a White colonial national project that managed to side-line and eliminate centuries of Indigenous and Black presence in

Canada.³ Thobani (2007) states that notions of belonging and the construction of Canadian citizenship was formulated within the knowledges of ‘western scientific theories of White racial superiority’ (75). Therefore, those from outside the desired national borders are considered to pollute the nation and pose a threat to White settler societies (Razack, 2002; Goldberg, 2008). There was an influx of stranger figures, considered neither wanderers nor visitors but rather those that are within society in a spatial sense but are Othered socially (Hesse, 1996; Ahmed, 2012). This stranger within, such as Black youth, have permission to be present but are subject to surveillance and scrutiny for their Otherness. They are often subject to a second-class citizen role through practices such as carding, which is the random stop-and-check practice by police in urban communities that had disproportionately targeted young Black and other racialised people (Saberi, 2017; Cole, 2020).

The discursive shaping of Black youth as dangerous outsiders is normalised through the circulation of statistics that also highlight the reach of state racism. Black youth are noted for having the lowest graduation rates and the highest suspension rates. The largest school board in Ontario, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) reported that between 2006-2011 the Black student graduation rate was 69 per cent, versus 84 per cent for White students (YouthRex, 2019). In 2019, the TDSB reported that Black students, who made up 12 per cent of the TDSB student population, made up 33 per cent of all expulsions (TDSB, 2019). Black youth are disproportionately represented in the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto (41 per cent), which is five times the general population, and their unemployment rates are twice that of the rest of Ontario (MCYS, 2017). Black children and youth are also noted to live in higher rates of low incomes (27 per cent) compared to the rest of the population (14 per cent) (Statistics Canada, 2020). Black youth are also identified as being carded by police two and a half times more than White youth and made up 25 per cent of all those carded in 2013 (Rankin, 2010). The correlation between crime and Black youth is established from the long history of slavery and the continual systematic practices of subjecting Blacks to surveillance and carceral control (Maynard, 2017). The Black citizen, from the period of slavery to the present, has been a subject of abjection; and occupies the role of what Thobani (2007) identifies as the non-preferred race: often viewed as deviant, lazy, uncivil, dangerous and a threat to White nationality’s hardworking settler spirit (Razack, 2002). This article explores further how settler state practices of policy making in Ontario manage the ‘problem’ of Blackness through anti-racism and inclusionary discourses that continue to bolster circuits of Whiteness and further racial capitalism and settler-colonial dominance.

Circuits of Whiteness: naming anti-Black racism, erasures and colonial aphasia

Black resistance and White naming

This section traces the cyclical and dual process of naming and un-naming racism in anti-Black racism efforts in Ontario from 1992-2019 and the maintenance of circuits of whiteness through ongoing erasures and colonial aphasia. It begins with a critical circuit surrounding the events of the Yonge Street demonstration (May 4, 1992), which commenced as a peaceful demonstration organised by advocacy groups such as the Black Action Defense Committee (BADC) in response to the police beating of Rodney King in the U.S and the shooting death of a young Black man, Raymond Lawrence, by Toronto Police just days before the protest (Braganza, 2016). The event shook the discourses of tolerance and multiculturalism as the event spiraled into a riot with the presence of white supremacist groups. It compelled Ontario’s New Democratic Party (NDP) government to commission Stephen Lewis, an advocate and past politician, to examine the state of race relations in Ontario. Lewis’ seminal report *Ontario Race Relations* was released June 9, 1992; the report provides recommendations on police accountability, employment equity, education, an anti-racism directorate (1993-1995) and community development. The report’s opening pages state:

First, what we are dealing with, at root, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systematic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is the Blacks who are being shot, it is the Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers . . . Just as the soothing balm of multiculturalism cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target (1992: 2).

This statement is still considered a pivotal point in the naming of anti-Black racism in Ontario.⁴ However, interviewee #6 (2019), a Black government bureaucrat, called this naming of anti-Black racism the ‘Christopher Columbus’ moment, for a White settler male utterance made Black suffering real and knowable within the mainstream discursive formation, while community advocates’ struggles to name anti-Black racism for decades earlier remained unknowable. While the report names anti-Black racism, the language to name settler colonial state’s ongoing violence was not available to Lewis or the community members that were consulted during this time; therefore, anti-Black racism and systemic racism remains vaguely understood and moves through the report devoid of an actor. Hunter and van der Westhuizen (2021) note that whiteness upholds its respectability, oscillating between binaries of innocence and guilt, which ‘relies on the same possessive, narcissistic mastery logic of coloniality’ (2). The ability to name anti-Black racism and yet maintain white goodness and benevolence is revealing of colonial aphasia.

Lewis states that there is a ‘major’ problem of alienated youth for the Ontario government, specifically Black youth (1992: 35). This problematisation of Black youth as alienated and disengaged becomes part of the dominant discourse in managing Black youth in Ontario in subsequent circuits of crisis and settler governmental response. The management of youth through employment becomes a key intervention during this period. For example, as part of the Jobs Ontario Youth (1991-1994), a key programme known as Fresh Arts (1992-1994) engaged youth deemed high-risk in various projects during the summer months, including fine arts, music, and film (Sawchuk and Taylor, 2010).⁵ The programme supported the development of internationally renowned artists like Kardinal Offishal, Jully Black and Saukrates, and the Baby Blue Soundcrew and played a critical role in Canada’s urban music industry (Black, 2011; Marsh *et al.*, 2020). Interviewee #7, a community advocate and youth worker, passionately shared that Fresh Arts’ youth participants

were in the arts sector but they were activists. They used their arts and platforms to empower, engage, and educate young people . . . their craft broadened and set a new stage for the emergence of not just an arts sector, but an emerging Black youth consciousness.

The space for Black creativity that was accorded through the Fresh Arts programme is an indispensable outcome of the moments of inclusion. Walcott (2021) asserts that Black creativity is an important aspect of Black freedom, as the colonial practices of slavery denied and dismissed Black innovation and imagination. Furthermore, Blackness remains under perpetual surveillance under the white gaze and remains challenging to create space for the Black imagination within a settler colonial landscape (Walcott, 2021).

Years of advocacy efforts by groups such as BADC along with the Lewis report and Ontario’s New Democratic Party’s leadership allowed for space to dialogue on anti-Black racism and systemic racism that impacts the Black community. The report provides recommendations on employment equity, education, the establishment of the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat, the Cabinet Committee on Race Relations and community development. However, the momentum generated from the 1992 Yonge Street event ran a course of barely three years before swift erasures by the two-term Conservative government (1995-2003) dealt significant blows to social services in Ontario as well as anti-Black racism movements.⁶ Walcott and Abdillahi reflect on the Yonge Street riot and the early nineties as a period where Black cultural presence and the circulation

of anti-Black racism discourse burgeoned and add that the Ontario Progressive Conservative party's leadership 'signalled the beginning of the end of Black possibilities in a number of ways' (2019: 12). For example, the Anti-racism Directorate and its cabinet committees, settlement house, and the Jobs Ontario Youth programme were closed or defunded. Consequentially, valuable youth programmes like Fresh Arts no longer received funding and eventually closed, endangering the opportunities for Black creativity; in addition, official spaces for dialogue on anti-racism and anti-Black racism no longer existed. Funding cuts that especially hinder marginalised community progress function as a form of white rage (Anderson, 2017) and remain a critical phase in the circuits of Whiteness. Marginalised communities are denied supports and rights, which results in negative youth outcomes: they become problematised and again require government 'action' in the name of reports and investigations.

Returning to these moments of de-funding and closures is critical as Mills (2021) reminds us how White ignorance, a non-knowing that upholds White racial superiority, is evident as Black advancement and the violence of Whiteness are erased from memory. In this circuit of Whiteness, efforts to name anti-Black racism and the history of Black resistance and organising remains fleeting and subject to colonial aphasia as an active dissociation occurs from the language of anti-Black racism and Black creativity. Notably, anti-Black racism is erased in public discourse and practice for almost another twenty-five years till Black Lives Matter (BLM) take to the streets in 2014.

Managing the threat of Black youth violence

Ontario found itself amidst another racial crisis in 2005 dubbed the 'Year of the Gun,' which consisted of fifty-two gun-related deaths out of Toronto's eighty homicides, many of which involved Black youth.⁷ The Dec 26th 2005 shooting death of a young White female by-stander, Jane Creba, on a key metropole street (Yonge and Dundas) resulted in significant outcry and jolted the public and national consciousness. There were nineteen young men under the age of twenty-two who died in 2005 before Jane Creba, some of them also innocent by-standers; however, they were Black males and did not receive the same degree of public outcry (Arvast, 2016).⁸ Colonial practices that relegated Blackness to the category of non-human and dangerous to the Canadian national project continue to authorise Black suffering as invisible or normal, while the same forms of suffering are not tolerated in the protected spaces of White metropolitan centres and White suburbs (Maynard, 2017; Walcott and Abdillahi, 2019; Jackson, 2020; Rios, 2020). Subsequently, significant terror is unleashed through racist over-policing, as well as the persistent systemic underfunding of Black communities that contributes to their state of injury (Mbembe, 2019); however, forms of state terror recede into the background, while narratives of youth crime dominate the discursive field.

Outcry, investigations and reports, increased policing, and new underfunded programmes for marginalised youth swiftly followed under Ontario's Liberal Party (2003-2017). A new community policing unit, Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) (2006-2017) and a racialised funding body, the Youth Challenge Fund (YCF) (2006-2012) were announced. After subsequent violence in 2007, the Ontario government commissioned the *Roots of Youth Violence Report* (McMurtry and Curling, 2008). In addition, the Toronto Police Services implemented the School Resource Officer (SRO) that introduced police into schools in primarily racialised and poor neighbourhoods. The United Way of Greater Toronto's report *Poverty by Postal Code* (MacDonnell *et al.*, 2004) released before the Year of the Gun (2005) authorised the use of a place-based approach, which became a dominant model of intervention of both policing and the youth work sector. The place-based approach brought in increased funding to certain spaces but also allowed greater surveillance and governing of marginalised racialised neighbourhoods, initially labelled as Toronto's thirteen priority neighbourhoods.⁹

TAVIS was funded \$5 million per year and engaged in the highly contentious policing initiative of carding. The policing of racialised, immigrant neighbourhoods was viewed as logical, for the growing non-White communities were blamed for the violence (Saber, 2017). TAVIS was

disbanded in 2017 due to ongoing advocacy and the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2017) labelling carding practices as violating the human rights of Black community members. However, the data collected over the years remain available to police, a practice that continues to be embroiled in controversy as it can be utilised in the ongoing surveillance and criminalisation of racialised lives.

YCF (2006-2012) was considered the first community funder in Ontario, run by and for racialised communities; it was tasked with addressing racialised violence in Toronto and was provided \$41 million over time from the United Way of Greater Toronto and the provincial government. YCF provided short-term (three-year) funding for racialised, marginalised, youth-led projects within the City of Toronto's thirteen priority neighbourhoods. YCF was under immense pressure to address youth violence and disengagement within a rigid timeline and uncertain conditions. Interviewee #4, a key YCF member stated:

Yeah, because you could do that in three years, right, Maria? Easy peasy. Nothing. Get the money in, just send it out, and you tick the box, and it's all done because we're not talking about systemic anything . . . They just wanted to have the tick box, photo op, political thing was, "Community asked for this. This happened. We gave this much money to 121 initiatives in thirteen priority neighbourhoods" Done (2019)!

Similarly, a majority of the interviewees expressed that such social inclusion investments were undertaken to manage public relations, appease both the general public and the Black community and to ensure the stability of the state, with little regard for social change.

The *Roots of Youth Violence Report* (McMurtry and Curling, 2008) played a critical role in the structural and discursive rollout of youth policy making and youth work in Ontario. The report targets gun violence, and Black youth are its focal subject. The roots, mainly that of poverty, are connected to place and to racism; the report adds that poor community design, issues in the education system, family issues, health, youth disengagement and a lack of voice, lack of economic opportunities, and concerns within the justice system are critical areas that disproportionately affect urban Black youth.

Racism is singled out as a crucial issue within the *Roots of Youth Violence Report* (2008); this was considered a triumph by community members, as the direct naming of systemic racism was not possible in this period by sector members. However, the report defines three forms of racism: overt, subconscious, and systemic. It claims 'this systemic racism is a product of individual attitudes and beliefs concerning Blacks . . . ' (McMurtry and Curling, 2008: 238). Despite racism being named within policing and education systems, it is individual racism that is underscored (Aubrecht, 2010). Racism moves through the report devoid of an actor, as the language to name larger systems of power such as capitalism and settler-colonialism remains unavailable. The dis-jointing of structural racism and associating it to individual beliefs, rather than systems of racial knowledge and power, is revealing of colonial aphasia's dismembering of concepts from their objects and meaning. Aphasia ruptures the semiotic relationship of the signifier and signified, making it challenging to name the thing being spoken (Barthes, 1968; Stoler, 2011). Subsequently, this definition of systemic racism absolves institutions from taking responsibility and narrows the parameters of knowledge on structural racism.

Furthermore, in the naming of Black youth in a report set out to identify the roots of youth violence, the report attaches Blackness to violence and authorises the fixation of the White gaze on the Black community, Black deficit, Black spaces and Black violence. Subsequently, Black youth are legitimised as subjects needing intervention within the sector. Racial spaces and its people are made to belong within a carceral archipelago (Foucault, 1979) as they are routinely problematised and brought under the white gaze and subject to increased scrutiny and discipline.

The report's major recommendation is greater organisation of sector goals through a youth development resource framework, strategy, and policy. This was met through the launching of

Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development (MCYS, 2012a), Ontario's *Youth Action Plan* (YAP) (MCYS, 2012b), and *Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed* (MCYS, 2013). The critical ideas to address systemic issues such as the surveillance and criminalisation of Black youth, embedded deep within the *Roots of Youth Violence Report* (McMurtry and Curling, 2008), were not activated – as governance-focused recommendations that furthered neoliberal settler goals took precedence.

The *Roots of Youth Violence Report* (McMurtry and Curling, 2008) also brought youth work more closely within the medical, psychological, youth development frameworks and managerial principles of evidence-based programming. The political rationality of assets and managerialism, which promotes neoliberal goals (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2011), is advanced through discourses of crisis around Black youth violence. This emphasis on data and evidence-based programming redirected the nascent systemic critique that was being nurtured by racialised youth groups in the YCF era and shifted it towards assets and evidence-based programming to qualify for funding, or risk perishing. This shift curtailed grassroots community work, stunted experimentation and stifled the creation of alternatives by Black and Othered communities. Furthermore, YCF was evaluated using the new managerial and evidence-based Positive youth development model and was deemed ineffective in reducing youth violence (For Youth Initiative, Laidlaw Foundation and United Way of Greater Toronto, 2018). YCF was not renewed in 2012 despite another spate of violence that year, with the Eaton Centre and Danzig mass shootings, the worst in Toronto's history. YCF's work was subsumed under the Ministry of Child and Youth Services Youth Opportunities Grant (YOP) and the United Way of Greater Toronto; while TAVIS was renewed in 2012, cementing the state of exclusion that Blackness occupies in Canada (Walcott and Abdillahi, 2019).

YCF's presence as a Black and racialised youth funder resulted in the inclusion of Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) as staff and the grassroots organisations it funded being invited into traditionally white spaces to engage with politicians, policy makers, funders, and key institutions. This inclusion resulted in strange encounters (Ahmed, 2012) and the continual endurance of a soft violence. Interviewee #6 was closely involved in these meetings and shared that naming racism remained elusive despite experiences of microaggressions:

It was always that elephant in the room that everyone wanted to say – fuck your comfort. But we couldn't, and we had to always dance around it, massage it, and make people feel good about even being in the room with us [Black and racialised members]. And it's that work, that tension, and what it does to our sort of effective[ness]. Yeah, no, but even then, the emergent language of White fragility. White guilt. That was emergent language. We were starting to put names to the things that we were being confronted with . . .

The lack of language to name the soft violence that endured through these encounters with Whiteness is a function of colonial aphasia (Stoler, 2011). The tenacity required to withstand the force of White comfort results in a silent suffering by racialised subjects within the sector and is a form of ongoing colonial pressure or duress that many experience (Badwall, 2015; Stoler, 2016). Unfortunately, the closure of YCF in 2012 truncated the spaces available for Black youth and sector members' critical dialogue, solidarity building, and experimentation.

Black Lives Matter and the rise of anti-racism discourse in youth social policy

Black Lives Matter's Toronto Chapter's protests (2015–2017) once again brought the issue of anti-Black racism to the streets, reminiscent of the 1992 Yonge Street riot.¹⁰ BLM TO called for justice for the deaths of Andrew Loku (2015), Jermaine Carby (2015), and Abdirahman Abdi (2016) at the hands of police officers in Ontario. The practices of carding by TAVIS also became a key concern for the BLM TO movement.¹¹ Once again in response to violence and upheaval on

the streets, the Liberal government, under Premier Kathleen Wynne's leadership, established the Anti-Racism Directorate (2015), launched numerous large consultation efforts, and released *A Better Way Forward: Ontario's 3-year Anti-racism strategy* (Government of Ontario, 2017a) and population-specific initiatives to address anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Islam racism.

The efforts of BLM TO and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), along with international actors, enabled the language of systemic racism to re-enter society in deeper and more profound ways; however, white ignorance, aphasia, and white rage continue to mold the way systemic racism is understood in this circuit as well. For example, in *A Better Way Forward*, then-Premier Kathleen Wynne, stated 'I had the chance to attend the first of these meetings. It was powerful and eye-opening to hear exactly how racism has directly affected people's lives in our communities' (2017: 4). Similarly, McMurtry and Curling in 2008 stated in the *Roots of Youth Violence Report* that 'Deep concerns about racism pervaded our consultations. We were taken aback by the extent to which racism is alive and well . . . We had assumed that progress was continuing to be made even though the discourse was less evident' (39). Similarly, Lewis in 1992 stated, 'Those discussions [on racism] had a visceral impact on me' (1992: 2). Despite long careers as politicians and witnessing various anti-racism struggles throughout that time, such recursive claims of ignorance and epiphany continue to support racial hierarchies (Thobani, 2007; Mills, 2012). Bonilla-Silva *et al.* (2020) argue that such naming allows for the 'good white' category to be upheld, where white supremacy is acknowledged but not one's complicity in the system, which may have opened up possibilities for different conversations and interventions. The role of the settler state's ongoing complicity within these unequal relations of power and the oppressive conditions faced by many marginalised communities requires greater scrutiny within public policy. However, there are also risks that the rhetoric of complicity can spiral into apologies, an increasingly prevalent practice in government, but do little to shift the realities of those harmed (O'Connell, 2015).

The collection of race-based data, promoting culturally sensitive evidence-based models, and focusing on Black deficit has become the major focus in this circuit of addressing anti-Black racism. For example, *Ontario's Anti-Black Racism Strategy* (2017b) focuses on race-based data collection, culturally sensitive programming, and educating the general public on systemic racism. The *Ontario Black Youth Action Plan's* (BYAP) allocation of \$47 million over four years (2017-2021) focuses on Black youth employment, parenting and mentoring programmes, and a culturally-sensitive aggression management programme.¹² Many of the interviewees stated that, despite all the resources targeting the Black community in this current cycle, there is little additional benefit to the communities that arise out of these mechanisms. Interviewee #10 noted the efforts made to develop a culturally sensitive collective impact model of working together in the youth work sector.¹³ He stated that the Ontario BYAP version of collective impact, 'we call CI squared, Collective Impact Cultural Identity . . . it takes into consideration the realities that exist for the Black community because this is for the Black Youth Action Plan. It acknowledges the historical context of colonialism' (Interviewee #10, 2019). Interviewee #10 expresses the intentional efforts made to create a collective impact model that focuses on anti-racism and recognises the impacts of colonialism through the Black Youth Action Plan. However, as these areas have not been focused upon in the past, the infrastructure required to create culturally sensitive collective impact is a new undertaking, one that interviewee #10 identified as requiring considerable political will and investment.

However, the change in government, from the liberals to the conservatives in 2018, significantly stalled the momentum for change as BYAP efforts and other aspects of the ARD were halted or saw a reduction in funding. Subsequently, there are limits again placed on the Black imagination to re-envision a collective impact model. Furthermore, in a moment where anti-Black racism discourse has been sanctioned and named, the opportunity provided to build and innovate new strategies is narrowly limited to envisioning only within an existing evidence-based model focused on collaboration and not outside of it. The ability to envision new alternates and innovate solutions

that might be more attuned to the community's needs remains limited to settler state approved models.

Nonetheless, the insertion of anti-racism discourse, despite its limitations in its current formulation, has emboldened some members of the sector to critique and question White power systems and functions as a form of catharsis. A racialised member of the sector, Interviewee #14 (2019) stated, 'It's very different than how we were operating ten, fifteen years ago. And with the erection of the [Toronto Confronting Anti-Black Racism] office, now we're actually able to call people out on anti-Black racism shit.' It is deemed a feat to now name Whiteness and systemic racism in a country that unreservedly donned the cloak of multiculturalism, tolerance, and benevolence while skillfully erasing its Othering practices and maintaining settler rule. However, these slow discursive changes are not as comforting to the communities who are 'under siege' in their own neighbourhoods where material conditions remain in place (Interviewee #6, 2019) and Black advancement and creativity is subject to cyclical erasures and aphasia.

The circuits of Whiteness continue to stifle Black movement; interviewee #14, a Black member of the sector, emotionally reflected that Black community and sector members

Cannot innovate. You cannot create. You cannot imagine. You're busy trying to hustle some food . . . We're so tight cast in to telling community what they think they need, and telling them, "Here's what we can do. Employment law, invest in the community center, put up the basketball court . . ." and not to the broader – and I think this is an issue of – and I hate to say it this way, but it's an issue of class, as well as an issue of, "I never had the means before to really understand the possibilities of what I can dream up." Or the narrowing of the imagination in terms of what is possible, right? . . . You have lost your ability to envision what a truly safe and thriving community could look like . . . They have a good idea . . . conceptually, – and that's the problem with colonisation (2019).

The ongoing efforts to stifle and destroy the Black imagination are a critical outcome of maintaining settler-colonial order, which contributes to a certain scarcity in innovation in community development and youth work that allows for the fixation of the gaze on the Black subject rather than on White supremacy. Liberalism's racist underpinnings have been buried and glossed over, which can also subject racial actors to a state of colonial aphasia and at a loss for the language to shift the focus onto structural violence (Stoler, 2011; Mills, 2021; Walcott, 2021). Instead, there is an invitation of Black youth into the settler colonial project, allowing little space to create new forms of racial justice.

In the latest circuit of Whiteness, the current Conservative government (2018-present) has removed \$2 million in funding from its initial \$7 million to the Anti-Racism Directorate and closed the various secretariats (Dhanraj and Westoll, 2019). It shuttered the Provincial Advocate's Office for Child and Youth, a critical voice on youth issues, as well as the Premier's Council on Youth Opportunities, along with cuts to various other programmes such as community hubs that support marginalised communities. Furthermore, interviewees who were working on the BYAP stated that there has been a halting of action, and momentum has waned upon the election of the Conservative government: for example, even information on the BYAP was no longer available on the government website (2018-2020).

However, upon the revival of the BLM TO protests in 2020, due to the death of George Floyd in the U.S, the killing of BIPOC people at the hands of police in Ontario, and COVID-19's uneven impact on Black and poor communities, the government revitalised its anti-Black racism efforts. They allocated \$1.5 million dollars for an anti-racism panel and the BYAP once again was made available on the governmental website after these announcements. However, as Anderson (2017) noted, institutional focus can shift overnight to something else that requires resources; subsequently, funding allocations, erected directorates, or committees can be swiftly eliminated.

Interviewee #4, a long-term Black youth sector member, articulated this violent act of cutting off inclusionary projects within governmental institutions:

Yeah, so CABR [Confronting Anti-Black Racism unit] is there at the City [City of Toronto], but that unit now has quite a few people . . . you and I both know that, tomorrow, our Mayor can say or the City – can say, “_____, that was a very nice game you played,” . . . Yeah, there is no money in the budget . . . Lob it off.” And they’re all gone because they’re actually not even into the city infrastructure . . . We have these little pilot things hanging outside that are easily lobbed off, forgotten.

Interviewee #4 evokes that Blackness remains external to the body politic of society and white rage’s workings through bureaucratic measures can swiftly cut off Black movement through defunding, erasures, and unknowing and it remains contingent on the political motivations of the settler-colonial state. The relationship between discourses of anti-racism and concepts of social justice, freedom, abolition, and transformation envisioned by groups like BLM are perpetually vulnerable to being severed and re-attached to safer discourses of multiculturalism, inclusion, and participation. Interviewee #14 stated that, ‘If we alleviate and restore justice in a true – social justice in a true sense, then people would have the time and autonomy and energy and capacity to think beyond the four corners of their community and conceptualise what could actually be’ (2019). Walcott (2021) argues that this obstruction of the Black subject to think, create, and imagine is a fundamental goal of the oppressive mechanisms of White dominance and one that requires greater attention.

Despite the barriers to envision otherwise, Black and Othered subjects do engage in counter-conduct strategies, which Foucault understands as seeing otherwise and envisioning alternatives that shift power relations (Davidson, 2011). This includes efforts that shift the gaze from youth as objects of knowledge (Melamed, 2011) to strategically interrogating the sector by: a. mapping the sector, b. sharing knowledge, and c. creating alternatives. Strategically utilising inclusionary technologies of power enables the possibilities of seeing otherwise and envisioning what Fanon (2008) deemed a new form of universality that is not couched in liberalism’s racist notions of being human and social justice.

Concluding remarks

This article mapped the various eras wherein colonial aphasia actively contributed to reconceptualising anti-racism, anti-Black racism in public discourse and youth policy leading to contradictory, stereotypical and limiting forms of support that focused on inviting youth into a neoliberal and settler project. The dominance of the circuits of Whiteness remains integrally linked to colonial aphasia, which includes erasures, unknowing, loss of words, dissonance and is never innocent (Hunt, 2019). Whiteness functions in differentiated ways, shifting between invisibility and hyper-visibility. Despite the increasing political visibility of Whiteness, mapping systems of White power remains a difficult, yet important part of addressing oppressive racist systems (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2021). This form of mapping stands in contrast to colonial knowing and its truth regimes. Shifting the White colonial gaze and sharing knowledge on the functions of White settler colonial governmentality holds the possibilities of disrupting the aphasia that dominates normative understandings, and ruptures the circuits of Whiteness. Furthermore, as Walcott (2021) urges, there exists a dire need within anti-racist social policy efforts to create, support and protect spaces for the Black imagination so communities may be able to imagine and innovate other ways of being, helping, caring beyond settler colonial forms.

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Notes

- 1 An in-depth analysis of these texts was undertaken within the larger study where this article is situated.
- 2 A preference for skilled workers was slowly incorporated into the immigration strategy from 1967 but the official removal of the colour-coded immigration act was not enacted officially till 1978.
- 3 Strategies of exclusion included genocide, dispossession of land, erasures of language and culture and ongoing deaths at the hands of state apparatuses, such as police, prison, and hospitals (Chrisjohn *et al.*, 2017; Maynard, 2017; Walcott, 2018; Walcott and Abdillahi, 2019; Cole, 2020; Diverlus *et al.*, 2020; Sucharov, 2022).
- 4 The document has resurfaced at various moments of racial strife over the last thirty years in Ontario such as the *Roots of Youth Violence* (McMurtry and Curling, 2008) and *Ontario's Anti-Black Racism Strategy* (Government of Ontario, 2017b).
- 5 Fresh Arts was funded \$29,500 in 1992 and \$35,000 in 1993 by the Toronto Arts Council (TAC) and their Culture Force fund (TAC, 1993).
- 6 The 22 per cent cut to social assistance being a massive shift along with the reduction of principals and teachers right to strike alongside the amalgamation of school boards lent itself to ongoing protests, walkouts and strikes (Rodricks *et al.*, 2018).
- 7 Gun violence statistics are regularly compared to this tragic year; for example, 2016 was considered the worst year for gun related deaths since the Year of the Gun with forty-one gun-related deaths (Edwards, 2016); that was until 2018 when we saw the record number of ninety-six deaths by homicides with fifty-one of those due to gun violence (Gillis, 2019).
- 8 Homicide statistics (1995-2005) show that 45 per cent of Toronto's homicide victims are Black men, despite only making up 8.4 per cent of the population (YWCA, 2019: 4).
- 9 They were Malvern, Jane-Finch, Jamestown, Kingston-Galloway, Victoria Village, Dorset Park, Eglinton East, Scarborough Village, Black Creek, Westminster-Branson, Crescent Town, Steeles-L'Amoreaux and Kennedy Park.
- 10 It was triggered by events in the U.S and sought to bring attention to systemic racism faced by the Black community in Ontario. Other movements also contributed to the uptake of the anti-racism zeitgeist. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC, 2015) report highlighted state-driven violence against the Indigenous population and injected the discourses of colonial violence into the mainstream. In addition, the UN declared 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent.
- 11 As stated earlier, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2017) stated carding was a violation of human rights and TAVIS was disbanded in 2017.
- 12 The City of Toronto also followed suit with its Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit (2017) (CABR) and its *Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism* (City of Toronto, 2017).
- 13 Collective Impact as a model of working together has been heavily instituted within the youth work sector in Ontario. It was adopted from the U.S, promoted by John Kania and Mark Kramer (2011), and promoted a multi-sector evidence-based approach to addressing complex problems in society such as education.

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