"SINGLED OUT": BEING BLACK IN THE SUBURBS

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"Singled out" was how one young man described his experience living in Toronto's outer-suburbs. His parents, like other Caribbean immigrants, had moved to the suburbs which for them represented upward social mobility, safety (from violence), and opportunities for their children to have a "better" life – with better schooling, and respectable social networks. The youth reported that their experiences in the community was marked by stereotyping/racial profiling, the burden of expectations to be "good Blacks," schools that were unresponsive to their educational needs and interests, and a sense of being "singled out" in the community even as they tried to "fit in."

RACIAL PROFILING IN THE SUBURBS

For the parents – mostly first and second generation Canadians – the move into a fairly affluent neighbourhood represented upward social mobility sustained by a belief that they were providing their children better schooling opportunities, an environment suited to the cultivation of a suitable social network, and a safe neighbourhood far from the violence of the city. As one parent said: "Parents live here because it's safe; it's a nice place to raise kids […]. It's quiet and away from the hectic life of Toronto […]." But despite their parents' desire and social appeal of the community, the young people never felt welcomed, hence as one questioned: "If I'm truly part of this community, why am I being singled out?"

Many of the youth talked of being treated differently and of their efforts to come to terms with reactions to their "colour." They reported that as they journeyed through the neighbourhood people would watch them in wonder. In the words of one youth: "All of a sudden colour matters. People look at me. They do a double take, like: 'Is that a Black person?'" They took this reaction to mean that they were out of place and did not belong in that community as a Black person.

The youth told stories of teachers' perception of them as academically limited — "you are not smart" — and hence likely to be educational failures. For this reason, one said: "You always have to show that you are not the stereotypical Black." Another suggested that the first thing [the teacher] thinks is: '"so it reads"' […] this guy is going to fail; his marks are not going to be as high as the others.'[…] They don't think we are smart [because of] the way we dress or the way we act […]. We just have to show we are smart […]."

And there were the storeowners and security officers whose surveillance of them with which they had to contend. One youth recalled that he had to ask a corner storeowner – who demanded that he make his purchase and leave the store while others were allowed to browse – to leave him alone because he was "really a good kid."

For many of the youth, racial profiling by police officers was considered a significant disadvantage to living in the community. One young man talked of instances when he was unnecessarily stopped, "rudely" questioned, and threatened to be "beaten" by police. He said that he was asked to present his driver's license although he was not driving, but the two White females with whom he was travelling were never questioned.

Another young man described an instance when he was walking home from work with his co-worker friend when two police cars stopped and the officers "interrogated" them, saying that they "fit the description of two Black youth who had robbed a convenience store earlier." Noting that they were wearing their fast food restaurant uniforms when they were stopped, the youth indicated that he tried to reason with the officers saying that their attire should be a signal that they were innocent of such offence; furthermore, "why would I be walking towards the scene of the crime if I had robbed the store?"

The officer, he said, responded saying, "That's a really good question" and let them go. But before reaching home, he was stopped again by police for the same reason. However, as he noted, except for race, the apprehended alleged robbers looked "nothing" like him and his friend.

As I argue elsewhere (James, forthcoming), the presence of Black bodies in the suburbs serve to disrupt the often taken for granted the mostly white middle class homogeneous population and as such are rendered "out of place." Faced with proving the legitimacy of their presence in such areas, Black youth, like their parents, are left to navigate, the classist and racist discourses – and concomitantly discrimination – which permeate these suburban spaces. Therefore, despite the financial and social "sacrifices" that parents make in moving to outer- suburban communities, the experiences of their children in those communities are marked by stereotyping/racial profiling, the burden of expectations to be "good Blacks," schools that are unresponsive to their educational needs and interests, and a sense of being "singled out" in the community even as they try to "fit in." Similar experiences and perceptions were noted in a recent investigation of the social well-being of Black youth in Peel Region (James & Turner 2015). While some youth felt a sense of satisfaction living in Peel, many felt unwanted and devalued. They attributed this to the everyday racism directed at Black youth, especially males, through racial profiling in school, the media and police. In what follows, I discuss the youth's experiences with and perceptions of educators and police – significant individuals who have much to do with their social and educational situation and outcomes.

Similar to the youth in the earlier study, those in Peel reported their life in the area was a constant struggle against the profile of them belonging to a group of people who are uninterested in education, more athletically-talented, hence likely to be underachievers; as well they are antisocial and disruptive in that they persistently incite trouble hence need to be continuously policed (see James, 2012). Of their experiences in school and with teachers, the youth said:

> I think we have to fight an uphill battle in almost everything we do, especially school. I've had teachers tell me straight up that they don't believe my group of people could do certain things.
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> Schools don't take Black kids seriously. Teachers just think we are there to just chill and we are not serious.
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> If males miss a day of school then [the stereotype is that] they're automatically not interested in having an education and are probably out looking for trouble. [...] [The stereotype is that] Black girls only come to school for friends and not to learn; [...] [and] only want certain jobs such as nursing or hairstyling […].

Additionally, police, they said, tended to target them – a practice which made them feel fearful and unsafe because of possible criminalization and incarceration for "years for something I did not commit."

> In Peel, you're already a target if you're Black. If you live in a certain area, or if you wear certain clothing you are a target of police. If something goes wrong you're automatically a suspect.
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> Law enforcement also stereotypes us and assumes because we are Black we all partake in drugs etc. They also assume that all Black youth live in poverty and are struggling which is not true. People in the stores assume I am going to steal which is not true. I go out of my way to try not to look [like a] suspect. People are always staring at me thinking I am a thief.
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> […] Everywhere we go, we are a target. I want freedom. Before I came here, […] I was told Canada was a place I could be free. But it is not that at all. An incident happened at school where all kinds of kids were involved. I only saw the police handcuffing the Black students, and many of those students were not even involved. Anytime there is violence, it is assumed us Black youth have committed it.

It is understandable that these youth would be calling out for "freedom" from the omnipresent stereotyping of them as educational failures, misfits, delinquents, and potential criminals. They despaired that they might fail at having people come to see them as hard-working and not threatening; hence there is no need for people to be suspicious of them.

CONCLUSION

The practices toward Black youth are part of a societal cultural structure that places them at a disadvantage in school and in society where preconceived ideas, educational routines, and policing measures – supported by an inequitable socio-political structure – contribute to a web of stereotypes and racial profiling from which it is difficult for the youth to escape. What needs to be done is for teachers and police – as well as members of society generally – to come to understand and repudiate the ways in which through racial profiling, educational and justice institutions undermine the educational achievement, law-abiding living, and well-being of Black suburban youth.

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