
Are We Free to Go? Anti-Black Racism and Its Impact on Black Play

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Drawing connections between anti-Black racism, surveillance, and the criminalization of Black bodies, and using an autoethnographic approach, the author discusses the effect of racism on Black play. She analyzes her personal encounters and the public accounts of others to illustrate how white supremacy uses scrutiny and its attendant actions by citizens and law enforcement to deny Black people the basic freedom of play. **Key words:** anti-Black racism; Black play; racism and leisure; surveillance and play

Introduction

SOME OF THE EARLY THEORIZING about play makes necessary connections between play and our need to release energy and express our natural physical urges (Hendricks 2020). Although most theories vaguely define play, and there is much debate among scholars about its “rhetorics” (Smith-Sutton 1997), what seems most apparent about play is the variety of activities and expressions in which it can take shape (Burghardt 2012; Hendricks 2020; Wright 2018). Some of the general notions and understandings surrounding concepts of play and its purpose in the lives of people remain consistent, because individuals commonly use activities associated with play as a catalyst for engaging in pleasurable self-expression (Wright 2018). The research about play also points to the numerous social and physical benefits that individuals derive from engaging in the “innumerable variety” of play (Hendricks 2020, 117). Highlighting this link between human beings and the necessity for play in people’s lives, Dutch historian and classic play scholar Johan Huizinga described play “as a primary mode of our existence” (Wright 2018, 3), suggesting that play (and playing) is a central part of the human experience.

Considering these points, individuals—living freely—should have the ability and opportunity to decide first the type of activities, based on pleasure and self-expression, that fulfills their inherent need for play. And they need to be able to enjoy freely and openly legal activities used for that purpose. However, the extent to which particular groups of people can openly engage in any play remains limited by and confined within the power structures and social order of society that maintain anti-Black racism. Here, I associate play with activities that provide such qualities as freedom and lead “to excitement, fun, and its most sublime manifestation, joy” (Henricks 2020, 128). In the face of racist oppression, qualities that reflect elements of freedom and joy gained through play are particularly important to Black people, and for the purpose of my analysis, I extend classifications of what I consider play in numerous ways. Here, play is less about the scholarly definitions of play and more about the activities in which Black people actually engage to pursue the values and qualities that can be derived from play. This, in some of the situations I describe, includes activities that can also be associated with leisure and recreation. The value of play and its connection to human desires is central to my analysis. Some activities I outline may not be traditionally seen as play but can be considered so for Black people, based on values associated with those activities.

The actions and activities of Black people since the beginnings of colonialism in the West have been managed and monitored (Maynard 2017). Through various historical and contemporary structures of control—from slavery to modern policing in Canada and the United States—the freedom for Black people to participate in activities for the purpose of play are constantly surveilled and criminalized. I outline an even broader concern related to Black people and play, which is that when Black people attempt to live their lives freely (by participating in play, for example), they create ideological tensions that provoke reactions of racism and discrimination in those who believe Black people should not be free to play nor free to do what they want for their own pleasure and purposes.

Christina Sharpe’s (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* documents and discusses the violent circumstances that impact Black lives within the strangling confines of white supremacy. Sharpe weaves together histories of Black experiences to illustrate how Black people live with the “ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging” (14). Normalized exclusion and a permanent state of nonstatus precipitate a form of consciousness around Blackness and being of which Black people are always aware. Western society defaults to seeing Black bodies as unwelcome and unworthy participants

in humanity (Sharpe 2016), and this can prevent Black people from open and free access to such distinctly human values as play, freedom, and security. When we place these values in the context of Black people's normalized criminalization, it seems no surprise that Black individuals' access to play has been circumscribed.

Play, and its purpose and value in the lives of human beings, conflicts with notions of Blackness and nonstatus, particularly in places with histories of enslavement. For many Black people, participating in leisure, play, and recreational activities can result in not only social tension (Philipp 1995; Mowatt 2018), but also violence and criminalization (Maynard 2017), unless of course, the play functions as work by the Black body that society deems appropriate and necessary, as in professional sports. The unfortunate reality with which most Black people must contend is that, in spite of the legal status of being free, we remain limited by the vicious stronghold of anti-Black racism, upheld by social institutions through the surveillance by—and actions of—white members of society. This can turn simple activities like riding a bicycle in a city park or staying in an Airbnb rental into criminal offences for Black people.

I explore this connection between the surveilling and the policing of Black people's play and how it maintains Black people's nonstatus, effectively denying our value as human beings. To start, I will draw correlations between activities for play and leisure, particularly in Black people's lives, to contextualize the relevance of my analysis to play studies. Then, drawing on my personal encounters and on publicized reports, I describe events involving Black people that underscore the impact of white supremacy on Black life in North America. My goal here is to help expose the vicious and violent impact of anti-Black racism on Black people's freedom and play from a Canadian perspective and to emphasize how white supremacy across North America is maintained through normalized surveillance and policing of Blackness. These are rooted in histories of oppression, which starts with watching, leads to suspecting, and ends in the criminalization of Black bodies carried out by white citizens and enforced through the power of social institutions.

Position of the Researcher

My choice of topic and methodology are bound up with my identity and experiences as a Black feminist, researcher, and scholar, living in a predominantly white country. A child of Jamaican immigrants to Canada, I was born, raised,

and have lived in Toronto for most of my life. Experiences of being Black and under perpetual surveillance are by no means foreign to me. Although not fully accounted for here, I have experienced far too many events and situations that infer the inherent criminality of my skin, making this examination and discussion of Blackness and its restrictions on play a personal one.

Methodology

Many Black feminist scholars (Crenshaw 1991; hooks 2000; Lorde 1984; McClaurin 2001) have recounted, examined, and validated their Black-lived experiences, and the experiences of other Black people, to position accounts of Black life within scholarship. Here, I employ a similar technique, recounting my own experiences and then, based on memory (Keightly 2009), I center the experiences of other Black people to provide further perspectives on the impact of anti-Black racism on the everyday activities of Black people.

In using this method of grounding my experience with racism as a Canadian Black woman with the experiences of other Black people as detailed in the media, I seek to carry on a tradition outlined by anthropologist Irma McClaurin (1999), who states: “The use of narrative has been central to the shaping of my life and scholarship as a way of understanding the experiences of the African diaspora, a place that is part memory and part geography, populated by the descendants of enslaved Africans who were forced through the Middle Passage, dispersed throughout the Americas, and who endured and continue to endure patterns of economic and social stratification and exclusion as a consequence of their ancestry and phenotype” (30–1).

Within this Black-feminist approach, I use my personal experiences to begin to contextualize anti-Black racism and its impact on and limitation for Black people and play. Then, through my own recollection of accounts of anti-Black racism, as experienced by other Canadians, I weave together examples to illustrate this position.

I selected the events and examples I summarize and discuss based on news reports. Living in a white-dominated society, I have always been concerned about issues connected to Black people, and I recollect many news reports and situations that demonstrate anti-Black racism against Canadians. Keightley (2010) outlines memory as a method for research and investigation to establish a basis for evidence and knowledge on the researcher’s own terms. Thus, I recall and

reference the examples of anti-Black impediments to play in this article by evoking memory as “a lived process of making sense of time and the experience of it.” And, “this process of sensemaking has potential value for social research both as an object and technique” (56).

In recounting my own personal experiences with anti-Black racism in the context of play, or activities deployed to achieve its values, I used to my advantage the fact that evidence of criminalization of Black people’s activities are at times documented, broadcasted, and, therefore, easy to retain. As Keightley points out, “the study of remembering is a crucial way of exploring the temporally inflected relationships between personal life, social relationships, and public culture and how these contribute to the construction of personal and collective identities” (66). In planning and organizing this analysis connecting the specific activities Black people enjoy with play, I made an informal list of events of anti-Black racism that I recalled from previously reported news stories over the last five years. Then, to add more context and understanding of the events, I completed a few basic online searches with the names and locations of each situation to identify reputable sources to gather more details about each of the accounts. I selected the examples based on what I could recall from the description of incidents and their racial specificity. Examining the examples used in the article and connecting them to circumstances and realities of Black lives, I attempt to include these types of racially relevant activities, engaged in by Black people, within the scope of an analysis of play.

The situations I use to support my arguments about anti-Black racism and play are tragically common in the lived experiences of Black Canadians, and they account for only a small portion of the circumstances and realities that surround Blackness, being, and play, in North America.

Play and Its Possibilities

Some of the more common scholarship on human play concerns its value and necessity to child development (Burghardt 2012; Cohen 2018; Ginsburg 2007). For example, Burghardt (2012), outlines twelve specific types of children’s play, ranging from make-believe imaginative play to play focused on building motor skills in children. The importance of play for children that is documented in the research and discourses of a number of academic areas including anthropology, psychology, and education (to name a few), makes play an interdisciplin-

ary pursuit for scholars. Scholars also explore the value of play in the lives of adults (van Leeuwen and Westwood 2008) because the physical, social, and emotional well-being benefits that play can provide do not end with childhood. Even though play is commonly associated with and often described as the “work of children”—and in some instances, adult play is viewed as being “childish”—there are considerable efforts to highlight the importance of play in the lives of adults, particularly for creating life balance (Deterding 2017).

Keeping in mind the vast variety of human activities that can be classified as play, I find it important to link various undertakings of play to examples in this article. Henricks (2020) emphasizes three play rhetorics, “progress, the imaginary, and the self,” and in the first issue of *American Journal of Play* (AJP), David Elkind (2008) states “most of us engaged in the study of play consider it a form of exercise for creative dispositions—for imagination, for curiosity, for fantasy” (1). Wright (2018) contributes to this understanding of play and notes that “play is a noncoercive relationship, an imaginative method of engaging everyday life in a specific space and time that we may or may not consider an accomplishment but that is, in any case, accompanied by a sense of well-being” (4).

The classifications of play in the scholarship reveal the expansive list of values—freedom, pleasure, imagination, joy—attributed to play. These descriptions suggest many activities that Black people use as forms of play—for example, attending a cultural event, going to a party with music and dancing, taking an exploratory bicycle ride through the park, and playing in a recreational hockey league for fun. These activities offer possibilities for expanded imagination, curiosity, self-expression, and pleasure in the lives of Black people, particularly in white-dominated spaces where anti-Black racism is incessant.

From these descriptions of play and its value, I would argue that, when Black people go to cultural festivals, host a party in an art studio, or check into a fancy Airbnb for their pleasure after a long week of work, these activities serve the same ends as play, because they are being freely chosen, create space for pleasure, and assist in the manifestation of joy. Bearing in mind play’s imaginative function (Elkind 2008; Henricks 2020; Wright 2018), these derivatives of play also create the catalyst for the fantasies that often exist in the Black imagination (hooks 1992)—the fantasy of actually being “free to go” or the fantasy of a world void of the racism Black people experience daily. These activities often represent how Black people, especially in the face of white supremacy, choose to play, or choose to use leisure as play. This association is appropriate for Black people, as Burr et al., (2019), suggests: “Play experiences and practices are multifaceted

and are often influenced by a number of sociocultural factors” (362). And in this context, even a walk in the mall—an activity that may not directly connect to play—affords Black people a space to frolic in playful imaginings, an opportunity to be curious, to fantasize, and to focus on their well-being.

Through the framing of the types of spaces and opportunities play can and should provide, I contextualize the activities outlined in this analysis of Black people and play. I challenge play studies scholars to interrogate the intersection of race in play and to consider Blackness and being as a limitation to play and, by extension, a limitation to freedom. My focus on events in Canada and experienced by Canadians offers evidence that surveillance and criminalization of Black bodies are not endemic to the United States. These everyday situations in my own experience and the experiences of others are examples of institutional and social anti-Black racism, and they demonstrate the numerous ways that Black people are excluded from freely choosing and engaging in play across North America. Not to be overlooked in this analysis is the resilience of Black people who face these constraints. Their ongoing resistance to the criminalizing of attempts to play are underscored by the way they seek and express joy through their play, even in the face of persistent racism and surveillance.

Connecting Play and Leisure

In connecting play to leisure, I am focusing on the cognate nature of the concepts. My goal is not to conflate these concepts, but to make clear how both play and leisure are taken up in the lives of Black people in pursuit of desired human values. At the core of both play and leisure lie a few consistently sought values (Stebbins 2017), such as the freedom, joy, and self-expression with which I am most concerned. Henderson (2012), suggests that pleasure, wellness, happiness, and other positive states of being derive from the engagement in and enjoyment of play and recreation. From this, activities classified as play can also be mapped to leisure. Both leisure and play create space for entertainment, passive engagement, active interaction, and creative expression (Ross et al. 2020). These are all fundamental to healthy, valuable, human experiences. Play in other words underscores the connection these have to freedom, enjoyment, and choice.

Leisure, like play and recreation, offers people an outlet to express their values. As leisure theorist Charles Brightbill (1960) noted, “Our decisions are based on our values and are never more on display than they are in our choices

of the things we do to satisfy ourselves. Hence leisure not only provides the opportunity to shape values; it also establishes a setting for expressing them” (46). Brightbill states that desire—in this case, manifested in individual choices of activities—is fundamental to shaping one’s personal beliefs and developing self-expression. Choice is central to play and leisure activities, especially for Black people. Activities such as relaxing, perhaps listening to music at an Airbnb after work (leisure), or playing a recreational game of hockey (play), can help individuals experience elements of freedom, joy, and cultural expression. Clearly, having the freedom and ability to choose activities and freely engage in them is necessary to human life and, therefore, a right that all people, including Black people, should be able to enjoy openly.

A clearly outlined relationship between racism and its impact on play, particularly in the lives of Black people, seems to be absent from many play studies discourses. This is an area of analysis that critical leisure studies scholars continue to pronounce in their work. But scholars such as R. F. Washborne (1978) and Steven Philipp (1995) have outlined the overall inaccessibility of leisure and its benefits in parks and wilderness adventures to Black people. And Rasul Mowatt’s work on leisure, power, place, and order effectively situates the inherent racism seen in the examination of leisure spaces and activities of Black people (Mowatt 2018).

From a psychological perspective, leisure—like play—has been defined as an endeavor free from the responsibilities of obligatory work (Stebbins 2017). The qualities people gain from leisure activities are much like the qualities they seek from play. When engaging in leisure activities, individuals do what they want to do, because they want to do it for their own self-expression and joy. The freedom to choose the activities for play also characterizes leisure. The element of “free choice,” as outlined by Stebbins, is fundamental to leisure. These connections between leisure and play for Black people manifests through the activities Black people use to access specific qualities of life, and thus we experience the limitation to our freedom while we engage in both leisure and play.

Play and the White Racial Frame

Racism is rooted in what Joe Feagin (2013) calls the “white racial frame.” This white-dominant framing exerts political and social control in all areas of life. First initiated through colonial theft, violent occupation, and Black enslave-

ment, the white racial framing of societies produces and supports the power and privilege of white people, which is upheld through social, economic, and psychological systems that institute whiteness as superior to all other races. The white racial frame can be more explicitly and properly defined as the system of white supremacy that has existed through centuries of white domination (Feagin 2013). It is through the pervasive, infectious system of white supremacy that the ideology of racism (manifested in racial hatred and discrimination) is internalized, enacted, and maintained by people within all societies, particularly those with a colonial past (Maynard 2017; Muhammed 2019).

White supremacy has a direct impact on all people who are not racially classified as white. It establishes and maintains whiteness as the norm (*status quo*), and all other racial groups and categories as “other” and, therefore, innately inferior (Feagin 2013). But this does not mean all people who are not racially classified as white are subject to the same racism through institutional, structural, and social practices and policies. It must be acknowledged that one of the most constant and vicious manifestations of white supremacy can be seen in the racial discrimination and injustice faced by Black people (Dumas 2016). This type of racism (anti-Black racism) connects all members of society—regardless of race or social position—to direct, extreme levels of hatred, unjustified fear, and violence towards Black people in all areas of social life (Maynard 2017; Muhammed 2019), including play.

The term anti-Black racism was born out of a need for a contemporary response to the specific and disproportionate impact of racial hatred directed specifically toward Black people (Kusma et al. 2014). Dumas (2016), draws a parallel between anti-Blackness and the concept of “afro-pessimism.” The concept of afro-pessimism highlights the tensions between Blackness and humanity that result in anti-Black racism. As Dumas (2016) states, “Anti-Blackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard” (13). Racial discrimination maintained through historical and contemporary systems in white-supremacist societies has and continues to severely constrain Black lives. Thus, the term anti-Black racism best describes the visceral, deliberate, and disproportionate impact of racism on Black bodies. Speaking specifically about a North American context, Black people have long faced vicious, unscrupulous attacks that are solely based on, and rooted in, the normalized hatred of Blackness within societies at large. Dumas (2016), elucidates similar notions of the impact of Blackness and being, particularly as it relates to experiences Black people have while taking part in everyday activities as: “Black[ness] is socially

and culturally positioned as slave, dispossessed of human agency, desire, and freedom” (13).

Baldrige (2020) describes anti-Blackness as “a specific denial of humanity for Black people and Blackness, marked by gratuitous forms of violence, natal alienation from homelands and homeplaces, and general dishonor within all forms of social, cultural, and political life” (749). The term anti-Black racism first delineates the effects of racism specific to Blackness and, then, makes emphatically clear its severe impact on Black bodies (Kusma et al. 2014).

Any discussion of play should also acknowledge the white racial frame and white supremacy that controls predominantly white spaces in regions of North America. Racial hatred impacts the attempts Black people make to engage in activities associated with play, including leisure. Upholding anti-Black racism is a normal function of white-supremacist societies. It allows white people—and other members of society—to appropriate the power and control of institutions and to continue to devalue and marginalize Black people. This manifests itself in Black people’s play through its regular scrutinization and even criminalization. The institutional and social subjugation of Black humanity contributes to the continued nonstatus of Black people. It denies freedom to Black bodies and, consequently, normalizes excessively punitive responses to Black people engaging in everyday behaviors (Philipp 1997; Mowatt 2018), even something as innocuous as walking in a shopping mall or riding a bicycle.

Play as Work and Work as Play

Contextualizing the connection between play, leisure, and work is also crucial to understanding distinctions between freedom as a derivative of play and other activities. Some scholars have considered the foundation of play to be something distinct in its essential purpose from work (Burghardt 2012; Wright 2018). For example, Wright (2018) posits the difference between play and work as: “Play was simply an activity that was not coerced. Work, on the other hand, as alienated or coerced labor, constituted the everyday lives of most people under capitalism, an economic system where play manifested itself through carefully crafted commercial festivals, carnivals, and hobbies” (3). According to Wright, play affords one with the possibility for personal self-expression and development that does not have to be tied to capitalist or economic pursuits that may limit the freedom of the activity.

The main distinctions between work and play here are personal agency, freedom, and choice. Yet, if or when play and work coalesce, for example, in the life of a professional basketball player, Black people are then expected to play. When it is work in the service of other people's entertainment and pleasure, Black people playing is acceptable. Consider basketball superstars LeBron James and Kevin Durant being told by Fox News commentator Laura Ingraham to "shut up and dribble" in response to their political statements about then U.S. President Donald Trump (Lowry 2018). In this case, Black players were expected to play their sport professionally but thought to have no other value for society. Professional sports promote the values of play—joy, self-expression, creativity—but its type of play is work for the players, who are predominantly Black in several professional leagues. Play for such ends is less restricted, and it is encouraged. We see examples of Black people being celebrated while playing to entertain others who themselves engage in play or leisure by watching professional sports.

The distinction between playing for work and playing for freedom is also important to my analysis. I must emphasize that the expectation and acceptance of Black bodies playing when serving the public of capitalist culture and the denial of freedom when Black people are engaging in activities for freedom and joy constitute further evidence of the normalizing of anti-Black racism and the devaluing of Black humanity that makes true freedom unattainable. Why is it acceptable for Black people to play sports professionally in commission of capitalist priorities but for them to be surveilled and criminalized when they play a sport for their own recreation? The reality is, Blackness and being demands, accepts, and celebrates Black bodies at work to maintain the white racial framing of society, but our perpetual position of nonstatus as full and free human beings controls our participation in any desired human values like play and leisure of our own agency.

Reflections on Anti-Black Racism at Play and Leisure

In my experience, Blackness is a permanent mark that makes any social engagement appear a type of code that needs cracking to determine how to insulate oneself from the impact of anti-Black racism. To combat attempts to limit my engagement in play and leisure, I look for a combination of inclusivity and tolerance to determine whether I might be welcomed in a particular space. For

example, when I plan a vacation, I consider whether my Black body is suitable for specific places. I start with a simple Google search using phrases like: “number of Black people in . . .”; “incidents of racism in . . .”; and “inclusive, safe places to stay in . . .” I have never, in my adult life, traveled to a town, city, or country with predominantly non-Black citizens without first performing a thorough search as a precaution. I take steps to get ahead of any issues I might experience; after numerous experiences of anti-Black racism, I am aware that my Blackness and being bring tensions within societies at large.

This awareness came at a fairly young age. I remember that one of the first times I recognized the surveillance of my Black body came as I was shopping. In *The Importance of Being Lazy: In Praise of Play, Leisure, and Vacations*, Al Gini (2003) draws a correlation between shopping and leisure and play to describe how the “pleasures of products and shopping” have become a “primary pleasure principle” and in many ways “a main means of recreation” (82). In other words, shopping has become what Gini calls “a leisure activity in its own right” (85) and could even be considered a cultural activity in North America, where people of all ages regularly use it as recreation. It represents a leisure activity in which people come together in a common space for fun or relaxation, exactly the sort of public engagement that can be impossible for Black people.

This became clear to me during my shopping trip. Walking through the mall and occasionally stepping into random stores, I was aware for the first time of my hyper-visibility, and I saw that I was clearly unwanted. I remember I went into a popular leather retail chain only to find instantly that all the attention got placed on my body and my movements. “Is there anything I can do for you?” the sales associate asked. “No, I am just browsing,” I replied. Unsatisfied with my response, the associate trailed behind me, scrutinizing my every move for about three minutes before she suggested, “This is considered a high-end store, you know; I am not sure if there is anything in here for you, let alone anything you can afford.” Not wanting to cause trouble, I left the store silently, trying to avoid drawing further attention to myself.

After this incident, anti-Black racism—and its everyday enforcers—became easier for me to recognize. One night as my friend and I returned home from a house party in Toronto, we were rear ended by another vehicle when we stopped at a red light. I was driving my father’s car, and the other driver, a white man, upon seeing me and my friend—both young Black women—decided not to exchange insurance information for a simple rear-end accident that was clearly his fault but instead to call the police. The white man, alone in his car,

waited for the police to arrive on the scene before engaging with us. When the police officers arrived, they asked very few questions before placing both of us in the back of the squad car. We knew this was unusual protocol for a simple accident for which I was not to blame. No one involved appeared injured, and, normally, in this type of situation, drivers would exchange information, move on, and follow up with their insurance companies. I asked the officer why we needed to sit in the squad car, and he replied: "It's just standard procedure, ma'am. We are trying to determine what happened." The driver of the vehicle responsible for the accident remained free to move about and speak with the two officers.

As I sat in the police car, I noticed the bars separating the back seat from the driver and passenger seats. I said to the officer seated up front, "This is a very tight squeeze." The officer replied, "What, you've never been in a police vehicle before?" My friend said, "No, sir, we never needed to be, kind of like we don't need to be now." There was no response. After about fifteen minutes, the officer speaking with the other driver returned to the car to question us. He asked, "Where were you heading?" "Where are you coming from?" "Whose car is this?" "Do you have permission to drive?" "Does your father know you are out this late?" The flurry of questions made both of us feel as if we were suspects in an interrogation room being accused of a crime. Eventually, the officer returned my license and insurance and informed me that no charges would be filed. I just needed to follow up with my insurance if I planned to make a claim. After we asked twice for the other driver's details, the officers finally gave us a report that included the information of the at-fault driver. Then, they told us we were "free to go."

But were we? Are Black people ever really free to go? The fact that I was placed in the back of a squad car for trying to return home after a social gathering constitutes evidence that, as Black people, we are rarely ever free to go. This is hardly the first time a Black person has experienced surveillance and criminalization for simply being behind the wheel (Bell et al. 2014; Wortley and Tanner 2003). Of course, the impact of surveilling and criminalizing "driving while Black" affects not only the ability to engage in play and leisure but also to get to and from other places Black people need to be, such as school and work.

Still, even knowing how easily anti-Black racism occurs in public spaces, Black people continue to live the lives they should be free to live. They continue seek the values that humanity affords despite the attempts at control. This is

perhaps one of the reasons so many examples can be cited of impediments to Black play and freedom.

Let me now illustrate some of the circumstances in which Black people resist such forms of control over their ability to choose to engage freely in play. Any act of resistance and expression of joy, in spite of anti-Black racism, are also central to Blackness and being in white spaces.

Examples of the Surveillance and Criminalization of Black Leisure in a Canadian Context

If there is one activity associated with play and Canada, it is hockey. However, a recent story illustrates how even Canada's national pastime proves inhospitable to Black Canadians. In July 2020, The Sports Network (TSN) published a story by Rick Westhead that described the experiences of two Black teenage boys and a nine-year-old Black boy who play in the Greater Toronto Hockey League and Ontario Minor Hockey Association. All three young hockey players had experienced racial slurs, anti-Black surveillance, and excessively punitive measures for their actions while playing. When the families sought recognition of this discrimination from the league and actions to address their concerns about the racism perpetuated by referees and other officials of the organization, they were dismissed and their concerns left unaddressed (Westhead 2020).

Confronting any type of racism and discrimination in Canada can be difficult because Canadians and Canadian national institutions have benefited from the myth of Canada as a multicultural country, void of such racism (Fleras 2014; Pillay 2015). This myth suggests that Black Canadians do not experience the same level of anti-Black racism found in the United States. This is not the case, as my previous examples illustrate. Indeed, anti-Black racism prevents many Black Canadians from enjoying activities used for play. However, Black Canadians persist in attempting to play hockey even considering hockey's racist history in Canada (Harris 2003). For Black people to do so in any form, whether recreationally or professionally, should be considered an act of resistance.

Many documented experiences of Canadians further demonstrate the impact of anti-Black racism on playful activities that Black Canadians attempt to freely enjoy. According to a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) report, on July 10, 2020, Ntwali Bashizi, a twenty-one-year-old student from Ottawa,

Ontario, was enjoying a leisurely bicycle ride on Stonebridge Trail along the Jock River in Barrhaven. As he approached a bridge, he decided to dismount, perhaps to take a closer look at the river. At the same time, a white woman (unnamed in the report) was approaching the foot of the bridge. Seeing him on the bridge, she insisted that his presence was “intimidating” her and demanded that the young man vacate the area so she could continue her walk along the bridge. Knowing that he was doing absolutely nothing to stop her from crossing, Bashizi stood his ground. He told her that he was not preventing her from crossing the bridge and intended to stay where he was (Mussa 2020). Not satisfied with his response, she called the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) to request assistance to remove Bashizi because she was afraid of him. Bashizi captured her call with OPS on video as she paced back and forth. It is important to note that during this altercation other people successfully crossed the bridge without any concern or interference. Still, the white woman stayed on the phone with OPS making her assertions of intimidation and fear of violence. The OPS operator, taking the word of the woman with no evidence, asked Bashizi to leave the bridge over the woman’s phone speaker.

Bashizi refused. Firm in his knowledge that he had done nothing wrong, he suggested that OPS dispatch an officer to attend to the situation. In the end, no officers were dispatched. However, knowing this incident occurred because of racial prejudice, Bashizi made a formal complaint to OPS. Upon further investigation, Bashizi’s lawyer determined that the white woman mentioned Bashizi’s race twice on her call with OPS, confirming that what Bashizi experienced was rooted in anti-Black racism (Mussa 2020).

This incident took place in Ottawa, Canada’s capital city and, by all accounts, a hot spot for Black surveillance enacted through the actions of citizens (Hwang 2021; Lord 2021). Bashizi’s example points to how even simple leisurely activities like a bicycle ride can create tensions for people who, through the racial framing of their society, believe that Black people engaged in leisure are guilty of criminal activities. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence all over the country, even in Canadian cities with a much greater population of Black residents, like Toronto (Renic 2021; William 2020).

Such an incident occurred on New Year’s Eve in 2016, when John Samuels, a Black Canadian artist, was attacked by Toronto police. The incident, reported in *Canadian Art*, an online platform for journalism and criticism about art and culture in Canada (Sandals 2017), and also skillfully elucidated in Desmond Cole’s (2020) *The Skin We Are In*, was the culmination of a series of confronta-

tions that began when Samuels obtained a storefront in downtown Toronto for his long-desired art gallery space. According to Cole, upon seeing Samuels and other Black artists in the area, local residents initiated a string of calls to police to express their concern about this Black man's activities. This triggered intense surveillance and harassment by members of Toronto Police Services (TPS) (Cole 2020).

According to *Canadian Art*, tensions came to a head during Samuels's New Year's celebration at his gallery. Planned for close friends and art lovers, the event was to be an evening of celebration, because Black galleries are rare in the city of Toronto. Instead, the TPS raided the gallery and attacked Samuels, offering the justification that Samuels had failed to obtain the correct permit for the event. Although Samuels was physically injured by members of TPS during the altercation, they charged and arrested him for assaulting a police officer and fined him for several other infractions (Sandals 2017).

Samuels's Blank Canvas Gallery had opened in 2016 to provide a safe space for Black artists. As a result of this incident, Samuels lost the gallery entirely. The locks were changed, and a space dedicated to the creative work of Black people was closed (Cole 2020). Curiously, according to *Canadian Art*, other white artists with similar spaces in the area reported never needing to obtain permits for their small functions. Samuels also suffered the inconvenience of having to engage in legal battles to have the charges against him for that night removed from his record and the fines reversed (Sandals 2017).

In this example, we can consider the possibility of a gallery space that is dedicated to Black art and creative expression. Here, Black people can enjoy leisurely viewing and appreciating the artistic pursuits of Black artists. Several scholars have positioned art galleries and museums as sites of leisure (Foley and McPherson 2000; Stephen 2001), outlining the potential of museums and, by extension, art galleries, for those who create and appreciate art as a leisure activity. Still, as demonstrated by injustice in the experience of Jon Samuels, the opportunity of owning and enjoying his gallery space for leisure is constrained by anti-Black surveillance and impending criminalization. Jon Samuels did not have the same opportunities his white gallery-owning counterparts in the same area had to enjoy gallery space for leisure, or anything else for that matter. As Black people living in Canada, the criminalization that transpires from Black surveillance follows us everywhere we go, restricting everything we do.

In 2018 *The New York Times* reported on a situation involving Toronto

filmmaker Kelly Fyffe-Marshall and her team, who were finishing a job in San Bernardino, California, and staying at an Airbnb in Palo Alto (Victor 2018). On the last day of their stay, Fyffe-Marshall backed up the vehicle in which they were traveling to load luggage for their departure. She recalls seeing an older white woman across the street steadily scrutinizing her movements, but she stopped paying attention to her as they finished packing. However, as soon as they began driving, they were suddenly surrounded by seven police vehicles on the street and a helicopter above. The filmmakers, who consisted of two Black women (including Fyffe-Marshall), one Black man, and one white woman, were asked to put their hands up and to exit their vehicle. Only the three Black crew members were restricted from movement during the altercation and eventually were informed that they were being detained while police officers investigated Fyffe-Marshall's story.

During the detainment, officers were rude and disrespectful, refusing to respond to questions as the team, knowing that no crime had been committed, grew frustrated with the inconvenience. After approximately twenty minutes of questioning and confirmation from the Airbnb host that the team was staying in her lodgings, the crew members were told that they were allowed to leave (Victor 2018).

Interestingly, after being released, a police vehicle followed the team as they drove to the airport, while the helicopter continued tracking the group from above. Again, this is another example of authorities, after implicating and harassing the activities of Black people, suggesting that the victims of their harassment and brutality are simply free to go. Free to go? Evidently, from the continued surveillance that this group experienced even after any concern about their presence was discovered to be completely unfounded, Black people are not free to go in any of the environments in which we live, work, or attempt to play. The history of Black people's nonstatus as a result (a legacy) of colonialism and slavery has deemed freedom for Black people almost impossible in North America and other parts of the world.

Although the filming team in this situation was in California to fulfill work-related tasks connected to a conference the team was attending, Airbnb has gained significant popularity among travellers as suitable accommodation options when travelling for both work or leisure (Jang et al. 2019). It is not uncommon for people who travel for work or business to take opportunities to engage in leisure activities during the trip (Harris 2009). Clearly, based on the details of the incident and how quickly the white neighbor involved police, no

type of activity, neither for leisure nor for business involving Black people, were welcome in this neighbourhood.

Discussion

I could have used countless examples here to show how anti-Black racism limits Black people's access to activities for play and other freedoms. A litany of news stories depicts the constant and present threat of criminalization that results from the active surveillance of Blackness in Canada and the United States. As I noted earlier, the persistence of anti-Black racism in these circumstances demonstrate Black people's insistence, despite the ongoing barriers and threats to freedom, to fulfill their human need for freedom and joy. The examples highlighted here also show how Black people play in the face of anti-Black racism. The message is clear, white supremacy presents very real, very violent realities for Black people; however, we are going to play on our terms, regardless. From playing hockey to cycling to attending art gallery parties, play in these Canadian examples is more about the expressed associations with the values of excitement and freedom that all Black people, no matter where they live, seek to enjoy.

To corroborate the Canadian examples, I could consider experiences of Black people in the United States. Like the example of Christian Cooper, the Black Central Park birdwatcher who was reported to police for asking a white woman to place her dog on a leash. The white woman who made the complaint was in an area of the park in which several signs indicate that dogs are required to be on a leash (Vera and Ly 2020). Or take the story of Lolade Siyonbola, a Black Yale University student who was reported to campus police for falling asleep in her dorm lounge because the complainant, a white student, believed she must be in the wrong place (Gerken 2018). Here, again, the normalized surveillance and criminalization of Blackness, motivated by the anti-Black racism of citizens, effectively limits access to these activities and their inherent values when Black people engage in them.

Taking these situations as a whole and how they reflect concerns about the surveillance of Blackness that leads to criminalizing Black activities, I can draw three clear conclusions.

First, in white-dominant societies, the status quo (white supremacy) initially established through colonial control and Black enslavement continues

to be preserved, resulting in anti-Black racism. In examining the histories of Black enslavement, which established the criminality of Black bodies within the white racial frame, we are not surprised to see legacies of the enslaved-master relationship, not that the community surveillance that maintained white supremacy historically continues to be weaponized against Black people today. Beyond superficial discussions and some minor changes meant to address the impact of racism systemically, no significant transformation has occurred in the ideologies and cultures of North American society to create the shift needed for Black people to be treated as free and equal members of society. How do Black people go from being owned for over 250 years within a system that functioned to dehumanize them, to now—in less than half of the period of legal enslavement—being seen and treated as free? I am not suggesting this type of ideological and structural change was not possible within such a period, but I argue that the unwavering support and justification for sustaining white supremacy through the policies and practices of institutions makes true and complete Black freedom an impossible feat.

In each situation I describe—from my encounter at the mall to the experience of the Toronto artist celebrating the start of a new year—members of society first engage in surveillance of Black bodies, which leads to their suspecting these Black bodies to be criminal, and finally, in most cases, results in their carrying out Black persecution by calling authorities. This series of actions, surveilling, suspecting, and criminalizing, effectively sustains the white-supremist status quo first established with colonialism and European occupation in the Americas. In a contemporary context, this system keeps Black people in perpetual bondage even as we are said to be “free,” “free to go,” or “free to play.” Sharpe (2016) asks: “What is the word for how we must approach the archives of slavery (to ‘tell the story that cannot be told’) and the histories and presents of violent extraction *in slavery and* in incarceration; the calamities and catastrophes that sometimes answer to the names of occupation, colonialism, imperialism, tourism, militarism or humanitarian aid and intervention?” (113).

Sharpe’s question resonates within this analysis as it reminds us of the sophistication of the white-supremacy system. As apparent legally instituted shifts (i.e., emancipation) take shape, the system secures white authority through the actions of its everyday protectors to ensure that full and fair participation in society cannot be achieved for those once enslaved, owned, and controlled through white dominance.

The case of Bashizi, the white woman who refused to cross the bridge

because a Black male body was standing on it, demonstrated the undeniable fact that the woman prioritized her whiteness and inherent superiority (her entitlement to leisure) over any claim to freedom this young Black man may have in an open public space. History, and contemporary inaction against racism, have taught her that she is not required to respect Black bodies even as they play. The internalization and value she placed on her superior white status within society was and continues to be a learned response made possible through submission to and protection of white supremacy.

The same is true for all the situations documented in this article. Even in my car accident, in which the white male driver of the other automobile was clearly at fault, his internalized supremacy as a white man led to my automatic guilt as a Black woman. He, then, was justified in enforcing surveillance of my body to ensure that I was treated as suspect and criminalized for his wrongful actions, all of this as I was merely trying to return from a fun and playful social gathering.

The barriers created by anti-Black racism are upheld at the institutional as well as structural levels. However, it is members of society (usually non-Black people) who through their interpersonal, social, everyday experiences maintain the suffocating criminalization of Blackness. Black bodies were seen as sub-human and criminalized even before their arrival to the Americas (Maynard 2017). Within white societies, therefore, scrutiny based on Black people's non-status was de facto permissible and actively carried out by members of society. As Maynard points out, "all free and enslaved people were subject to the surveillance of a larger white community and law enforcement officials, who together scrutinized the presence of Black bodies in public spaces" (85). The examples I have outlined demonstrate that this surveillance by society at large persists and contributes to Black people's continued nonstatus.

Unchecked anti-Black racism, in the form of normalized surveillance of Black bodies, impedes Black people from freely engaging in play or any of its derivatives. Jon Samuels, Kelly Fyffe-Marshall, and the young Black hockey players were all subject to surveillance, which led to the criminalization of their activities. By looking at the details of each incident, we get a sense of how Black people, though supposedly physically free, can be so easily monitored and tracked through the legitimized policing of Black activities. Blackness is so regularly criticized, punished, and condemned that discrimination and violence enforced on Black bodies as they play, relax, and even rest has been systematically regulated and deemed defensible. Under these circumstances, there are limits to what a Black person can do to fully benefit from the freedom that emancipation

should have legally provided. The white neighbor across the street believed she was seeing Black burglars as Fyffe-Marshall and her team loaded up their car to leave their Airbnb. The same internalized, unchecked white supremacy and entitlement factored into Samuels's business neighbors initiating calls to police about his gallery, leading to eventual assault by law enforcement officers. Anti-Black racism continues to have both its defenders and excusers. Therefore, any institutional and structural changes initiated to address racism on a broader level that allow it to go unexamined and permitted on a personal level will have very little impact.

When members of society use their power to call the police, they are exhibiting what Browne (2015) describes as one of the functions of white supremacy, which is "to make everyone aware" of the order of things, even when the order has been legally changed. She states, "if an act that is deemed criminal is an assault on sovereign's power, an exercise of sovereign power is that which seeks to make the sovereign's surplus power plainly understood by all" (35). With bastions of white supremacy around every turn ready and willing to outlaw Black bodies, the system is so powerful and pervasive that Black people, though "free," have little power to effectively or legally resist.

Most of the events I have detailed were nationally reported on a variety of news media outlets. The media reporting also note that each incident reflects severe injustice, and it may even call for broad, intentional reform to dismantle ideologies and bias. However, this is not enough. Many of these circumstances not only escalated unnecessarily but ended with confrontations with police, pointing to the ongoing threat of violence and incarceration that surround Black people even as they play. Under these conditions, how are Black people supposed to be free? How are they to enjoy human values that play has to offer such as freedom, choice, and self-expression?

Lastly, anti-Black racism and the surveillance of Blackness combine to create profound, crippling constraints on Black humanity. Blackness is in direct conflict with freedom and humanity within white-dominant societies, making play and relaxation in public space a risky, at times even a fatal, endeavor. But Black people continue to take the risk, we continue to seek the values derived from play through a variety of activities that we choose for ourselves. We take the risk and too often suffer the consequence of unjustified surveillance.

There is nothing uncommon, unfamiliar, or surprising about the anti-Black racism experienced by Black people living in Canada and the United States. Any discussion or analysis of leisure and play must also emphasize its limita-

tions for Black people in white-dominant societies. Play is not and has never been fair in the lives of Black people, and these limitations speak to continued manifestations of the nonstatus of Black people and are undoubtedly linked to the anti-Black racism.

The belief that Black people are criminals, undeserving of human values or status, is firmly rooted and deeply entrenched in the perceptions, attitudes, and actions of members of society at large. As Maynard (2010) writes, “The demonization of Black communities that has been continually reinforced by the criminal justice systems has been largely accomplished by age-old associations between Blackness and criminality” (84). As a result, the multiple ways that non-Black members of society engage in and enjoy play are not openly available for Black people in North America. Any activity chosen, whether walking in the mall, going to a party, riding a bicycle, resting at an Airbnb, or celebrating the opening of an arts space, can result in harassment, criminal charges, and physical injury. Unless of course, it is in the service of white supremacy, such as professional sports for entertainment. Black bodies are expected to play in the services of capitalist consumption, which other, non-Black people can openly enjoy. White supremacy has so effectively normalized anti-Blackness, maintaining the long history of loathing and contempt for Black life in all forms, that it is often impossible for Black people to engage in play as they desire and see fit. It can feel as if a code exists that needs to be cracked to work our way around the surveillance that interrogates Blackness and the varieties of ways we seek to play. For Black people who, through inescapable white entitlement, are deemed automatically criminal, there is nothing playful about play.

Conclusion

The characteristics that constitute play and leisure continue to be debated, but one basic element widely agreed upon is that leisure and recreation is a necessary and fundamental feature of human life. All people in Canada and the United States, two countries that boast of upholding principles of freedom and choice, should have open, unhindered opportunities to engage in play, without discrimination. For Black people, though, this freedom is an illusion. Black cultures in North America are not monolithic, we represent a multitude of identities, and we live, play, and resist, in different ways. However, due to our race, we all seem to share similar experiences that manifest from white supremacy and our his-

tories of subjugation. The idea of Black people being free to engage in play as their basic human right remains incongruent with Black life in North America. Freedom is not possible for people who live in perpetual bondage. Black people continue to cultivate their own means of freedom to resist control in all aspects of human life. This is what consciousness of Blackness and being means. It means, we are never truly free to go like many other members of society. And, still, we try to create freedom through our activities despite the people who uphold the systems designed to deny our freedoms.

Feminist scholar and activist Audre Lorde (1984) said, “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is deeply planted in within each of us” (123). This seems a fitting quote on which to end. The oppressive systems (such as white supremacy) that create the situations described in this analysis, which we seek to escape, are maintained through institutions and the ideologies and everyday actions of citizens. It is the internalized loathing toward, and nonstatus of, Blackness that restricts the activities in which Black people choose to play. Black people will always actively resist the structures and barriers that continue to hold us hostage and limit our ability to play freely. We will always find and experience joy on our terms. However, the false notion of freedom for all people remains an ongoing constraint in Black lives. For Black people to be free to go, the ongoing surveillance of Blackness needs to be addressed and dismantled. As much as anti-Black racism confines Black social life on a systemic level, it is the maintenance of oppressive ideologies through the policing of Black bodies that prevents Black people from unrestrictedly engaging in the values of human life, including the value of play. It is clear that Blackness and being has not, will not, and, I deeply fear, cannot be unshackled from slavery. White-supremacist society prevents the very thing that is needed, which is Black bodies unharnessed from racism and control, for Black people to be free, at last, to play.

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