

Writing Myself into Existence: An Essay on the Erasure of Black Indigenous Identity in Canadian Education

By Etanda Arden

I remember hearing somewhere that “no one wants to be Black.”

Thinking about that sentiment brings back a memory of my childhood, being pressured by my Indigenous friends to put my arm next to the arm of my dark-skinned Indigenous friend. I remember desperately hoping that my arm wasn't the darker one. It was, and when I saw that I felt shame and embarrassment.

More than 20 years later and I'm still struggling with the fact that the shade of my skin provokes anti-Black racism within my peers that keeps me in the margins of Indigenous society.

Layers of Insecurity

In 1983, I was born in Yellowknife, N.W.T to an 18-year-old Dene teenaged girl and a Black man who was never present and never spoken about. My mother gave me up for adoption at birth to her dad and his second wife, who was an Anishinaabe woman from Couchiching First Nation. At the time, they lived in a township just outside of Fort Frances, ON. They separated when I was three years old and a year later my mom, brother, sister (children from previous relationships), and I moved to Thunder Bay, where I have lived ever since.

Growing up I never quite fit in, for many reasons. I look more recognizably Black than Indigenous in a city with virtually no Black people, in a family with no other Black people, in a house where I wasn't biologically related to any of my family members who, along with my peers, were from a different Indigenous nation than I am. All these factors resulted in feelings of insecurity in my Indigenous identity.

I was thirty-years-old when I decided to go to university. I took a double major in Philosophy and Psychology at Lakehead but I couldn't relate to my classmates (who were made up of mostly younger white students) or the content, which was based on a Western view of the world. I ended up dropping out two years later and went to Confederation College to take Aboriginal Community Advocacy (ACA). The ACA program fostered an awakening that I'm still experiencing; I learned about colonization, white supremacy, how Indigenous peoples have been victimized but how we have persevered.

Can you be Black and Indigenous?

The ACA program taught me that many Indigenous families' traumatic circumstances were the direct result of being colonized. After learning all this, I was inspired to look into my family history. I learned that prior to contact with Euro-Canadian settlers, my family