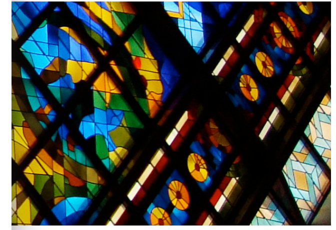
40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on Anti-Racism



DAY 22

Reflections on the Term “BIPOC” (Part 1)

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Learning

Categories are tricky things. We create them to make sense of our world, which means that our sense of the world is created through them. But how do we create categories? Who decides which ones we use, and what they describe?

It’s a tough question to answer, especially when what we’re categorising is ourselves. A global history of racist colonization has made human categories unavoidable: many of us—Indigenous, Black, Asian, Latinx—are categorized whether we want to be or not. Resistance to racism, too, often starts from identifying with categories. The struggle is to decide which categories to use, and how.

Lately, one such category has been causing a bit of commotion: “**Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour**,” or “**BIPOC**,” for short. It’s a new category for many people, and for many, it’s also an uncomfortable one. Where did it come from? Why does it make the distinctions it makes? There are a lot of questions about it, and not many reliable answers.

When and where did it originate?

A lot of people assume that “BIPOC” is an American term that emerged recently. The truth is, BIPOC has been around since the early 2010s, and most likely originated in Canada. From the late 2000s, social media users were using the acronym “POC” as a shorthand for “people of colour,” and using other, related acronyms, like QTPOC (queer/trans people of colour). BIPOC emerged as one of these acronyms. Its first recorded use was in a 2013 tweet by a Toronto-based queer POC event organiser, and it spread through social media and activist circles in the wake of movements like Idle No More and #BlackLivesMatter.

What does it mean?

Technically, the full term should be “Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour.” It’s a way of naming groups of people who are categorized as “not White” and so are targeted by the systems of violence, exploitation, and displacement that we collectively call White supremacy. The “other” is important here: Black and Indigenous people could also be considered people of colour. Which leads us to our next question.

Why distinguish Black and Indigenous people from other people of colour?

The term is meant to name non-White peoples who are targeted by White supremacy, while at the same time distinguishing how Black and Indigenous people are subjected to particularly brutal forms of supremacy on this continent. Distinguishing anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms is important for a few reasons.

- Black and Indigenous people face life-threatening violence on a colossal, systemic scale across this continent, which makes it urgent for us to recognize and address the systems that target them.
- Indigenous genocide and Black enslavement form the political, economic, and societal foundations of Canada and the U.S., which makes them crucial to understanding how race has shaped our country today.
- As racism gets framed as a general problem of "exclusion" and our focus is turned to diversity and inclusion, we lose track of—and therefore need to highlight—the distinctive violence that Black and Indigenous people face.

Does that mean Black and Indigenous people are more important?

No. This isn't a question of who is more important, or whose oppression or experiences matter more. It's not even about which people do or don't experience violence; after all, many peoples of colour are subjected to violence in other parts of the world. Instead, distinguishing Black and Indigenous people's experiences is about recognising that the dynamics that affect us are related but not the same, and that we need to take these differences seriously, in context, in our anti-racism and racial justice work.

Remember, too, that many individuals experience more than one type of racism. What we're addressing here aren't individual people's identities and experiences, which are always complex, but the dynamics that target them on a systemic scale.

Shouldn't we be treating everyone the same?

Not necessarily. There's a difference between valuing everyone and treating everyone the same, and we're aiming for the former, which actually requires us to treat people differently, according to what they need to live a valued life. Jesus recognized this: he spoke to everyone but spent most of his time with the poor and marginalized, and his ministry was universal, but he also healed those who had immediate need.

We all make these kinds of calls when we approach a complex problem. Some issues need urgent attention, while we might have or even need more time for others, but each is important. It's the same with our approach to racism: we may have to deal with some racial dynamics first, but that doesn't make the others less important. After all, we need to address them all in order to dismantle the whole system of White supremacy.

This theme will be continued on Day 23.

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