

Psychology EDI Reading Group #1
(originally held Wednesday March 10th 2021, 10-11am)
The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power by Desmond Cole
Discussion Questions and Prompts
Prepared by Sari van Anders and Trinda Penniston, 02.24.21
Last Edited 05.07.2021

We had a LOT of questions we wanted to ask during the reading group, and a LOT of prompts for facilitating discussion - much more than what we could get through in only 1 hour. So, we are sharing with you the questions/prompts that we prepared for the reading group. We hope these questions/prompts will aid you in your self-reflections and critical thinking about anti-Black racism and Black resistance in Canada.

Trigger Warning: Some prompts briefly describe specific traumatic events that Cole recounts in his book. These questions/prompts will only include brief summaries – not any graphic details. Readers should be mindful when referring to the book for more details regarding any traumatic event recounted by Cole, especially if you have not read the book yet. Scenarios recounting Black trauma should not be searched for only the purpose of satisfying one's curiosity.

1. Early in the book, Cole notes “This is so often how news spreads, through the outraged cries of Black fam on social media, people I may never have met but with whom I am always swimming in the struggle” (pg. 4). How do you often hear about Black experiences and anti-Black racism? Is this different from what you see posted/shared directly by Black folks on social media? Why do you think this is?
2. What does this “They didn’t believe Black people before the numbers, and they don’t believe us now.” (p. 63) say for change attempts and/or continued calls for more data?
3. How do we see racism and anti-Blackness applied to children, youth, and young adults (e.g., university students) in Canada?
4. How much of the anti-Black history – and present – in Cole’s book was new to you? What do you think caused that (i.e., a lot of it was new or wasn’t new)?
5. Cole uses the term “white supremacist improv” to describe how “white supremacy encourages the people it benefits to create their own parallel universe, their own set of facts and explanations about the existence and prevalence of racism...” and “share an explanation that eases their anxiety and shame” (pg. 31-32). In what ways do we see this in Canada? In academia? In our department?
6. How does academia – like journalism – want to bring in people who are oppressed, but not their ideas, priorities, or fights for rights?
7. In Chapter 3 “Justice for Abdirahman,” Cole notes how coffee shop workers believed they had no other option than to call the police on Abdirahman Abdi, who witnesses believed was harassing and attacking several people in and around the shop. Abdirahman sustained serious injuries and lost his life at the hands of the police. Cole noted how people were asking “what about the person being groped or assaulted? What about those people...?” The question of “whose lives/well-being is more important?” is tough in these situations. How do we navigate these tough situations? Whose lives and well-being are often being prioritized?

8. People often criticize BLM and Black activism for turning potential allies off. As Cole asks on p.191, “What is the purpose of activism?” We could also ask: What is the purpose of EDI work?
9. Cole states how “the [*Toronto*] *Star* wanted [his] profile but not [his] voice, [his] “diversity” but not [his] blackness” (pg. 78). What does he mean by this, and where else do you see this happening in Canada? In academia?
10. When anti-Black racism happens, it hits anti-Black racism hits Black people and non-Black people differently; reflect on how Cole notes: “I sometimes ask “Why?” but it’s more of a lament than a question.” (p.4)
11. In Chapter 5 “Deep Breath,” Cole writes about being grateful for the Spring, flowers, animals, friendship, and love. What do you think was the purpose of this chapter? Who do you think it was for?
12. What did you read that changed your idea of Canada as a historical and/or present haven for Black people fleeing enslavement or other adverse circumstances? Or did your ideas not change (and why)?
13. In Chapter 6: “honoured groups” Cole discusses how BLM Toronto organizers have called out Pride Toronto for their anti-Black racism, quoting Alexia Williams stating “We threw bricks for you. We got locked up for you... Don’t you ever forget who made this possible” (pg. 99) and signs that read “May we never again need to remind you that we, too, are queer” and “May we never again need to remind you that WE built this” (pg. 84). In what ways do we see anti-Black racism among other marginalized and racialized communities in Canada?
14. How does “White supremacy is never personal, never individual, never isolated.” (p. 7) play out in our department and at Queen’s?
15. In Chapter 8 “Here for Dafonte,” Cole recounts how police brutally assaulted 19-year-old Dafonte Miller, resulting in several severe injuries, including permanent damage to his eye. In what ways did Dafonte Miller (and all other victims of police brutality and violence noted in Cole’s book) receive justice? What does “justice” mean, and what does it look like? In what ways was justice *not* served?
16. I remember reading about carding when the stories and reporting came out in the *Toronto Star* (including work Cole did!) and I was surprised/not surprised. Cole lived in Kingston for a short time and his first/earliest memories of police surveillance, harassment, and carding were in Kingston. This book fleshed out my understanding of all this. How did it shape your view of anti-Blackness in Canada and in policing?
17. What did you learn about the Underground railroad and its significance in Canada that you did not know before reading Cole’s book? What were you surprised/not surprised by? How has the railroad influenced Black Canadian history in academia?
18. What were your reactions to “The police are just doing their job: a central responsibility of policing has always been to discipline Black people on behalf of the ruling class.” (p.4); would you have reacted differently before BLM vs. after, thinking about police in Canada vs. the U.S., before reading this book vs. after.