

Anti-black Sanism

<https://equitableeducation.ca/2016/podcast-antiblack-sanism-abdirahman>

[[Draft transcript, courtesy of Ryerson University – School of Disability Studies]]

>>The death of 37-year-old Abdirahman Abdi has hit the community hard. There were demands for answers and for better police training, as well as tears and sorrow yesterday, as mourners filled Ottawa's main mosque for Abdi's funeral. Meanwhile, a peaceful march is planned for this afternoon, to demand justice for Abdi's death. It starts at 1:30, at Somerset Square in Hintonburg and it will make its way to police headquarters on Elgin Street.

>>So, Idil, the people are going to be listening to this interview. It's almost half an hour long, about— about the police killing of Abdirahman Abdi in Ottawa. And there's a broader context which we're going to be talking about and that is this concept of anti-black sanism. So I was wondering, just very briefly before we actually get into the interview, just explain what you mean by that, what is that?

>>Sure, thanks Greg. So maybe first, I'll just quickly explain sanism. So sanism is a particular type of discrimination and oppression that is lodged against individuals who are living with mental health issues and sometimes individuals who are soon to be living with mental health issues, that have very severe and damaging consequences for them.

>>Mhmm.

>>And so sanism can be experienced by anyone of any race, gender, any age, and etcetera. Quickly in terms of anti-black racism, is a particular type of pernicious racism that is directed towards black people, black Canadians, etcetera. Anti-black racism is global; anti-blackness is global. So when we put together now the concept of those anti-black and sanism in one sentence, or as a concept, what it means is a particular type of weaponizing against black individuals who are living with mental health issues. And so as opposed to just coming to the conversation from understanding that sanism on its own is an issue, what we're doing is looking through a lens of anti-blackness in order to understand the experiences of Black people who are also living with mental health issues.

[Sirens and music. Excerpt of rap song playing]

>>(Rapping) *And if I try to fight back/Well then I'm dead and Black—*

>>This is Greg Macdougall with Equitable Education (.) ca. Today, July 31st, I'm speaking with Idil who is Board Chair with Across Boundaries, a mental health centre in Toronto. We're speaking about the killing by police of Abdirahman Abdi which happened in Ottawa July 24th. It was a Sunday morning and police were called to a coffee shop, where there was a disturbance. When they arrived, Abdirahman fled to his apartment building. As he got there and was trying to get inside the building, the police grabbed him

and beat him unconscious. There were witnesses there —multiple witnesses who described a brutal beating. He was left unconscious in handcuffs, face down in his own blood.

It came out a few days later that when the paramedics arrived, there were no vital signs. A few things have come out since then; one being that what the police were called for —to the coffee shop. The media reported what the allegations were but in a VICE article that I saw recently, another witness came forward to say no, that didn't actually happen.

Another thing is it was reported immediately the family thought he was dead at the time. But then it was uh - the next day the media reporting. . . that he died Monday afternoon. Even though it was then that the family released a statement through their spokesperson, saying the hospital told them he had actually been dead forty-five minutes before he arrived at the hospital, and that would be Sunday morning. But they didn't tell the family he had died until the Monday afternoon. So, so there's questions there.

One of the things in the media afterwards was the police union, or the Ottawa Police Association, head Matt Skof on CBC radio saying race had nothing to do with this and to talk like it did—I don't know what he said—but basically saying we shouldn't talk about race. And then that is one of the things that was in the, the press statement from Across Boundaries, which Idil, maybe you could speak to.

>>Yes. So firstly, again Greg, thank you for having me. And we extend our deepest condolences to the Abdi family and the broader Ottawa community. So indeed, yes that among many other things we take issue with. Primarily what we see here by the comments from the president of the police union is the omission and outright dismissal of anti-black racism and/or a conversation about race. And so while he asks us to A) not speak about race and further suggest its inappropriate, these statements in and of themselves are actually baseless and have had no evidence. So to date, we don't know what the outcome is, which suggest racialized people, and in particular Black people, should not voice their concerns or speak to the experiences of racism is absurd.

>>You said we don't know what the outcome is. Are you afraid to?

>>So while he's suggesting that race—that racism—is not an issue here, he—we—in fact don't know if race was not an issue here.

>>Mhmm.

>>Right? So to suggest that race is not an issue, without having—is premature. Quite clear that race, for many reasons, is not just an issue but is a core issue and is fundamentally at root in this situation.

>>I think when you said outcome, you may have been referring to the Special Investigations Unit, in the investigation?

>>Yes.

>>I omitted that when I was describing what happened. So the Special Investigations Unit was called in, two of the police are subjects of their investigation. And also, I didn't mention that Abdirahman, was a 37-year-old male, originally from Somalia. And also has been reported to have mental health issues. And so I wanted to ask, 'cause you're the chair of the board of a Mental Health Centre for racialized people in Toronto. What do you see are the key issues in this? And, and you said this has really impacted people deeply and impacted the community deeply.

>>I, I think, of course, there, there are many issues that are obviously at play. First and foremost, is that of blackness and anti-blackness: poor and deplorable policing: an inability to de-escalate a person that's living with a mental health issue and; really, what we seeing here is that there is clearly a problem with, with blackness and clearly a problem with mental health. And so we have to start to ask critical questions about what the intersection of both blackness and mental health breeds a particular type of outcome from police services across Ontario.

I think it's really important to underscore that this isn't a new problem.

>>Yeah.

>>So again, the fact that I want to go back to this statement with me, that the Ottawa Police Union president, to say that conversations about race are inappropriate. . .in fact, what is inappropriate is death starting from 1978 of black men at the hands of police services across, across Ontario, but specifically police services in Toronto.

I just want to quickly recall a few things here for folks that are new here to this conversation. 1978 we had Andrew Evans; the following year, 1979 we had Albert Johnson. Subsequently we've had, we lost, Wade Lawson in 1988, Lester Donaldson also in 1988, O'Brien Christopher-Reid in 2004, Michael Elgon in 2012, Reyal J. Douglas in 2013, Ian Pryce in 2013, and more recently we've seen Jermaine Carby and Andrew Loku.

So I would, again, I think it's absurd, given this history and now a week ago, that this man with Abdi, would suggest that race is not a factor, is in fact its own illustration of racism, anti-blackness and white supremacy logic and further we can see how it's that kind of attitude and rhetoric that we see that manifest in day-to-day policing. Our inability to even begin to even question or query the issue of race in a conversation, when a community's saying, "Hey! This is odd for us." We have to look at how does this play out; how does this kind of discourse and rhetoric play out in the day-to-day lives of black people? And we saw how that plays out in the day-to-day lives of black people, we saw that last Sunday on Hilda Street. That's what we saw and—

>>Yeah.

>>And this idea that we should be waiting for the SIU and that the SIU is some general, kind of fair process. Let's not forget who is employed by the SIU, firstly. Secondly, I also want to draw our attention to a story that was done by the Toronto Star—

>>Mhmm.

>>Which looked at three-thousand plus cases by the SIU, or investigations by the SIU, from 1990 to 2010. And in that, what we found was that in a 20-year period, only 16 officers had been convicted of a crime and only 3 of those officers actually faced prison, faced any kind of prison time and served specific time there. Now let's further complicate that. In a 25-year, year history of the SIU what we also see there is that in the incidents related to black bodies, that there's never been a decision that has been beneficial, where the investigation has been beneficial that has released a decision that is meaningful in the context of Black life.

So the fact that people aren't trusting the SIU, the fact that people aren't trusting the process of the SIU, there's a reason for that. And, and it's this kind of research and data that's telling us, "Hey, there's an issue here." And just to ensure folks know where to be able to access that, that actually came out of also a report that was done by a Toronto lawyer, Anthony Morgan, in a report that's called *The Civic and Political Wrong: The Growing Gap Between International, Civic and Political Life*. So again, I encourage listeners to go back to that report and really engage with this material from a primary place.

>>And I know previously you were telling me that the, the way the SIU came into being. So the SIU's this Ontario organization that investigates when police kill or seriously injure. And you said that it was in the early 90s and it was a lot of the black community pressuring that there needs to be something done.

>>And so isn't it telling that it is the black community and some other communities who support it but mainly, and at the front of this, was the Black Action Defence Committee, who pushed for a process of accountability. And now to see that the labour of the black community is exactly what in itself is being used to not serve the black community. And that's not something new. The black community in both Toronto and Ontario and throughout Canada, have been at the forefront of many kinds of advocacy and activism work, that often turns out not benefitting the black community readily.

>>Mhmm.

>>So absolutely not the, the inception of the SIU was directly _____ Toronto's black community and Toronto's black activists.

>>And of course, we don't want to forget about the mental health aspect of this, all those people you've listed, the names of those who've been murdered, are killed by police, I think you list at least ten people, those are at least ten people with mental health issues, right?

>>Absolutely, those are people living at the intersection of blackness and madness or also referred to with mental health, mental health experiences.

>>Yeah.

>>So indeed. I think we have to look at how is it that, that mental health and/or blackness are both compounded and what happens in that space when these two experiences, these two lived experiences, coincide?

>>Yeah.

>>And what we see is that there is already a particular type of discourse around people living with mental health issues, as quote unquote being folks you should be fearful of; being folks that are dangerous; being folks that are erratic. That kind of really problematic sanist kind of attitude.

>>Mhmm.

>>And then we compound that with folks—black folks—who are seen in a very particular way. So in a sense there is like a dual kind of social response that people are interacting with. Because we do see in fact that police are able and have capacity to de-escalate other people. And so when we . . . when we ask this question, my entry point is more a point of anti-black sanism. My point of entry in this discussion is from a specific location of blackness at the intersection of mental health and not the other way around. Because what we know is a black body has a particular type of outcome. And that is often one that is fatal. And we really have to underscore that experience there.

>>Yeah and I want to say I, that I heard people saying, well if Abdirahman wasn't a black man, would the, would the police beat to death someone else of a different identity? And I don't think many people can really imagine that in the same way as what happened.

>>Yeah, I can't imagine that, certainly not, not based on the evidence and names I have read before.

>>Yeah.

>>Right? I can't imagine that. Absolutely not.

>>No.

>>No.

>>And another thing, this USA Today article that I had seen from December of last year, where the headline was, I think they use the term "mentally ill," are sixteen times more likely to be killed by police than say, a regular person. But I think, I think when you're talking about intersectionality, it's not, say a white woman, who's going to be sixteen times more likely to be killed by police because she is, she has mental health issues. It's a . . . yeah, it's an intersectional issue.

>>Mhmm, absolutely. You know, it is, it is intersectional and certainly . . . I also want to say that black women as well quite clearly experience violence from police, as do Black women with mental health issues, black women generally. Indigenous folks, Indigenous folks living with mental health issues, folks that are poor. It is an intersectional issue, when we're talking, we're approaching this issue from a mad or mental health issue perspective.

>>Yeah.

>>Part of having intersectional conversations is having intersectional conversations with integrity, and with honesty.

>>Mhmm.

>>So we can't, we can't really do this "add a pinch of this, add a pinch of that, blend" and keep going. No. This requires us to look at history. So it requires us to look back. It requires us to look within; it requires us to look forward and; it requires us to look in the immediacy. Where are we right now? Where were we? What is happening? What happened and how do we make those changes? Being intersectional in our analysis requires a bit more work than I think sometimes folks are ready for. Approaching mental health from an anti-black sanism lens does not, does not mean we're not talking about mental health. Does not mean we're not talking about other folks' experiences within mental health. It means we're saying "we get that," right? We get that mental health is difficult for lots of folks. We understand that in and of itself, as a particular—there's a particular experience of that in the social world. Again, that's called sanism.

But when we compound these experiences, how else can you look at this issue? So really beginning, beginning to look at that, and there's, there's become a way in which intersectionality has both served as an excuse, but also served as a way to really kind of water down in some senses what we're talking about.

>>Mhmm.

>>For a true intersectional approach begs from us that we do a bit more work.

>>I'm wondering what you mean when you say it's an excuse, that it's a watering down.

>>I think what happens is sometimes we'll just, we'll simply make reference to, to . . . intersectional or other lived experiences with folks that are living with mental health.

>>Mhmm.

>>But we won't necessarily speak to the actual facts. So let's talk about, for example, the fact that schizophrenia has been referred to as a black man disease for decades. Let's talk about the fact that folks who are hyper-diagnosed, over diagnosed, poorly treated, poorly served and left on the fringes of the mental health system are black folk.

Let's talk about the fact that the people who are in community treatment orders, which is a criminal id tool, are black folk. Let's talk about the fact that we have, we have many black folks that are still not able to access mental health services, sorry, mainstream mental health services in the ways they would like to. Let's talk about the fact that we see that for many folks, and particularly young black folks, again, as highlighted in African and Caribbean to be specific—

>>Mhmm.

>>People, as highlighted in the CAMH studies, tell us that it takes black folks anywhere between—anywhere up to eighteen months to seek treatment.

>>And just, just to—yeah—to jump in there, CAMH is a Canadian Association—no, what is it?

>>Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

>>Right. In Toronto?

>>Yeah, in Toronto. So they did a study and in that study what they told us was that it takes up to eighteen months for a young, black person to be looked at, to get the care they need. And also highlighted that often, that treatment comes by way of the criminal justice system.

>>Mmm . . .

>>Right? So what I'm saying is we really need to be able to name these things. And I can go on and provide example after example after example

>>Yeah, yeah

>> But black people and the black community and the black communities, because we are diverse, we're not a monolith, cannot continue to be . . . we cannot continue to be who the mental health system benefits from. So we can't continue to be the folks who line your day program; line your psychiatric ward; line your, your case management rosters or continue to be getting poor care.

So we really have to implicate the way in which the mental health system can be understood as a new plantocracy.

>>So you—a

>>Yeah.

>>I was just going to say, so it's obviously not just a police problem. We're talking about much broader issues that the police are just one aspect of.

>>Yeah, we are talking about much broader issues. But again, what I do want to underscore, is what I won't allow to happen—

>>Yeah

>>is that it often used to happen, is we look to blame sort of the nonprofit industrial complex and/or the mental health system.

>>Mhmm.

>>For issues in any of these fatal, fatal deaths. So while, yes, there's many problems, right? There's systemic problems certainly. But we're extremely concerned about the degree of force used by the Ottawa police, given the tragic and ostensibly preventable outcome of this interaction. So I don't want to conflate those, right? So there's, there's larger systemic issues but in this context, and in the context of other individual's names that I had said, right?

>>Mhmm

>>It wasn't about a broken mental health system that did that. It was specifically police services or the ways in which police interact with black bodies and the consistent leading to black death.

>>Mhmm

>>and that is also what we witnessed that day. We witnessed black death. Ottawa and Toronto and the nation? What we saw publicly was black death and we should all be outraged. All of us should be outraged because of this, the mental health community, the Ottawa community, the black community—we're all implicated. We are all implicated, particularly implicated when we are silent; when they're silent and when we silence the conversation around Blackness in this context.

>>Yeah, and it's—yeah, it's right there; everyone's hot. And I was thinking when, as you were discussing these issues, just like how much can the media do when they just do a little story and have a little, a few little points that they kind of get across . . .

>Mhmm

>>Where, where does this conversation really happen and where, where does the change come from?

>>Mhmm, mhmm. So the conversation is happening. The conversation is happening as black people are, are mourning in their homes, as black people are outraged in the streets, in private, in text message or conversations on Twitter. The conversation is happening.

>Mhmm

>>We also have to look at, again, how did the media take up this issue? How many headlines actually used race in a way that was to really name and implicate, versus using race as a descriptor in the broader story. What, what media outlet, both locally in Ottawa and nationally throughout Canada, is asking the really difficult question. Who's doing the work to find out how else this is happening in Ottawa? The media is implicated; media is implicated in accepting language like anti-black racism; media is implicated in accepting language like blackness. And sort of really, you know, also producing another discourse which is, again, quote unquote, "I've seen things said about this mentally ill man, we didn't really know what was happening," which also has a certain kind of impact as well. So I think, indeed, while there has been some coverage in Ottawa, some really good coverage in Ottawa, I, I also think that media really need to sit with what is our fear around language of blackness and anti-blackness. What are we afraid to name? Because we saw it; we saw anti-blackness live. We saw it that day; we witnessed it.

>>I think maybe . . . and where I was going with it is also how do . . . how we see this and we have conversations about it and where, where does that all go?

>>Mhmm, Mhmm. Yeah, I think that there's, I think there are individuals that are demanding things like body-worn cameras and different type of methods and measures of accountability, I think and better training.

>>Mhmm

>>We've been saying better training for decades. Better training did not stop the fatal deaths of many of those men I mentioned. And again, I come back to better training that doesn't address anti-black racism, is useless. Better training that doesn't address how it is to approach and interact with individuals with mental health issues is not necessarily beneficial. While I think that body-worn cameras have their place

>>Yeah

>>I also want to remind us that, for example, now we have the evidence. We have the evidence of what happened to Abdirahman Abdi. We've all seen it. We all saw what happened to the late Sammy Yatim in the Toronto, on the Toronto streetcar.

>>Yeah

>>And so I, I want us to think about that a little bit, right? We're. we're seeing this and more recently, we're seeing James Forcillo now getting a six-year, getting a six-year sentence., subsequently after he received bail, subsequently after he went home, while again we watched that.

So I think we, we also need to be a little bit more strategic in the things that we ask for. But also really begin to understand that there's a different type of implication that needs to happen in the context of policing, that is going beyond it. That I guess, what I'm doing, is asking you a question back, which is certainly not for you to answer—

>>Mhmm

>>Which is we've seen that even in the presence of footage and evidence what the outcomes could be. And so I don't, I guess I'm saying that I don't know how beneficial body-worn cameras are, I'm not saying they're not useful, I'm just sort of putting out another point of contention. I think certainly race-based data would be great. We're still in a time where we don't have any race-based statistics on police interactions that, police interactions that end up becoming fatal. We still don't have that.

>>Yeah

>>have that. We're not collecting that data and we need to start collecting that data.

>>To add to that, is not race-based but the documentary that's, that's already online and it's going to be shown on CBC. It's called *Hold Your Fire*. The filmmakers actually had to go and get all this statistics or data

>>Mhmm

>>from the different provinces. And I think they, maybe it was a ten-year period and they found about 200 police killings, actual shooting killings?

>>Mhmm

>>And I think they found about 40% of those—yeah, 40% of those were people in mental health crisis.

>>Mhmm. And so that's the data we need.

>>Yeah.

>>We need certainly like, in this case, we, we need that kind of data that looks at fatal outcomes, particularly when mental health and race are at the forefront of these interactions. So I think, I certainly think that's important. And I also think too that we also have to do like this inside-outside institutional policing analysis. And sort of bring in the prison industrial complex and what's happening inside the prison industrial complex with folks who are afflicted with mental health issues as well.

So I really want to also alert people to the fact that individuals who are either in forensic types of institutions and/or regular jails and prisons who happen to live with mental health issues or happen to be Black or otherwise racialized, certainly Indigenous, Indigenous folks, are also dying there.

>>Yeah

>>And also, again, like at the hands of these specific types of officials, like we've seen these kinds of reports. And again, just really drawing folks' attention to that.

>>Yeah, sure.

>>And again, to quickly sort of highlight to folks that we've seen the example of solitary, solitary confinement or isolation is disproportionately used against Black and Indigenous people, and Black and Indigenous people who also happen to have mental health issues. As well as recent deaths within both forensic institutions, as well as, again, jails and prisons, right?

>>Yeah

>>So ensuring to keep that in mind.

>>It's an interesting difference where we're talking about this subject now because everyone saw what happened to Abdirahman.

>>Mhmm.

>>And what's happening in prison, people don't see that. It's like you're saying, you want to draw people's attention so that they know that's happening and—

>>Oh, absolutely.

>>Yeah

>Oh yeah. Absolutely, absolutely. And I think as well, right, like of course you and I are talking about this in the Ottawa context because we've seen it. But I also have to underscore that by saying black communities, particularly here in Toronto, have been talking about this since 1978 and probably even before that.

>> Yeah

>>Right?

>>Yeah

>>And this particular intersection, intersection of both blackness and mental health and these conversations have been happening. What's really sad is that we—because people have seen it, in a sense now it's more believable.

>>Mm

>>And I want to highlight the anti-blackness in that as well.

>>Yeah

>>So you have to consume our death—our murder, publically—for you to believe that this is a real thing that really happens and has been happening to our community and our people for a very, very long time. So that as well, I think, is challenging; it's challenging and it's difficult and it's rough. And so I think, I think that's important to highlight, highlight all of this because this isn't new for us. It hasn't been new —

>>No

>>It wasn't new. What happened on Hilda Street is something that, that the collective public witnessed.

>>Yeah. And when you say it's challenging and difficult—I know another word you used was despair.

>>Yeah

>>Yeah. And I was just thinking, yeah this thing that everyone is seeing it and. . .we're seeing . . .is there justice for it? And then how does that affect people?

>>Mhmm

>>Um, yeah.

>>Mhmm

>>And over long periods of time? Right —yeah.

>>Mhmm. And yeah, I think, I wish I could be hopeful. But I struggle with being hopeful, with being hopeful for my people. I struggle with being hopeful for the mental health community and I struggle with being hopeful for folks in Ottawa, knowing the outcome of previous SIU decisions. So I'm critically hopeful that sort of the large-scale conversation around this might lead to something different? But I'm struggling with being, again, sort of hopeful, knowing what we know about SIU decisions. And I think that's really difficult. I think that's really difficult as citizens, as citizens of this country, especially with

the SIU again that we fought for. Again, I think it's really difficult to be . . . yeah. In despair. In despair with what will be a just process, a fulsome process and a process of accountability.

>>Yeah. Alright, well thank you for your time.

>>Oh thank you as well. Just one really quick thing.

>>Yeah, yeah

>>Again, for folks who are interested around issues of anti-blackness, some of the stuff I spoke about today in a community-led and driven report that Stephen Lewis prepared. And that's a 1992 report on anti-black racism. And again, you can just go onto Google and type in Stephen Lewis and anti-black racism, this report will come up. So if folks want to have a look at that and anything else I mentioned during this conversation, go to the CAMH, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health studies online. The document from Anthony Morgan is online. The report prepared by Stephen Lewis is online so I really encourage folks to look into that inclination. And thank you so much for having me, Greg.

>>Yeah, I think it is important that we do what we can, right?

>>Yeah, absolutely. We have to demand justice. We have to demand justice. We have to demand justice

>>Mhmm

>>For Abdirahman and for, for the rest of us. We saw it happen; we see it happen, we've been seeing it happen, and, and we need to really, really need to think about this going forward.

>>So for listeners, just a note: all the links, all the reports that Idil mentioned in this interview are online, in the post at equitableeducation.ca. And also to note that the audio file of this is downloadable there, in case anybody wants to play it on community radio or elsewhere.

[music]