



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2021

Black Lives Matter Reading Group: Hosted by Dr. Camille Isaacs

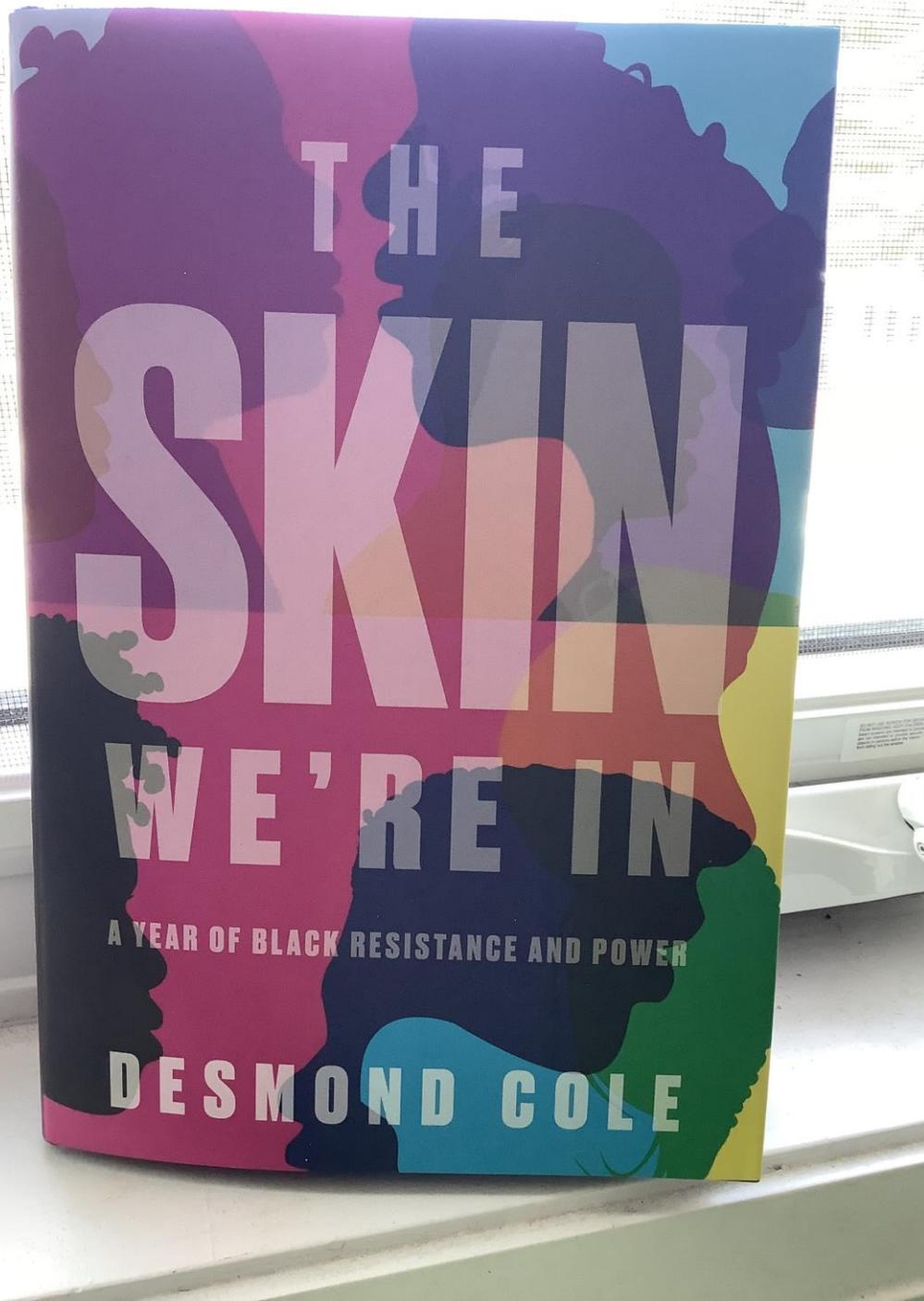
Isaacs, Camille

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Black Lives Matter
Reading Group –
Hosted by
Dr. Camille Isaacs

Sponsored by OCAD U's Library Book Club

Desmond Cole

- **Journalist and activist.** His work has appeared in *The Walrus*, *The Toronto Star*, and *Toronto Life*. He most recently won the Toronto Book Award (2020).
- **ARTICLE:** "The Skin I'm in." *Toronto Life* 49, no. 5 (2015): 38. Available at <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A412799760/CPI?u=toro37158&sid=CPI&xid=a6d092de>
- **FILM:** *The Skin We're In*. Filmoption International, 2017 (full video 43:44). Available at https://fod-infobase-com.ocadu.idm.oclc.org/p_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=145234
- **BOOK:** *The Skin We're In: A Year of Resistance and Power*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2020. Available at most bookstores.



Othello ~1603

- How does Othello relate to current BLM events and protests?
- Othello is constantly surveilled by the Venetians, some of whom question his authority
- Othello is discriminated against and labelled with numerous racist slurs
- He is called “thick lips” and said to have a “sooty bosom”
- He is referred to in animalistic language, including “Barbary horse”
- His marriage to the white Desdemona reveals Venetian society’s fear of miscegenation
- Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, is woken in the middle of the night and told that “an old black ram is tugging your white ewe”

Othello ~1603

- The Moors were, of course, historically Muslim. And the fear is that, although he has converted to Christianity, that Othello might be secretly Muslim.
- He is referred to by “the Moor” more frequently than he is called by name.
- His orphan status doesn’t help. Being without family makes him vulnerable
- He is thought to be oversexed and called “lascivious”
- After days of constant needling by his right-hand man, Iago, about Desdemona’s supposed infidelity, Othello suffers several mental-health episodes.
- He experiences headaches, faints, has several seizures, and is thought to have “epilepsy”

Othello ~1603

- Despite the news of Othello and Desdemona's elopement, he is allowed to go to fight the Turks because, above all else, his warrior skills are valued
- Othello is so valued for his physical prowess, for his skills in battle, that it earns him a compliment from the Duke of Venice:
- “If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black”
- I often show the students various images of Othello, which stress his athletic ability



Othello by Edmund Kean, 1814

- Note the musculature in his legs.
- He carries a dagger in one hand and a genie's lamp in the other, emphasizing his "Oriental" appearance
- Source: www.humns.canterbury.ac.nz

Othello ~1603 --- BLM 2020

- I asked my students to trace anti-Black racism from Othello's time to the current era.
- The public lynching of George Floyd by state-sanctioned police officers in 2020, and the resultant protests, were perhaps uppermost in everyone's mind. And I, too, referenced the killing.
- Almost all the students referenced American examples in their papers.
- I realized my mistake.
- The majority of the students did not see BLM as a Canadian movement.
- They seemed unaware of the numerous killings of Black, Indigenous, and racialized people, often at the hands of police over the years in Canada.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) Canada

- So, what I so appreciate about Desmond Cole's work (in articles, film, and book) is that he highlights BLM as a Canadian movement.
- We're going to take a look at a short clip from the documentary



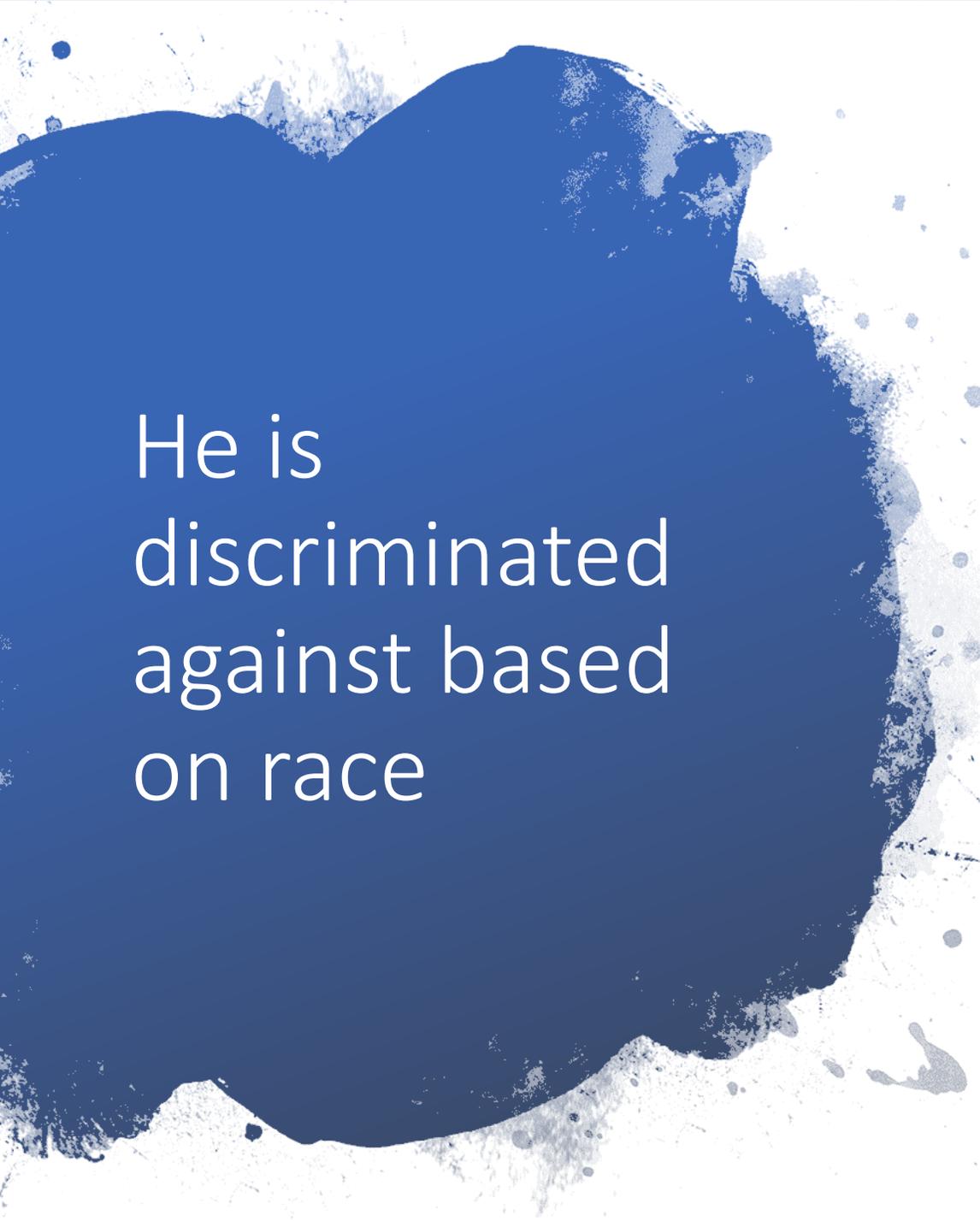
Desmond Cole

- What has changed in 400 years?
- How does Cole's life differ from Othello's?



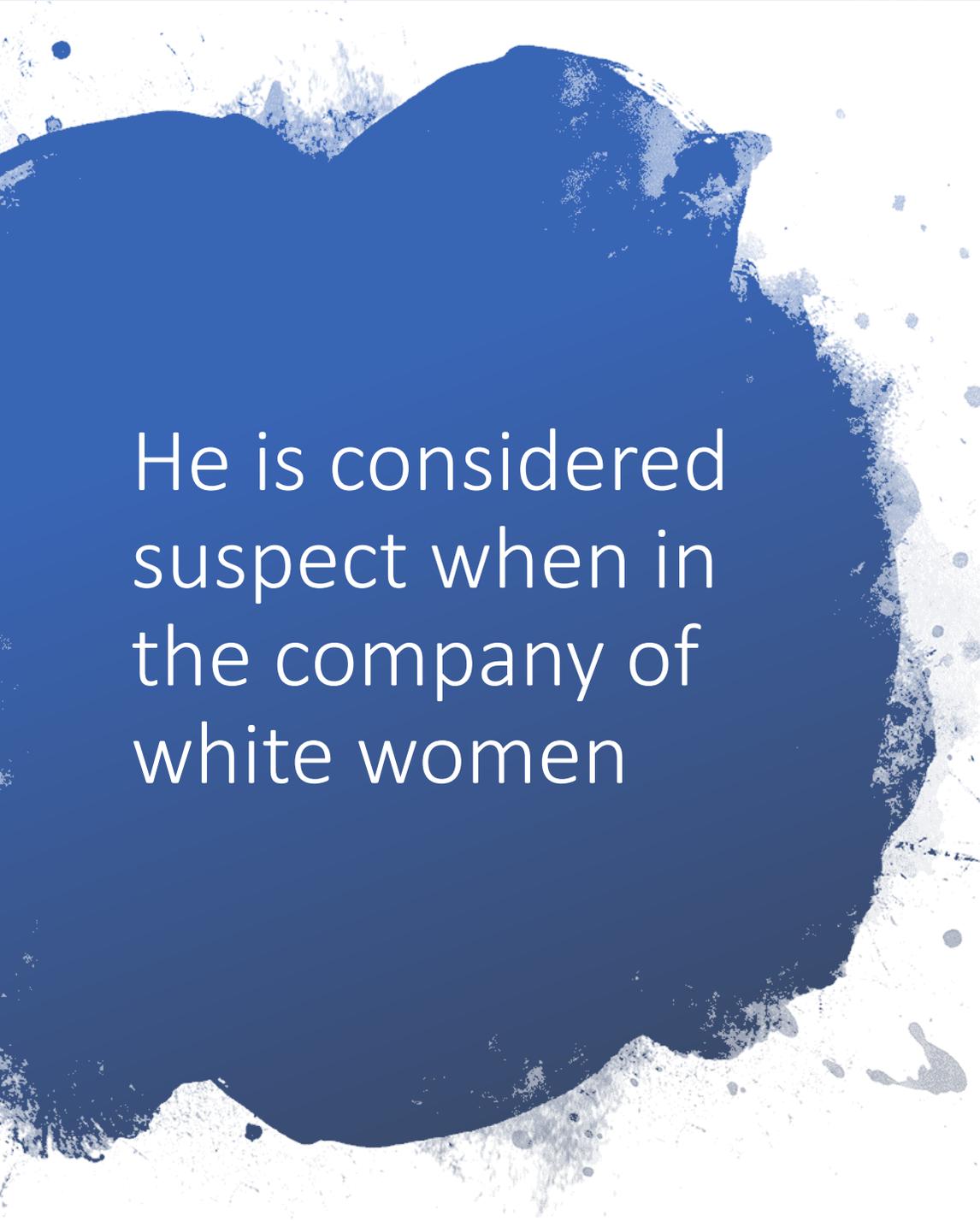
He is
constantly
surveilled

- “I have been stopped, if not always carded, at least so times by the police in Toronto, Kingston and across southern Ontario. By now, I expect it could happen in any neighbourhood, day or night, whether I am alone or with friends. These interactions don't scare me anymore. They make me angry. Because of that unwanted scrutiny, that discriminatory surveillance, I'm a prisoner in my own city.”



He is
discriminated
against based
on race

- “In Toronto, I thought I could escape bigotry and profiling, and just blend into the crowd. By then, I had been stopped, questioned and followed by the police so many times I began to expect it. In Toronto, I saw diversity in the streets, in shops, on public transit. The idea that I might be singled out because of my race seemed ludicrous. My illusions were shattered immediately.”



He is considered suspect when in the company of white women

- “I was walking my friend Sara, a white woman, back to her house after a party. An officer stopped us, then turned his back to me and addressed Sara directly. “Miss, do you need assistance?” he asked her. Sara was stunned into silence. “No,” she said twice--once to the officer, and once to reassure herself that everything was all right. [...] The fact that my mere presence could cause an armed stranger to feel threatened on Sara's behalf shocked me at first, but shock quickly gave way to bitterness and anger.”

2020

- Of course, Desmond Cole is not the only Black person in Canada experiencing racism and discriminatory treatment
- Black Canadians are far more likely to die in a police shooting than white Canadians.
- If they are immigrants or migrants to the big cities, they might be alone and without sufficient family support. This makes them vulnerable.
- Many of the men killed by police in the past year in Toronto have been suffering from some type of mental illness at the time of their interaction with police. Many were seeking help.

2020

- As a result of the many killings of unarmed Black men in the U.S., many teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA) postponed or cancelled games.
- The Toronto Raptors dedicated the season to the BLM movement with players sporting jerseys with inspirational sayings of their choosing.



2020

- Yet there were several critics who felt that the players should not dabble in “politics”
- Fox News host, Laura Ingraham told LeBron James to “shut up and dribble”
- He was valuable solely for his athletic ability.

What To Do Now?

- It is disheartening to know that Black men, such as Desmond Cole, are not faring much better than the Moors did.
- We are dealing with centuries of ingrained discriminatory and racist ideas regarding Black people
- We are living in a time where systemic barriers are affecting us in all areas of our life.
- What to do now?



Educate Yourself

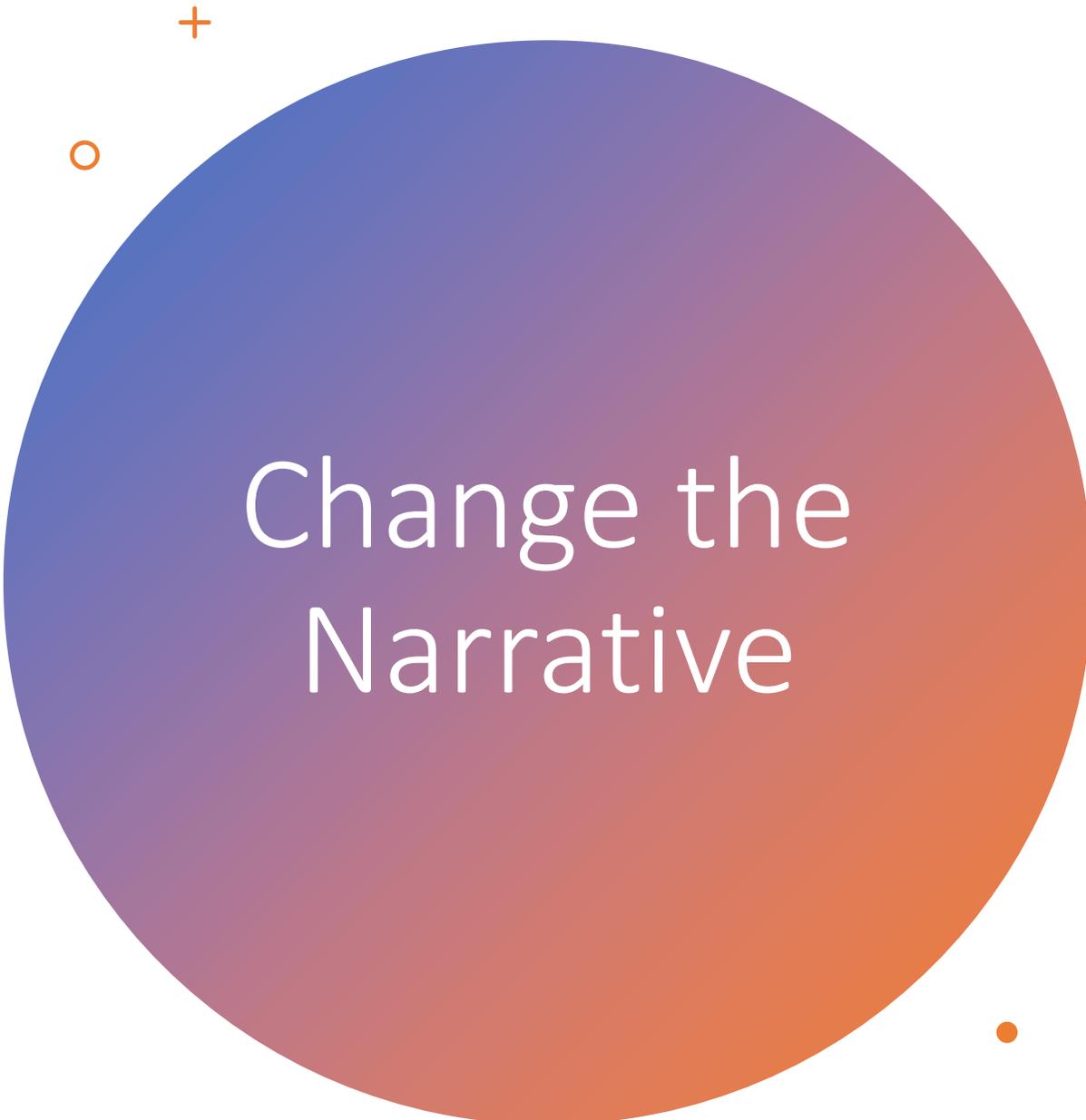
- Please see the following link to an anti-Black racism reading list:
- <https://onsearch.library.utoronto.ca/anti-black-racism-reading-list>
- Do not overburden Black, Indigenous or racialized people who may be facing their own daily struggles

Be More than an Ally – Be an Advocate

- We need all Canadians to be active participants in changing our woeful demographics.
- Look around you at the board table, the meeting room, the classroom.
- Who's not at the table?
- Whose voice is not being heard?
- If there are brown bodies in your organization, how are they being supported?

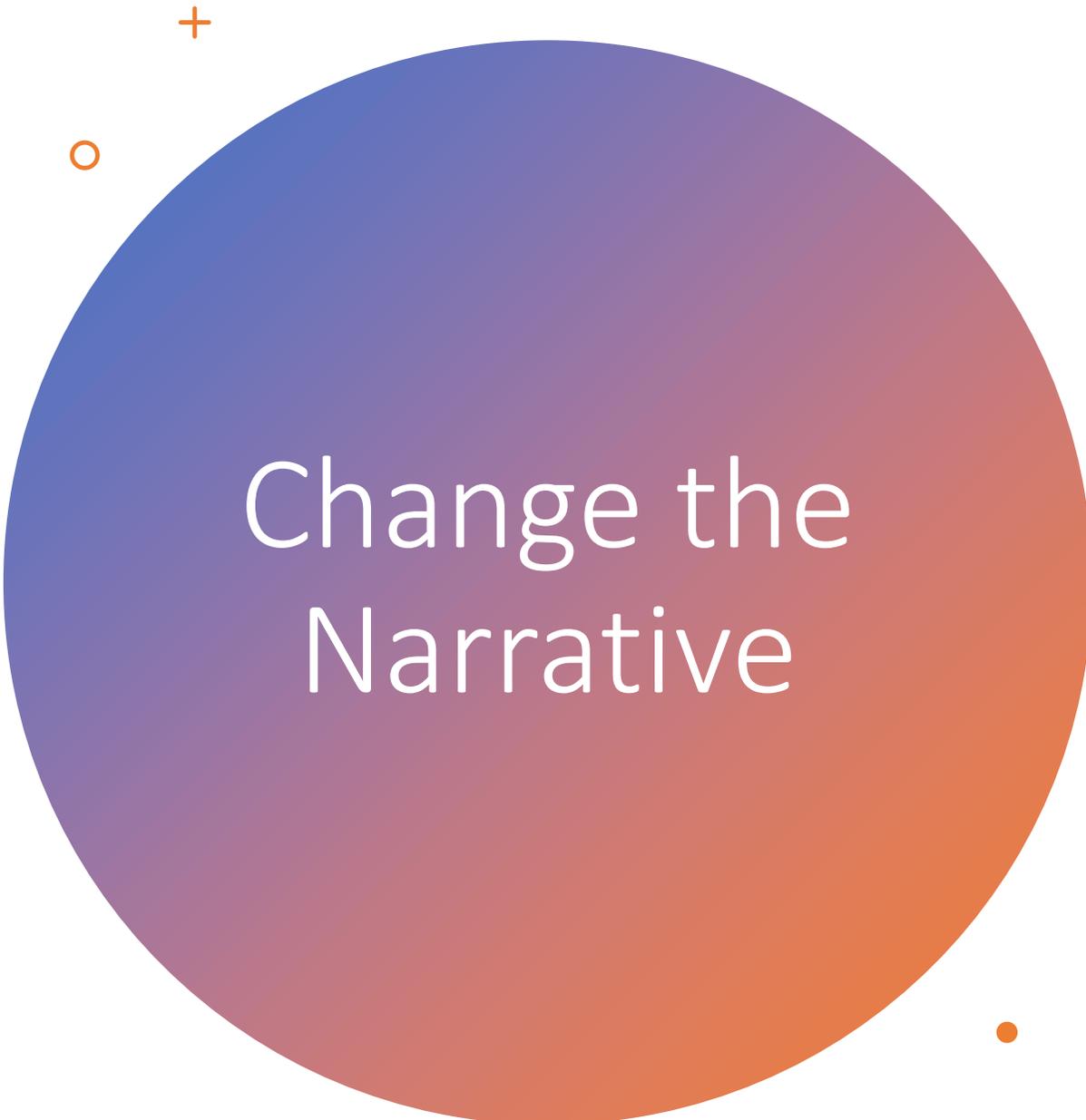
Be More than an Ally – Be an Advocate

- If you are an employer, imagine the candidate whose education failed them, who was carded the night before the interview while walking in their neighbourhood, who was hassled by TTC transit police as they took public transportation, and must now “perform” successfully for a job.



Change the Narrative

- For too long, Canadians have patted themselves on the back, thinking of how magnanimous we were in being the final stop on the Underground Railroad. We offered refuge to the slaves!
 - We tell ourselves that Blacks in Canada have it so much better than the United States
 - Many believe, as my students did, that BLM has relevance only in the United States.
- 



Change the Narrative

- Slavery was just as brutal in Canada as it was in other places in the world.
 - There is no such thing as “better slavery” or “happy slaves” because at its core, slavery was based on the premise of people as property, as things.
- 

Change the Narrative

- Learn about the real history of Canada's slave past:
- This image highlights the work of Camille Turner, who has given tours of Toronto, showing precise locations where slaves lived and died, all while dressed as a beauty pageant winner



"A blue Kersey jacket and pettycoat, a dark cotton cap with yellow string, and an Indian shawl round her neck"



Change the Narrative

N. B. The subscribers have also to let, that pleasant House on the hill, (either together or separately) now occupied by Messrs. *Dorion* and *Sarjeant*.

Quebec, 6th March, 1787.

RAN-AWAY from the subscribers, between the hours of seven and eight o'clock yesterday evening, a NEGRO WENCH named BETT, about eighteen years old, middle stature, speaks the English, French and German languages well; had on when she went away, a blue Kersey Jacket and Pettycoat, a dark cotton Cap with yellow strings, and an Indian Shawl round her neck, was big with child, and within a few days of her time.

Whoever will apprehend said Negress, and secure her return, shall be paid A REWARD of TWENTY DOLLARS, and all reasonable expences.

Any person who may harbour or conceal the said Negress, will be prosecuted to the rigour of the law, by

JOHNSTON & PURSS.

For SALE by AUCTION on the Premises,

- Camille Turner and Camal Pirbhai have also changed the narrative by taken forgotten slave wanted notices from actual Canadian newspapers and turned them into modern fashion photography.

Changing my Narrative

- The mistake I made in asking students to think about the trajectory from Othello to today was in not providing Canadian examples.
- I want to rectify that now and to say some of the names of those who have been killed by police in Canada:
- Andrew Loku, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Jason Collins, Eisha Hudson,, D'Andre Campbell, Randy Cochrane, Sean Thompson, Machuar Madut, Greg Ritchie, Chad Williams,
- Here's a link to more information and more victims
- <https://www.pyriscence.ca/home/2020/5/29/cdnpolice>



Desmond Cole

- In the documentary, Cole also suggests we change the standard narrative we tell ourselves in order to truly acknowledge how Black Lives Matter in Canada.
- I'll let him have the last word.
- Play last video clip here.