

Good afternoon,

I am a friend of Toni Latour, and I'm honored to be part of this important event today.

I was born and raised here in Vancouver. I am a woman of African ancestry. Three of my four grandparents were descendants of African slaves who were displaced from their homeland and brought to the southern United States to work on plantations. My paternal grandfather was born in Alabama and migrated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with his family as a young child. After eloping with my very young, white, grandma, they settled in Cleveland Ohio, where my dad and his siblings were raised. On my mother's side her great-grandparents were born in Alabama and Mississippi. They migrated to Texas, then from Texas to Oklahoma. Then in hopes of finally escaping racial oppression, they migrated from Oklahoma to northern Alberta during the great migration in 1910 and 11 and helped establish the black settlements in Amber valley and Breton.

I grew up hearing my great-grandparents, my grandparents, and my parents share countless stories about their experiences of being subject to racial discrimination and harassment. Just like the older generations in my family, I have been subject to racial discrimination and harassment, my brother has been subject to racial discrimination and harassment, and my children have been subject to racial discrimination and harassment. So, for me, when I hear the term 'Black Lives Matter', it's simply of modern phrase for an idea that's been fought for hundreds of years. It's the continuation of the legacy of fighting for civil rights and social justice left by my ancestors and countless others. What makes the idea different in 2023, is the access activists have to online platforms. While online platforms like social media are excellent for getting information out quickly to a large number of people, these platforms also make it easy for individuals to weigh in on social activism conversations without showing up authentically and making a real difference.

The Black Lives Matter Memorial project is a beautiful example of Toni's commitment to showing up authentically, responsibly, and taking action. This is why when Toni showed me her early sketches for the concept of the exhibit you see featured here today, and she asked for my feedback, though I was caught off guard and felt a bit vulnerable in that moment, I instinctively knew that Toni's idea was coming from a place of sincere care, empathy, and accountability... as a person, and as an artist. It's not lost on me that as a white artist, Toni took a huge risk in moving forward with her plan to unite her intent with action, to realize this project.

This particular project brings up many sensitive issues that are at the forefront of current conversations about systemic racism. I can attest to the fact that Toni takes her social responsibility as an artist seriously. Not only does she provide the community with inspiration and engagement, but she also gives thoughtful critique to our political, economic, and social systems and produces art with the intent of making steps towards social change.

We all have social responsibility, don't we? The notion of community engagement and addressing institutional racism involves everyone, doesn't it?

There are a couple of questions that I reflect on continuously, and I wonder what comes up for you when you hear them? First, will racism ever disappear? And second, what would be required for that to happen? To be honest with you, sitting here at the age of 52, I'm not sure if racism will disappear in Canada or the US, or in Europe in my lifetime. It's so intensely part of our Western culture. I do believe though, that with enough commitment and hard work we can make racism disappear for a major portion of our population, namely our children. Adults are part of this too, but anyone who knows me knows that I'm passionate about the well-being of children. Having worked in the field of child development and family support for 29 years, I believe without a doubt that the most effective way to bring about social change is to invest in the lives of children.

The best hope we have for decreasing and potentially eliminating racism is to teach children about the history of the concept of race and racism, how it developed over the past 500 years, and what it really means. We mustn't underestimate a child's capacity to understand the reality of genetic variation and how this can be beneficial for the population at large, and for individuals. We need to acknowledge to our kids that sometimes some people do bad things and have bad intentions, but that for the most part these behaviors were learned and not inherent genetically determined behaviours. Children can learn that what people do depends upon their history, their background, their neighbors, and not upon the by all biological reality of race. So, if you have children within your sphere of influence, support their learning in this area. According to current statistics for black youth and most youth of colour, Canadian schools can still be places of degradation, harm, and psychological violence.

I also encourage you to expose children to the arts and advocate for them in those spaces. While there have been advancements, there are still many challenges for students of colour looking to pursue high level skill development in the arts. I continue to see that children of colour are often not able to reach their potential because they still have to sift through a variety of discomforts, ranging from disconnects with the material being presented, to how some teaching artists might engage with them due to implicit bias, to simply being in a space surrounded by peers and instructors who don't look similar to them. Older students in particular still endure microaggressions and blatant comments about their accent, their heritage, or their hair. While they have a better understanding than younger students of what is happening in those encounters, because the emotional burdens they carry can be so heavy, sometimes it feels easier for them to just laugh it off or go along. They may perform content even though that does not reflect their personal experience in the world. So, please don't forget to invest your time and effort in the younger generation. They are our hope for change.

Toni, thank you for having the courage to be true to yourself. Thank you for listening, trusting, and empathizing with the lived experiences of black lives and all marginalized groups. Congratulations on a job well done.