

Submission #4

The last few months have been difficult ones. World events have forced me to reopen old wounds and personally engage with my experiences as a person of color, specifically as a black woman – and even more specifically as a black female lawyer in Alberta. But amidst the backdrop of this worldwide discussion on race, I could not help but notice the deafening silence of my profession as it relates to this issue.

Although I have lived my entire life being one of a handful of visible minorities in any environment I've ever been in, I have never felt less included, less represented and less welcome than I did in law school. It was abundantly clear that most of my classmates did not share my views nor were they even aware of the existence of the systemic challenges faced by a number of facets of our society. I heard through the grapevine that I had been labelled as a "militant" by classmates who had become aware of the community building and anti-racism work that I had been involved in my own community. I quickly realized that my success in this profession would require my silence and my assimilation.

Our law school curriculum barely touched on the existence of systemic racism. With the exception of a single optional human rights course, I do not recall ever being educated as to the challenges faced by visible minorities in accessing justice through the law nor the existence of systemic racism and its interplay with the rule of law. Likewise, the bar admission course also failed to identify awareness surrounding these issues as a professional competency.

The articling experience was also fraught with challenge. I realized very early – and in fact was even told by one interviewer that I might be a better fit elsewhere due to reasons associated with my hairstyle. (Lesson learned – braids bad – straight hair good). While I was lucky enough to eventually find a wonderful principal and mentor, even he expressed to me after the fact, that he had hired me apprehensively – not knowing how well his clients would accept a black female lawyer and whether it was good for business. Lucky for me, I can often hide behind my very Canadian sounding name, my lifetime in southern Alberta, my Canadian sounding accent, and my attendance at a Canadian law school, however I realize that this is not often the case for many other visible minorities attempting to enter the profession. I strongly believe that visible minorities – and in particular both black and indigenous lawyers, have a more difficult time finding articles, often have very poor articling experiences with limited supervision and mentorship, and due to systemic barriers, often end up working for themselves independently after articles due to challenges in finding employment.

While for the most part, I have been treated with a basic level respect by colleagues in practise, I continue to experience "microaggressions" every day from lawyers and judges alike, that remind me that I am still an outsider. One member said to me, "you should be happy to be here in the first place". Comments about either my perceived "accent" or shock at how well I speak English being confused with the handful of other black female lawyers in the City, assumptions about my prior educational background or lack thereof, assumptions about the fact that I must have benefited from affirmative action in order to gain entry to law school, snide comments about "black lawyers" and their competence - while all seemingly minor, have further supported the feeling of not being entirely welcome.

Ironically, the most difficult discussions about race are the ones I've had with my legal colleagues. The one place where I thought I would find support for the principles of equality and justice – is the very place where I've personally felt the greatest resistance to even

acknowledging that systemic racism exists. And yet, we are the gatekeepers of the law. We are in a unique position to actively challenge, test, and thereby shape the legal system, and I would argue - it is our duty to do so. However, until our profession truly understands and acknowledges the existence of and impact of systemic racism as it exists without our own profession, we are ill equipped to even begin to challenge the larger issues faced by the legal system as a whole.