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and growing up**

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Martis, E. (2020).
They said this would be fun: Race, campus life, and growing up.
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Reviewed by: Sara Deris Crouthers, York University

At the outset of her memoir, *Eternity* Martis promises a book for:

Anyone, past or present, who has struggled to make sense of their post-secondary experiences. For those of you who feel alone and unheard. For those of you who want to learn more, and for those of you who courageously speak up and tell your stories, even in the face of denial and harassment. And this book is especially for those of you who came out at the other end, broken but not beat, resilient but still soft. (Martis, 2020, pp. 17-18)

She delivers. The text is educational, courageous, and timeless, for better or for worse. Martis' debut focuses primarily on her experience as a multiracial Black woman in London, Ontario at the University of Western Ontario, colloquially known as Western. A quick – but not so easy – read, Martis effectively packs in layers of reflections on navigating identity and learning to love oneself; racism, misogyny, and the rise of the alt-right on Canadian university campuses, the over-policing and under-protection that Black people experience in Canada; sexual and intimate partner violence amongst university populations; and the insidious nature of white feminism, while maintaining connection to her deeply personal narrative.

Equal parts devastating, touching, and funny, Martis balances her own brave testimony with well-researched facts, flexing her journalistic background. She weaves narrative with theory, touching on bell hooks' theories of marginality and eating the Other, W.E.B. Du Bois' double consciousness, Audre Lorde's uses of anger, and epistemic violence in education (Battiste, 2013; Diallo, 2018). Tongue-in-cheek interludes entitled *The Necessary Survival Guide for Token Students* break up chapters, providing witty takes on the microaggressions that Black and other racialized people are peppered with on a daily basis, such as being followed in stores or dismissed to the discount rack: “channel your inner Oprah – you will not let anyone take you to the rack of shame, even if that's all you can afford [nobody puts Baby in the back rack!]” (Martis, 2020, p. 513-14).

The multiple, insidious manifestations of racism on campus are the focus of the book. Martis recounts incidents ranging from overt aggression – coming face-to-face with a white supremacist – to the more quotidian – the inability to hail a cab as quickly as her white male companion. A strength of her writing is its ability to convey the moral injury – the spirit murder (Collins, 2002) – that all acts of racism contribute to, overt or covert. Martis explains the role that universities play in upholding racism, whether overtly, in the case of J. Phillippe Rushton, who conducted racist and eugenicist pseudoscientific research and was employed by Western until his death in 2012, or covertly, in the repeated failure of university administrations to adequately deal with reported incidents. Universities are further complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy because white students rarely experience consequences in the wake of racist actions: “universities are spaces where young white people can act on both their greatest desires

for Blackness and their most anti-Black fantasies” (Martis, 2020, p. 64). White male students are allowed to treat university as a playground, to test out impulses with no real consequences to contend with, and to write actions off as a ‘learning experience’.

White women play both the aggressor and the victim, especially in interactions with Black and other racialized women. The positioning of white womanhood as innocent, chaste and pure allows white women to hold up white supremacy and patriarchy and avoid retribution by positioning themselves as victims (Accapadi, 2007, p. 209). Martis reflects on an exchange with Megan, a white female classmate who extracted value from Martis, then went on to police her:

...How white girls operated: smiling in the faces of women of colour, acting like our friends and allies, calling us “queen” and “girl” and snapping their fingers; then turning on us for personal gain – or using tears, or carefully chosen words disguised as false innocence or concern, to plant seeds that they can reap for their own benefit. (Martis, 2020, pp. 102)

The insidious nature of ‘white woman tears’ make it difficult to discuss, and Martis’ frank and accessible discussion of the phenomenon represents a significant achievement in and of itself.

Sexual assault and intimate partner violence amongst university populations emerges as another major theme of Martis’ memoir. Martis uses her own harrowing experiences to tell the story of un(der) reported assaults, harassment, intimate partner violence, and rape in the Canadian university population. She writes that in Canada, university-age young women face the highest rates of sexual assault and intimate partner violence in the country – but that the problem is constantly minimized by local police services and university administrations. Martis follows this culture of dismissal down to frosh week chants – while brushed off as innocent fun by enforcement and administration, male students are indoctrinated into rape culture as soon as they enter campus, and even earlier.

Martis uses her story to elaborate on the unique experiences of Black women who attempt to find justice in the aftermath of violence. Misogynoir, the result of the collision of racism and sexism, leaves Black women unprotected: “My friends believed I could fend off abuse simply because I was a Black woman. I was supposed to be angry, defensive, indestructible, physically, and emotionally unbreakable” (Martis, 2020, p. 224). Misogynoir relies on stereotypes that Black women are hypersexual or animalistic, such as that of the Jezebel. It manifests as reports by Black women being dismissed, and sometimes in the punishment and criminalization of victims themselves. Martis’ meticulous reporting on her own experiences along with information on the many university women who have been murdered by partners is difficult to read, but sheds light on a vitally important topic.

Ultimately, *They said this would be fun* reminds us that there are multiple forms of resistance, both in its own form, the memoir (Smith, 1999), and in its content:

Resistance is not just about marching down the street or staging a physical protest. It’s in the health researchers collecting race-based data, the writers covering underreported stories, the lawyers representing clients against state violence, the teachers pushing for more inclusive curricula, the journalists and advocates risking their lives for the truth. (Martis, 2020, pp. 550-551)

Martis further demonstrates that not only does testimony have power as a form of resistance, but as a form of healing. Her work illustrates the importance of creating safe spaces for Black, Indigenous, and otherwise racialized students on university campuses so that they may find solace in shared experiences and build community.

There are many policy links throughout the memoir – the need for BIPOC-only campus spaces, as mentioned above; the need for universities to develop stronger anti-racism and sexual violence policies, to implement real consequences for offenders, and to take a stronger stance on acts of violence that occur in their broader communities; the need for the collection of identity-based data to advance racial justice (Shah, 2021); the gap in Canadian law that leaves hate crimes unprosecuted; and the ability of policy, in the wrong hands, to oppress, control, and punish racialized victims (Abawi & Brady, 2017; Cherubini, 2010). In her analysis of university actions and outcomes related to hate crimes on campus and to Bill 132, Martis illustrates the ways in which non-performativity – the use of policy to simply ‘check a box’

and avoid liability (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021) – manifests in university administrations.

The book itself is timeless. Readers may see themselves in Martis' writing on finding self-acceptance and navigating identity; on the importance of solidarity from family and friends; on the struggle of functional depression and anxiety. However, readers will also be reminded that past is indeed prologue: events that Martis recounts have been repeated, time and time again, and demonstrate how deeply racism is entrenched in Canadian culture and society. As Martis writes about sexual violence, readers may reflect upon the recent uncovering of decades of sexual violence in the Canadian military, or on the renewed calls for universities to act in the wake of a recent string of sexual violence on campus which policy has done nothing to quell, particularly at Western. Reading Martis' succinct history of blackface in Canada may recall two Canadian politicians who have performed blackface: Justin Trudeau and Stephen Lecce. Lecce's role in organizing a 'slave auction' while a fraternity president at Western (Thompson & LeBrun, 2022), likely while Martis was a student there, reminds us that white men do not face consequences for their violent actions in university.

They said this would be fun is a book for anyone, as Martis states at the outset, and should be read widely. This text should be a required reading for non-Black people, particularly those in academic or higher education administration and policy. Non-Black frosh week leaders, administrative staff, students, professors, provosts, and deans alike will be confronted with the ugly underbelly of the university experience. Black, Indigenous, and otherwise racialized readers may find solace in reading their own experiences echoed by Martis while non-Black racialized people will also be reminded of the unique experiences of Black women in Canada. I will issue a trigger warning to Black women, femmes, trans and non-binary folk: although you may find healing in Martis' words, you may also be triggered by frank discussions of racism and misogynoir. To non-Black people: sit with the discomfort and proceed. We owe Eternity, and the countless others like her, our attention.

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