



For Black Women In Media, A “Dream Job” Is A Myth

Every time a Black woman hits my timeline with yet another horrifying account of workplace racism, images of my own rush to my head.

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They warn you about the long hours. Journalism school, with all its flaws, at least prepares you for the intimidating red blinking light of live TV or the pressure of an impending print deadline. They tell you it will be hard and full of sleepless nights. They tell you to sharpen your skills because the jobs are scarce and the competition is intense. What they don't tell you, especially if your professors are white, is that for Black women, your career will be littered with shattered hopes and lined with shards of broken dreams. By virtue of being Black, we know that hopes and dreams without hard work won't get us anywhere, but I didn't understand how painful it would be to spend a decade standing on jagged edges of disappointment, knowing that even when I achieved some of the wide-eyed goals I had in school, they would be crushed under the weight of anti-Black racism and a system that was never designed for us to *really* succeed.

They don't tell you that even your successes will come with a caveat: You'll have to relive your trauma for praise and explain your humanity to your peers and superiors on the regular. You'll have to sit beside someone casually defending blackface in your morning meetings. They don't

tell you that it will take a worldwide racial reckoning for you to get the courage to drop the aw-shucks gratitude shtick and finally share your truth.

I couldn't say all of that in 40 seconds.

When Marci Ien thanked us and threw to a commercial break, I thought I'd said all I was going to say. I was one of the six Black guest co-hosts *The Social* welcomed for a special [#ShareYourChair](#) edition of the show on [Blackout Tuesday](#), a day when the world seemed to finally be waking up to [anti-Black racism](#) and [police violence](#) in the wake of [George Floyd's murder](#) — or, you know, they were posting black squares in [performative solidarity](#).

The final seconds of the show were a blur. I remember the executive producer, my former boss, telling me in my ear that we were running out of time. I took a deep breath, interrupted one of my co-hosts and told the country that while the show had done a nice thing by putting a bunch of Black people in front of the camera, it didn't have a single Black voice behind-the-scenes. I would know, since I am the first and only full-time Black producer *The Social* has ever had. The point was to amplify Black voices, and in that one hour of television, they succeeded, but I also knew that my voice had felt muzzled for years by the very same executives who would be celebrated for this episode. I challenged them to make sure the special wasn't just one big black square — a bandaid PR stunt without any real change.

After the episode aired, the clip started circulating on Twitter. Denise Balkissoon shouted me out in her column in *Chatelaine* about the [racism she faced at *The Globe and Mail*](#). We were both named in the *Columbia Review of Journalism* in reference to the [reckoning on racism in Canadian media](#).

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My brief moment of sweat-soaked indignation was applauded for its “bravery.” It felt strange to be mentioned alongside the other Black, Indigenous, and women of colour sharing their experiences of racism at media outlets, especially since I didn’t say much. As more stories continued to trickle in about the treatment of employees at prominent media companies in the U.S. ([Complex](#), [Bon Appetit](#), [Refinery29](#), [MTV News](#)) and in Canada ([The Globe and Mail](#), [ET Canada](#) and [Corus Entertainment](#), and [CBC](#)), I knew that *if* I was really brave, I would have said a lot more. Every time another Black woman hits the timeline with a horrifying but all-too-familiar account of the racist shit they’ve had to endure at media workplaces, images of my own rush to my head. Suddenly, I’m standing in the middle of every time I was made to feel less-than, passed over for a promotion, pushed to exhaustion from fighting for anti-racist coverage, or sliced open by the tiny cuts of daily microaggressions. And I feel like a fraud.

Those 40 seconds on *The Social* are not the whole story.

I’m terrified to tell the rest, but I’m more pissed off by the fact that Black women face a reality where this industry robs us of our time, energy, and ambition. There have been too many Black women in media (and outside of it) who have had their dreams deterred because of the bigotry

of their colleagues and managers. The ones who have spoken out need to know they aren't alone, and the ones who are understandably staying quiet out of self-preservation need to know that's okay too.

Since I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to be a journalist, but the specifics of the ideal job within that dream career evolved — a talk-show producer, a foreign correspondent, a sideline reporter, a music writer, a VJ. Some of my dreams came true, but with each one, I realized that if you're a Black or Indigenous woman in media, especially in Canada, a "dream job" doesn't exist. Ask *The Social's* Marci Ien, [who deals with threats and harassment on Twitter daily](#) for just being outspoken and Black. Or *SportsCentre* anchor Kayla Grey, whose employer TSN has faced its [own racism scandals recently](#), including [botching a statement in support of Grey](#) when she was bullied online for stating the correct and uncontroversial opinion that a white woman shouldn't use the N-word (TSN later admitted to how useless that statement was). Or Imani Walker, the associate producer at CBC News who was on the call when host [Wendy Mesley said the N-word](#) and held her accountable for using the traumatizing slur. [Alley Wilson is a Global News producer whose devastating Twitter thread](#) about her experiences as a Black woman in a newsroom in Canada is a heartbreakingly accurate account of working in media while Black.

Ask *ET Canada* correspondent [Ika Wong, who quit the show last month after its refusal to cover anti-Black racism](#). Ask [Christine Genier, who recently resigned from the CBC](#) citing "the unconscious and conscious biases and systemic racism of the mainstream media in Canada." Ask all the racialized journalists who are required to, time and time again, perform their jobs as well as act as the go-to spokespeople for their race. Or the ones, like Wong and Genier, who are forced to choose their integrity over their incomes.

It's gutting to think of the journalists of colour throughout history who didn't stick it out with the help of "gossiping about the daily indignities we suffer at the hands of our white bosses and colleagues" as Balkissoon put it in her *Chatelaine* piece (those group chats have saved my life) and not only left jobs, but the industry altogether. CBC's Amanda Parris has written about the [history of Canadian institutions silencing Black voices](#) just trying to speak their truth. "Whether our concerns are casually dismissed or weaponized to justify the limits of our career mobility, the message is consistent: these truths are not welcome here," she wrote. Speaking up now will, no doubt, have consequences. "Black women in media are putting their livelihoods on the line because people in leadership and their colleagues have failed them," writer [Sharine Taylor](#) [tweeted](#).

Those failures started with my first job.

MuchMusic was my gateway drug into the highs and lows of Canadian media. So much of it was great. A lot of it wasn't. I was 20 on the first day of my internship at sister station MuchMoreMusic, and I was so excited to finally be in the door. I am of the age group my Refinery29 colleague [Connie Wang](#) coined [The Grateful Generation](#). In other words, I was just happy to be there. As Connie notes as well, I knew my race and lack of connections meant that my presence within those walls was rare. *Just don't fuck it up* was my guiding principle.

In my first week, my supervisor told me not to wear ripped jeans because I looked unprofessional. A white intern wore them almost every day. "I like your hair though," my boss said in the same breath. At the time, I wore my hair in a straight, long weave. I thanked her. I think a lot about all the microaggressions I took with a forced smile, a polite refrain, and a pang in my gut.

Back then, I hadn't thought of the fact that my favourite Black VJs of the current era were light-skinned until I overheard a supervising producer in an elevator reveal that their boss wouldn't

hire anyone “darker than Matte Babel.” Later, when two new Black male hosts were working at Much and I was a producer, I was told to never book them in the same segment. A white female colleague said to me once about her fellow on-air talent, “Sometimes, I think he’s hot, but then I remember he’s Black.” The dehumanization of Black bodies was as ubiquitous as Marianas Trench music videos.

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When I talk about my own experiences as a VJ, I usually downplay them. I say it was only for *a hot second* and I was *never a real VJ*. I internalized the belittlement of my work. The truth is, I worked as an on-air personality for MuchMusic for about a year. The entire time, while I wrote, produced, and hosted most of my own segments, they paid me as a production assistant. Being overworked and underpaid isn’t uncommon in media, but for Black women it’s the standard.

One day, I finally got called to the Big Boss’s office, expecting a raise and a title change, but he just rolled his neck, snapped his fingers in my face, and told me to “be sassier.” He (a white man) told me to “dumb it down” because my “I was too smart for [my] look.” In other words, I was too Black to be intelligent. He wanted me to be a Mammy. Thank you, *Gone with the Wind*. I was pulled off camera the next week. The most infuriating part is I knew that I was only in that room because of my privileges. I was smart and Black in a way that was palatable to them. Even if a Black woman who had the stereotypical traits he expected sat in front of him, I knew he would have found a way to dim her light too. We can’t win.

I tell the above story a lot. Partly, I think, because I regret my silence in the moment and also because it took me a long time and lots of tears to get past that interaction. Maybe it feels like the more I say it out loud the less power his words have. Years later, when I was fulfilling another dream on that childhood bucket list and working as a producer on *The Social* (like Much, it's owned by Bell Media), I told this story to the VP of the company. She dismissed it. "I don't think that was about race. He just wanted you to be sassy!" When reached for comment, she denied saying this. I remember it vividly. She admits to responding "in disbelief" to our conversation and says, "I am regretful that I did not validate Kathleen's experiences of racism while at Much." When you have bosses who uphold white supremacy so casually, they do it in unconscious ways, like not understanding how coded it is to tell a Black woman to have more sass, or not believing you in the moment you tell them you've dealt with racism your whole career. Of course, they do it in blatant ways, too.

I used to battle with our executive producer (EP) over what stories *The Social* should cover all the time. The fight that sticks out most is when Eric Garner was killed by police in 2014. As the world continues to mourn George Floyd and demand justice for his murder through ongoing protests, I've been thinking about Garner a lot. His "I Can't Breathe" was heard before Floyd's, and before [Elijah McClain's](#). I remember arguing to cover Garner's story multiple times, but it came to a head on December 4, the day after [no cops were charged in his police killing](#) and protests had erupted in New York.

The night before, I had cried holding my big brother's hand while watching CNN. That morning, my EP said to me, "No one cares," before catching herself and correcting the statement to, "Our audience doesn't care." Remembering how those words felt like a punch in the chest still makes me want to cry. I held it together then and pleaded with her to consider that the life of a Black man and the reality of police violence were important enough to discuss on a national talk show based in Toronto, a city where [Black people are 20 times more likely to be shot by police](#). She

relented, but only if it was pushed to the second segment of the show. According to her, ratings would go down if we “led with a story about race.” She was referring to the previous month, when I had convinced her to let the hosts discuss the [protests in Ferguson, Missouri](#) after a grand jury decided not to indict the cop who killed Michael Brown. The thing is, “stories about race” are lumped together carelessly and if one doesn’t “do well,” the next is written off in service of a phantom white audience member we were forced to cater to: “Suzy in Saskatchewan,” we used to call her.

I’m sure every time my boss shot down anti-racist coverage, she looked at it as purely an editorial decision. To me, it was a blatant disregard for Black life *and* a bad editorial decision. On December 4, 2014, we led with a story about Alexander Wang’s sexy new denim ads and a debate over whether Kelly Clarkson’s “Since U Been Gone” was the best song of the decade.

I could tell so many more of these stories. Like the time one February when I didn’t pitch any Black History Month segments just to see what would happen. If the sole Black person on your team doesn’t advocate for the acknowledgment of Black history, does it go uncelebrated? The answer was yes. We made it to Valentine’s Day without a mention. When a Black host of the show complained, our executive producer said, “What are we going to do, say, *Hey, it’s Black History Month, we’re not racist!?*” (Something she says she now regrets.) I remember these moments clearly because I kept track of all the offensive things my EP used to say in a note in my phone. I have “Kathleen’s Black posse” entered from the day I produced an entire show featuring Black comedians and she referred to the show’s guests that day as my “Black posse.” I also have written down the time she said, “I don’t want to be the race show!”

After so many of these interactions, I was exhausted. I knew these constant arguments made me seem difficult and less likable. Most of the time, my relationship with my bosses was solid. I always thought they respected me and my talent. But I watched my whiter, less-qualified peers

get promoted over me repeatedly (despite promises that I would be too). When I asked why I wasn't getting promoted, I was told by the VP that "it wasn't my time" and that I needed to be as confident as one of my colleagues who would barge into her office unannounced. God, grant me the confidence of a mediocre white woman ascending at a company patting itself on the back for diversity and feminism while treating its Black employees unfairly.

I won't rattle off my resume here, but I will say that the efforts made by me, and other producers and hosts of colour on *The Social*, are a big part of why the show became what it is, which is mostly something I am proud of. In front of the camera, the show stands for inclusive feminism and championing diverse voices, which makes its lack of representation and collaboration with Black and Indigenous people behind the scenes even more egregious.

I did love my job and still consider many members of *The Social* team I worked with as family. It hurt to be forced to leave them. But I was ready to move on. I had no fight left in me. When Refinery29 offered me a job, I decided to take it. In my contentious exit interview with the Bell Media VP (she finally offered me a promotion the day I quit), I told her to replace me with a woman of colour, preferably a Black woman. She scoffed in my face. "You don't have to tell *ME* about diversity," she huffed. (My role was not filled by a Black woman and of the next three hires on the show, two were white and one was South Asian.) Defensiveness is the antithesis of allyship.

The thing is, I was still so *grateful* to her. When George Floyd was killed, she reached out. "Thank you for always taking the extra time to educate me. I realize that was not your job. I appreciate you." The acknowledgment meant a lot to me. I sent her a gushing email back. I realized that even after all the hurt I had felt under her leadership, I still wanted to impress her. Former [Cosmopolitan staffer Prachi Gupta](#) wrote about this in a Jezebel piece detailing her own mistreatment as a woman of colour in media. "I've been thinking a lot about gratitude —

mainly, how Black and brown people are expected to feel it and express it in white spaces; about how I often did — and still reflexively do,” she writes. “I was welcome so long as I didn’t demand much, and so long as I continued to demonstrate how thankful I was to be there.”

I had a lot of apprehension before writing this piece. Aside from the fear of being blacklisted and never working in Canadian media again, I was worried I would look ungrateful. I was worried my stories were too small, or not racist enough. After all, workplace racism is insidious and slow, and we’re conditioned to take it silently and fear authority. Plus, these people gave me opportunities. After I left *The Social*, I was hired to work part-time on a show for the Bell Media streaming service, Crave. I was so grateful for the opportunity (and worried I wouldn’t get another like it), I took the gig in spite of *and* because of my past experiences at the company. I had all my career bests and worsts in the same building. I can’t count how many times the words, *Think of how many people would kill for this job!* have run through my head throughout my career. I have never reported a racist incident to HR. I have stayed quiet in moments I should have spoken up. I am speaking up now because I know Bell Media has committed to hiring more Black and Indigenous people. (Bell Media did not respond to a request for comment on this story.) They have promoted their one Black executive. *The Social* has promised its team that their next producer will be Black. I’ve heard that they are working on their pitch process and taking steps to implement changes to the culture. I’m glad, but I couldn’t let someone else walk into that environment without doing everything I could to make sure it’s a safer space than when I was there. And to let the executives at that company know that hiring one Black person isn’t enough, especially since every person in a senior position on *The Social* is white. “Workplaces that are all white except for one Black person are violent spaces for us,” comedian Robin Thede tweeted. “We have to wear emotional armour every day. We have to deal

with microaggressions that chip away at us... The sooner you understand this, the sooner you can dismantle systemic racism.”

The systemic part is why even when I personally have not been a victim of toxic workplace anti-Black racism, it still invades my life. I have only had positive experiences at the Canadian edition of Refinery29. We have a small editorial team. Half of us are Black women (though neither of us are in leadership positions). But that doesn't negate the very real and serious accounts from Black women about their time working at Refinery29 in the U.S. and the U.K. It doesn't change the fact that our editor-in-chief and our president stepped down in disgrace after multiple allegations of racism. Reconciling being proud of the work I'm doing with the fact that I work for a company being investigated for racist, heinous things is frustrating, because all I want to do is the work. I think about Toni Morrison's famous quote a lot: “The very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being... None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”

The question has become, where can we go where racism will not be a distraction? Where can we tell Black stories fully and be able to cover Black Canadian life honestly and fairly? To quote my friend Kayla Grey, “Where can we be Black?” I wish there was an answer that didn't include, *Well, this place is only a little racist!* Newsrooms are overwhelmingly white. Only 3.4 percent of people in newsrooms in Canada are people of colour. That stat is from 2006. It's not broken down to show Black or Indigenous representation. We don't have the race-based data we need here in Canada to accurately assess the inequity in lifestyle media, which is where I've built my career.

Even Elaine Lui, my former boss at LaineyGossip and a *The Social* co-host, and someone who has always created a safe work environment for me, has used abhorrent racist, homophobic,

and transphobic language on her site (before I knew and worked for her). She has apologized and worked for years to use her platform for good. When I stood by Lui — who I believe has changed and is now an ally to the Black and LGBTQ+ communities — my integrity was attacked. Her co-host Marci Ien and I have had our Blackness called into question for daring to believe that active “listening and learning” could actually change someone for the better. But this is how it works. If there are stray bullets, Black women will get hit every time.

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Every job I’ve had, even the dream ones, has been tainted by racism.

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For me, the dream has always been to change the system from within, but how do you salvage a burning building when you’re trapped inside alone? I am one of the few journalists of colour in Canada who has spent my entire post-J school career in full-time jobs. My peers, who are in similar positions, are also facing fruitless fights in predominantly white institutions. They’re doing all that while staring down an industry that is on the verge of financial collapse. By the time we (*if we*) dismantle Canadian media’s white supremacy and institutional anti-Black racism, will there be an industry left to fix? And for now, are we sending Black and Indigenous people into environments where they will just leave traumatized and defeated? I’m one of the lucky ones and yet, every job I’ve had, even the dream ones, has been tainted by racism. I’m struggling every day to not give into trauma and defeat.

This essay will not have a happy ending. I do not have answers to tie this in a bow and leave white people reading with the warm and fuzzies. I’m not here to inspire you. I’m putting my ass

on the line to wake you up. For Ika, Kayla, Marci, Imani, Alley, Christine, and all the other Black and Indigenous women doing the same, believe us. Rally behind us and hold Canadian media accountable for its complicity in white supremacy and its failure of racialized women. Let's push media outlets to become places where reporting the truth includes the truth of Black and brown people and where BIPOC hires aren't tokenized, belittled, and bullied in newsrooms or control rooms. Let's preserve the dreams of the next generation of journalists of colour who just want to do the work. That's the only dream I have left. I hope it comes true.

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MY EXPERIENCES WITH SYSTEMIC RACISM IN CANADIAN MEDIA

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