# RACISM, YOUTH AND PUBLIC SPACES

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Cities and towns represent our most immediate geographic boundaries, and we often define ourselves in relation to these communities. While local community only makes up a part of our identities, much of our lived experience is nonetheless impacted and influenced by where we live. So if it is the case that place matters, what does it mean to grow up as a youth in a city which commemorates and or sometimes celebrates its discriminatory and racist history? No Canadian city or town is apart from colonization, and my home city of Halifax has a more obvious colonial heritage than many others. This is evidenced by the countless buildings, statues, plaques, and street signs commemorating the legacy of the European men and women who established themselves on the land we call Nova Scotia. This story of occupation, oppression, and racism is an ongoing thread throughout the history of Halifax; from first contact to the present day. It is encapsulated within our built environment by commemorations.

How does living in such a place impact how youth view the importance of overcoming racism and discrimination? Does it have the effect of normalizing or depoliticizing racism? How symbols of racism are incorporated into public spaces, particularly historical ones, is something that all Canadian municipalities should be thinking about when they consider how to engage youth in anti-discrimination work. Making the spaces in which youth live and grow ones which grapple with the intricate history of racism and discrimination teaches future generations that racism hasn't been eliminated and that it has the ability to morph and take on new forms. It's important to engage youth in this work so that colonialism is not depoliticized. We must understand that those legacies continue on and that we must contend with our histories in a more nuanced way since racism and colonization did not end with the termination of official colonial policies.

One of the ways we can do this is through engaging youth in the redefinition, renaming, and contextualization of public spaces in our cities and towns so that histories aren't erased but are instead, situated in a way that brings these hidden stories to light as a way to start genuine dialogue. One way to do this is to look to youth to identify spaces in their communities that commemorate or even celebrate a problematic history and to ask them how these spaces can not only be made more inclusive, but spaces in which to educate future generations on the impacts of racism and discrimination. Youth could be asked to identify and articulate previously unheard stories of community heroes—people who represent a breadth of lived experience that more closely represents the lived experiences of people in the community—and to think about how to incorporate these stories into our public spaces. Another way to engage youth could be to ask them how they perceive what they are being taught on our shared histories and their perception of the significance of different public spaces with the aim of identifying where we need to

have deeper conversations or make changes. Municipalities can learn from youth about how physical surroundings are interpreted and how they can be made more inclusive.

Part of grappling with our history of racism and discrimination is not to erase it from public spaces, but to contextualize it and elevate the stories of previously silenced peoples into the public sphere. By engaging youth in redefining our communities in a way that properly acknowledges and contextualizes the history of racism and colonization present in our public spaces, we may be able to build more inclusive, welcoming, dynamic, and sustainable communities which have far more to celebrate than their British or French colonial history.