

A Note on Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Programming

The stories we tell about Canada are important. They shape and reflect our cultural identities and self-perception. When we hear stories that challenge or contradict how we see ourselves, it can be uncomfortable. It can feel easier to ignore those stories than to meaningfully engage with their implications. Canadians tend to compare ourselves favourably to our American cousins. We tout our multiculturalism policies and pride ourselves on being a mosaic, not a melting pot. When we see evidence of racism and violence to the south, we often think, ‘*we’re not THAT bad.*’

Yet, there are those in Canada who have always spoken out. For example, Indigenous people, Black people, and People of Colour have been clear about the harmful ways racism affects their lived experiences, drawing attention to the ways Canada has failed to address our own problems with racism, both on an individual and a systemic level. These are stories Canadians need to know.

We share stories from diverse creators because we believe in the power of authentic, self-determined cultural expression. Our intention with REEL CANADA’s diverse programming is to provide students a platform to engage with filmmakers, their work, and the multitude of experiences and identities, especially those which have been historically marginalized or ignored, and to open dialogue between students of all backgrounds on the topics of what it means to all live together in Canada.

However, we recognize that our intentions are influenced by the particular perspectives and biases of those who make up the organization and our partners, and the broader apparatus of predominantly white educational, political, corporate and artistic institutions of which we are part. Good intentions don’t prevent our complicity in maintaining the status quo. To work toward dismantling institutional and systemic racism and oppression requires ongoing learning and re-evaluation of the ways we can leverage our positions of privilege to address inequities, both in our own work and in our broader society.

For us, the issue of *whose* stories get told and who gets to decide is crucial. The mission of REEL CANADA from day one has been to make students more familiar with “the power and diversity of Canadian film.” That is only possible when we are actively seeking out creators, partners, collaborators and consultants from the margins of these institutions, and when we not just hear their stories, but listen to them.

The platform and national reach that REEL CANADA has developed is an immense privilege and honour. But we also have a responsibility to use that platform in a meaningful way towards amplifying and empowering the voices of Canadian filmmakers and youth to share their realities of life in Canada, especially when those realities are the stories that make us uncomfortable.

Your interest in this programming tells us that you are already having or preparing to have courageous and difficult conversations with your students about racism, colonialism, violence, white supremacy and other sensitive but important issues.

We know these conversations can be difficult, so we hope these resources will help you create a safe environment in your class that will allow different perspectives to be heard, and allow students who have lived experiences with racism and intergenerational trauma to feel empowered to contribute.

We want to encourage all participants to share and to listen in a respectful way, in order to strive for greater understanding and cultural exchange. For that reason, it is important to allow for the honest expression of difficult experiences, but also to establish safety protocols that prioritize care for the well-being of students and staff, as personal narratives relating to traumatic issues and events can be very sensitive and even retraumatizing to listen to or talk about. A fulsome understanding of race, racism and other forms of oppression in the Canadian context is a nuanced and ongoing process.