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HOST: In the reality of everything that's happening around us, do you ever feel like your story is going to be drowned out or forgotten? Amanda Parris does. And she shares the very real fear of being forgotten by a culture that seems to prefer to forget stories like the ones that she tells and amplifies. But how does denial affect us in our individual lives, and what can we do to remedy Canada's Collective Amnesia? Stay tuned... This is The Conversation Piece. And this is Amanda Parris from The Walrus Talks.

Amanda Parris: Hello everyone. I'm Amanda Parris. What gets me up in the morning is the hunger and desire to tell and share stories. In high school, I read the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs and I was inspired. Her story was incredible. And I decided, because I didn't know, I had this sort of mindset that I wanted to write a theatrical adaptation to this slave narrative. I don't even think I really knew what an adaptation was and I'd never written a play in my life, but I was going to do it. I was going to do it and I was going to star in it and direct it and present it at my school's first ever Black History Month assembly. Ambitious. I know, maybe. Full as well too, but after months of agonizing over the script weeks of rehearsals and countless sleepless nights, the day finally arrived and I will not lie to you.

It was a terrible production. I definitely did not do Harriet Jacob's story justice. The dialogue was campy. If I'm being generous, the direction was confused due to some casting issues that the slave master was actually played by a black woman, which made it seem like something out of the *Twilight Zone*. But in the midst of all of the mess, something in there felt like magic. To hear words that I wrote performed on stage to see an audience going on a journey that I helped to craft it. It was a life-altering experience. Unfortunately, you'll have to take my word that any of this all happened because to this day, there is no evidence of its occurrence. Other than a script that I will never show to the public as a novice first time event producer, I had assumed that my high school newspaper would come to the first ever black history month assembly and write about it.

I was certain that my play would be covered by the yearbook committee. I was sure that the administration would invite the trustee and the superintendent who came to all the other big events of the school year. I was sadly mistaken. At the end of the semester, I scoured through the yearbook, passing pages on the talent show and the spring dance and all the Halloween costumes, looking for an article, a photograph, a sentence, even acknowledging that my play or that this Black History Month assembly had ever happened that day. I realized for the first, but definitely not the last time, that because it wasn't documented, because there was no evidence, my play, my work - that assembly would be forgotten forever. What gets me up in the morning is the hunger and desire to tell and share stories. What keeps me up at night is the fear of being forgotten.

I fear that I will do all of this work. I will write these scripts. I will write these stories. And then the work and me will never be remembered. I was reminded by a colleague that the fear of being forgotten is kind of this universal existential crisis. It's part of why we give our children our last names and why we write memoirs. It's why in the Island of Grenada, where my mom is from people huddle around the TV, watching something called the death news, where every evening people are named, who have died in the Island that day. And people exchange stories about all those who've passed. It's kind of morbid, but it's also a way of honoring lives that have gone the idea of our lives. Being inconsequential - reduced to less than a footnote in this great text of life. It can be a bit of a blow to the ego, but beyond the universality of this fear of being forgotten, it's something that I want us to recognize in this country in Canada.



We have a problem when it comes to remembering, particularly when it comes to the lives and legacies of racialized and Indigenous people. We don't like to remember the hard stuff. And a lot of the hard stuff in this country's history has the lives and experiences of Indigenous and racialized people at its center. So, Canada has decided to make a practice of forgetting and in doing so has allowed and encouraged entire institutions and a national culture to function and flourish in a collective state of amnesia that filtered all the way down to my high school. Canada's denial, I want to emphasize, goes well beyond the surface level, narrative of diversity inclusion and tokenism cultural invisibility on this level should be seen as an act of violence and Yasmin Jiwani's 2006 book *Discourses of Denial, mediations of race, gender, and violence*. She argues that Canada has created several versions of what can be called the ideal citizen and our stories circle around this ideal citizen.

The first is what she dubs the reasonable person. So, let's call our reasonable person Joe. Joe was your all-Canadian law-abiding plaid-wearing white middle-class person. He's an easy-going guy. Doesn't like to kick up a fuss. And Joe always, always pays his taxes on time. Joe comes from humble beginnings, but he's worked hard and pulled himself up by the bootstraps. Joe always recycles and always makes sure to vote. He's not a fan of those who are always hammering on about injustice. Joe believes that everyone is equal. It's up to the individual to determine what they will and will not do with their lives.

Dr. Jiwani argues that there is also an immigrant version of this ideal citizen. She calls them the preferred immigrant, AKA the conditional Canadian. Let's call this person. Rita. Rita never talks about the trauma and baggage she carries from the dirt journey she took to get here.

She takes her family to watch fireworks on Canada day. She knows all the words to the anthem and she studied hard for her citizenship test. She's eternally grateful for all the opportunities Canada has bestowed on her and her children. Rita believes in the systems that define this country, the education system, the justice system, the electoral system. And she knows that success can be hers too. As long as she works hard enough.

I'm not Rita, and clearly I can never be Joe (I don't like plaid). I'm frequently late to pay my taxes - ok not frequently hopefully no one from CRA is here. I spent 10 years building curriculum because I deeply believe the education system in this country is dangerously flawed. My upcoming play is centered on the injustices many have experienced while navigating the justice system. I kick up many issues, I've attended numerous protests and will continue to, and I know that hard work in a society built on inequity.

It does not automatically yield success. Does that mean because I dive deeply into the hard stories that Canada prefers to forget that me and my work will get forgotten. It's a very strange place to be as a content creator. Last fall, a CBC Angus Reid poll revealed that 68% of Canadians believe that minorities should do more to fit into mainstream Canadian society. 68%. When asked the same question, only 53% of Americans believe that immigrants need to do more. We, the Canadian mosaic beat the American melting pot. This poll told me that 68% of Canadians probably won't appreciate my work and my stories. And maybe that poll is right.

In February. I wrote an article about seven African Canadian female filmmakers, whose names you should know. This list included people such as Jennifer Hodge to Silva Claire Plato and Sylvia Hamilton

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Amanda Parris from The Walrus Talks



pioneers, who in my book should be household names, but most of Canada has never seen their films and has never heard of them.

Most of Canada has also never heard of the Black arts movement in Canada or the pioneering work of radio DJ, Ron Nelson, over the queer and trans writing group. A's for orange or the time a generation of young people try to stop gun violence in Toronto through art. These people have done work. Tons of work, but because they delve deeply into the hard stuff, the stuff Canada so often wants to forget the stuff that doesn't fit the ideal citizen.

They are frequently forgotten. The Canada that I want to see is the one that stops patting itself on the back for its progressiveness and starts being real about its prejudice. Maybe then it will be ready to remember my, our stories. Thank you.

HOST: Amanda Parris is a playwright and the host of CBC's, Exhibitionists and Marvin's Room. And she's just one of the over 800 fantastic speakers who have walked the stage at The Walrus Talks. Wish you'd been there? Wish granted. Our YouTube channel is the place to find all of The Walrus talks. And we're coming to a city near you live and in person as soon as physically possible. Until then, sign up to our weekly newsletters to stay in touch. Find it at thewalrus.ca/newsletters.