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HOST: Personal storytelling has historically provided a new lens of experiences that challenge oppressive systems and introduce thousands of readers to the hardships of marginalised communities. Eternity Martis believes that these stories inspire future generations to create change.

Welcome to The Conversation Piece.

ETERNITY MARTIS:

Hi everyone. I'm Eternity Martis and I am a journalist, editor, and soon to be memoirist. And I am talking today about the power of personal writing and memoir for marginalised groups and young people.

So, when I was 22 and in my Master's of Journalism programme, I was still working on my memoir about what it's like to be a student of colour here at Western University. And I had been writing for four years and I was now looking for a publisher. And in J-school, I was one of the only people of colour there, which sometimes felt like the stories and genres I was interested in (which was race, gender, social, its issues, essay writing) weren't journalistic enough. Some of my professors questioned my interests or didn't really understand the stories that I wanted to cover. A white woman in one of my classes wrote a reported personal essay on a friend of sorts who had passed away as a result of a drug overdose.

Our professor, also white, was so touched that he pulled strings to get her piece published in a popular media outlet. Within days, he put her in touch with a major publisher as well. She had a book deal for a memoir in a week. Meanwhile, he had little feedback on my essay about the urgent need to preserve slave history in Ontario. After descendants of slaves die, a history, most people in Ontario don't actually know about. He did have one piece of advice for me, which was that I had ruined my story by putting myself in it.

One day after class, I mustered up the courage to ask him if he could also put me in touch with that publisher. I had a solid book proposal and almost finished manuscript and my selling points, which was that every student that I knew current or former had hearing stories of experiencing racism at a university or college yet, no one was really talking about it openly.

So, I told my professor all of this as I chased them down the hall. And when he finally stopped, he turned around and said to me, "I have contacts, but I don't think they'd be interested in the things that you write about. They're not interested in institutional racism in Canada, the prevalence of sexual assault on campuses, the struggles of student life." The struggles of student life for non-white students



were those things and my voice and authority on them were they not as important as what my peer had written.

I quickly realised that it actually wasn't about it was about who got to tell stories who were the keepers of those stories and what stories they believed mattered to our society. And I was being told that my story did not matter to society, but that didn't stop me.

While I believe in luck and hard work. I also believed in what I had to say. Two years later, my essay was published by a renowned media outlet and nominated for an award. And a year after that, I had an agent, a major publisher and a two-book deal.

I believed in my story and its potential to help bring an important conversation out of hiding, to help bring change to our campuses, to help current and former students make sense of their own experiences. Most of all, I believed that in our cultural and political climate, personal storytelling has tremendous power just a few years ago, personal writing was still called lazy and self-indulgent, it was considered an illegitimate form of writing. However, that criticism has hardly ever extended to white memories, namely white male memories.

When I first started writing my book a decade ago, I could hardly think of young LGBTQ people or young people of colour who had the opportunity to have their memoirs published. And even now when they are published, their reviews are driven down by racist and homophobes who don't feel they deserve to have the same space to tell those stories.

And they aren't held to a higher standard because the quality of the writing is poor. It isn't, they're held to a higher standard because it's assumed that people like us can't ever produce quality. Writing memoir has been regarded as something that is only unlocked after a certain kind of experience and privilege has been attained. It disregards young and marginalised people by saying, you're too young. What do you know? You haven't achieved enough yet? You haven't been through enough yet. You haven't lived long enough yet to know pain. You're ungrateful. Be happy for what you have. If you don't like your life here, go back to where you came from. Your experiences don't matter. They call us what they call our personal writing, lazy self-indulgent and whiny. Yet this generation of young people, millennials, as we call them has faced more obstacles and hardships arguably than the last generation.

We're told to spend thousands of dollars to get a degree in a shaky economy that guarantees no job and makes it impossible to be a homeowner, let alone find affordable housing our world. And along with it, our future is rapidly burning right



before our eyes where the era that grew up with school shootings and lockdowns women in their early twenties are the most at risk of inter partner violence and sexual assault in Canada and young black, Brown and Indigenous men are most at risk of police brutality and carding. Our generation is more likely to be gender fluid, even as LGBTQ rights are being taken away seemingly by the day young people of all ages and genders are most at risk of cyber bullying and cyber stocking and mental health issues. And hate crimes have doubled in Canada over the last year. And I've gone up half here in London and for students, they are facing a slew of far-right extremism on campuses.

So, if I might indulge myself, I'm inclined to say our experiences matter. Personal storytelling has been crucial to the evolution of society since ancient times and its legacy has have helped pass on culture tradition and history. It's been a means of sharing truth for the most marginalised and oppressed from slave accounts to memoirs by residential school survivors, today's personal writing echo centuries of others who have written their experiences into existence from what it means to be black today in 2019 drawing parallels to the sixties, civil rights movement. To me, two stories drawing from previous waves of feminism and womanism, personal writing braids together, centuries of individual stories of hardship and triumph exposing the collective, the collective injustices that we all face. It shows us that as much as history has changed for the better much of it has stayed the same personal writing binds our realities, offering possibilities for belonging, for healing, and for a better future.

Writing your story in this climate is critical. And at a time when so many of us are dehumanised by those with power, putting our story into the public record is an act of resistance, disadvantaged groups, whether it be people of colour immigrants, trans and two-spirit folks, young people were being pushed into silence through harassment, violence, and a loss of power. Also that oppressors can maintain control of the narrative and stereotypes that we are less deserving, less important and less powerful than we actually are, but they cannot take our words from us by simply sharing our experiences with the rest of the world. We had the innate power to make the oppressive systems around us. Start to crumble. Our words put cracks in the structures that keep us locked out and unable to form our own narratives time. And again, history has shown that our words, whether they're carved into stone or inked into paper or typed up for a blog can spark change in our society and inspire future generations to act, think, and make sense of their own experiences.

A week ago, I told the cousin that my memoir was coming out this March and he said, you haven't even been on this earth long enough to write a memoir. What could you possibly be writing about? And I told him, I'm writing about a life worth writing about thank you.



HOST: Eternity Martis is an author and journalist and she spoke at Western University presents The Walrus Talks storytelling. And she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have webcammed, wheeled and walked onto a stage at The Walrus Talks.

Care to join us? Coming up next is The Walrus Leadership Forum on strengthening Canadian journalism on May 11th. Register at thewalrus.ca/events for a front row seat from the comfort of your own home.