



Subjects of **DESIRE**

Community Discussion Guide



HUNGRY EYES MEDIA



CANADIAN
WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION



Introduction

This is intended as a short, easy to use, accessible collection of ideas to support discussions before and after watching the documentary *Subjects of Desire*.

There are some assumptions in how this guide is presented – we imagine that you:

1. Don't have a lot of time to prepare or to read
2. Have a relationship with the people that you're working with anyway
3. Have ground rules, and you can manage group dynamics
4. Know how to facilitate a group – that you do this kind of thing all the time

With that in mind, we are offering some discussion outlines with questions to help prepare you as community facilitators who can speak to some of the issues that we think bubble up to the top when working with the documentary *Subjects of Desire*.

For more information about the filmmaker, content, the cast, the creation and production process, and background on the documentary, please visit the website – SubjectsOfDesire.com



Grounding Statements

MISOGYNOIR IS THE CENTRE OF THIS VENN DIAGRAM

This documentary focuses on anti-Black racism within beauty myths and resistance to this. The discussion guides below help keep the focus of your discussions after watching the film on a close examination of the ways anti-Black racism and misogynoir – (i.e., misogyny also shapes anti-Black racism and has been named misogynoir by queer Black feminist scholar, Moya Bailey) – are present in all our lives.

GROUPINGS ARE IMPORTANT

Please consider how best to hold conversations in ways that do not harm, belittle, undermine or underplay the experiences that are centred in the films – those of Black women and how they are harmed by anti-Black racism. Consider holding your screening discussion for Black-only groups, for groups of BIPOC, for women-only groups or other groups that make sense for your community and who you work with. If the group is large, think about breaking up into smaller groups that are arranged according to affinity and shared experiences – this makes for safer and richer conversations.

BLACKNESS IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF “WHITE”

To adequately address anti-Black racism, discussions need to decentre whiteness and challenge white supremacy – that is the assumption that *whiteness* is the starting point – and the main comparison point for everything / everyone else in our collective spaces. In a mixed group, there has to be space to analyze and name white dominance, privilege and agency. This also means challenging all manifestations of anti-Black racism, including those from within other racialized groups. Having conversations that acknowledge these contradictions, especially in groups that lay claim to diversity, inclusion, anti-racism or multicultural identities are critically important. This is also why it is important not to rush to solutions or to consider “diversity” or “cultural” training and measures as reasonable solutions, but to spend more time actually understanding the meanings and effects of anti-Black racism.

Further reading: [*Diversity is not the solution: Dismantling white supremacy is. The Conversation.*](#) August 5, 2021.

YES, IN CANADA!

Anti-Black racism is real in Canada. Slavery did take place in Canada. Systemic racism is real in Canada. One serious gap is national comprehensive disaggregated data that show the extent of inequities.

Systemic racism's functions in such a way that information is not made available, our education system ignores Black history and data is missing – which in itself reinforces our collective silence about the existence of this racism. Black communities have for centuries been creating strong counter-narratives that show the embodied reality of being Black in Canada. It is only recently that these counter-narratives have been gaining wider attention. Creating counter-narratives that stand up to White Supremacy is exhausting for Black communities. And there is regular, concerted and organized backlash. A recent news item, a death in a community, ongoing global issues, or a school-based incident could all be present within the discussions, and each facilitator needs to be ready to explain these and contextualize them for everyone in the group.

Some recent community-based data - <https://www.bcg.com/en-ca/publications/2020/reality-of-anti-black-racism-in-canada>

Be very aware of and sensitive to the context and the timing of your discussions. Especially if you are a white facilitator, be very careful around asking someone Black or racialized in the group to step in because they are / you believe them to be better informed or better placed to respond. It is important to prepare yourself so that you can facilitate this with all the necessary humility and check in advance for how the group prefers to respond to questions about how to contextualize racism. Above all, please make sure that no single Black or racialized person becomes the focus of (inappropriate) questions.

Further reading: <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/robyn-maynard/>



Discussion Ideas

1. EXPLORING MISOGYNOIR

Misogynoir is the misogyny directed at Black women and girls specifically where both gender and race are involved in discrimination and violence. The term was developed by gay Black feminist [Moya Bailey](#) in 2010. Although misogynoir is something anyone can perpetrate, the use is often about the misogyny experienced by Black women from Black men.

In this documentary, the term is important as it relates to several points in the related experiences. Think about the following parts of the documentary and consider the reflection questions associated with them.

The following discussion points are designed for small groups that are organized according to shared experiences.

Topic	Prompt/Question
Different archetypes that are described: the Mamie, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire stereotypes	<p>The archetypes include unacknowledged and unnamed violence towards Black women within these roles.</p> <p>Why and how does ignoring violence within these archetypes continue to harm women/ gender diverse peoples today?</p>
Black men & dating Black women & dating	<p>What do you think when the Black women in the documentary speak about dating?</p> <p>How does anti-Black racism show up in dating? As mentioned in the movie, why do Black men choose white partners? How does this relate to anti-Black racism or misogynoir?</p> <p>In what ways does media re-enforce negative or positive interpretations of dating while Black?</p> <p>What are the roots of this? What are the reasons why Black men / women choose white partners and vice versa? Consider Eternity Martis' comments in <i>"They said this would be fun"</i> when she says: <i>"we prefer to blame women"</i> (p. 180)</p>

Topic	Prompt/Question
<p>Systemic gender-based violence</p> <p>Brittany Lee Lewis on Black Women and Rape *from clip library</p> <p>Seraiah's Poem *from clip library</p>	<p>What role does misogynoir play in systemic violence and gender-based violence for Black women?</p> <p>What are the effects in services, on Black women's healing journeys and their communities?</p>

Comments to underline the points above – Black women are silenced, they are not believed, their pain and harms are minimized, they are refused care and they often avoid reporting, not only because they know health and police services will not take them seriously, but also because these same services will be harsher in punishing any Black men involved.

2. TONE POLICING

Rewatch the clip "[Jully Black – Why Are You Attacking Me](#)" (*from clip library) about Jully's exchange with Jeanne Becker during the *Canada Reads* judging.

Share and refine different definitions of "tone policing" before starting this group discussion, so everyone is on the same page.

Read or present the main ideas from: "[Unpacking the Conversations That Matter](#)".

Set up smaller breakout groups. In these conversation circles, explore the incident and consider:

- Why it was so relevant in the context of where and when it happened.
- The specifics of the incident using the 5 W's method or another visible thinking tool.
- Share instances of being the recipient of or the instigator of tone policing.
- Discuss the concept of "intent vs impact" and how that understanding can help frame restorative conversations.
- Define code switching and discuss how and why Black, Indigenous and People of Color might code switch.

For groups that are more often instigating tone policing, when Black, racialized, and Indigenous women speak up about their experiences, how can other people really hear what's being said? So that the comments are not taken as a personal attack? How do you reflect on what they're saying?

3. BEING REDUCED TO AESTHETICS - CONSUMING BLACKNESS

"Everything we do is cool on them, but it's not cool on us."

"I find it extremely offensive. Deeply, profoundly offensive, because every time somebody does that, they're basically reducing Blackness to aesthetics."

Consider these two quotes from the documentary, and the history and reason for launching the Miss Black America Pageant as a way to celebrate, validate and make space for Black women's beauty.

- What does it mean to consider these two ideas together? What does it tell us about Black women's beauty now in Canada?
- What does being reduced to aesthetics mean in this context?
- What can we learn about beauty from the scene in the movie when Miss Black America was launched behind the backdrop of protests against Miss America pageant?
- How do you characterize the interaction between different beauty standards and what is and is not "fashionable", "popular" or 'desirable"? Or does it go further than that?
- What spaces exist to celebrate Black women's beauty and is there a need for something else?
- How does the idea of "Black joy" run counter the popular consumption of Blackness through aesthetics?

For further reference:

- Chris Rock's documentary comedy [Good Hair](#)
- [This video](#) about a girl getting her hair done



4. EXAMINING MEDIA REPRESENTATION

“I challenge everyone to just start paying attention to the images that you see on a day to day basis, and you’re going to be like, “oh my God, Becky is everywhere.”

Let’s think of the movies and shows we watch – brainstorm a list of names on a flipchart/jamboard.

For discussion:

- Who is most often represented in the images?
- How are Black or racialized women/girls represented differently than white women/girls?
- How do you think exposure to images like this affects media consumers?

Points to draw out in discussion: white-centred media representation, presence of Black women archetypes, who is positioned as main characters / secondary characters, what the images imply about women’s relationships to men, harms of these kinds of media narratives in promoting rape culture, misogynoir.

OPEN DISCUSSION

Some parts of the documentary may have left people with just the need to express incredulity, to vent, to ask questions or to express things that upset them. There needs to be space for this before the end of the discussion.

FURTHER READING AND STUDY

- [*Subjects of Desire* Glossary of Terms](#)
- <https://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black>
- <https://www.bwss.org/black-women-in-canada/>
- <https://www.dosomething.org/us/articles/our-role-as-non-black-people-of-color-in-disrupting-racism>
- <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/straight-outta-misogyny-big-screen-bigger-picture/>
- <https://www.washington.edu/counseling/culture-of-care/resources-for-non-black-individuals-and-communities-of-color/>

Credits

This discussion guide was created by



in partnership with



Discussion Guide Principal Writers and Contributors

Anuradha Dugal, Vice President of Community Initiatives & Policy, Canadian Women's Foundation

Michelle Musindo, Manager of Community Initiatives, Canadian Women's Foundation

Project Management + Design

RING FIVE
IMPACT DOCS

For more information visit:

subjectsofdesire.com

info@subjectsofdesire.com

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