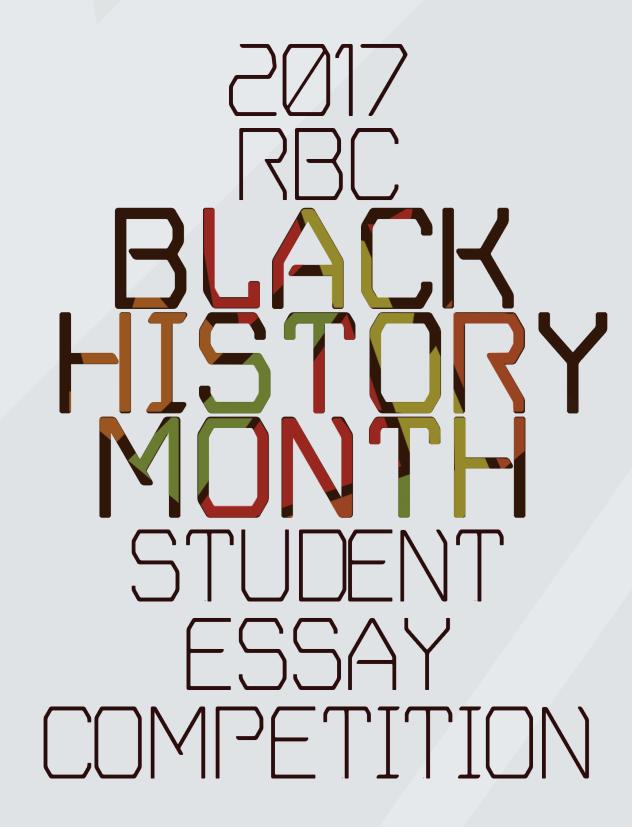
## THE INFINITE PINPRICKS OF RACISM

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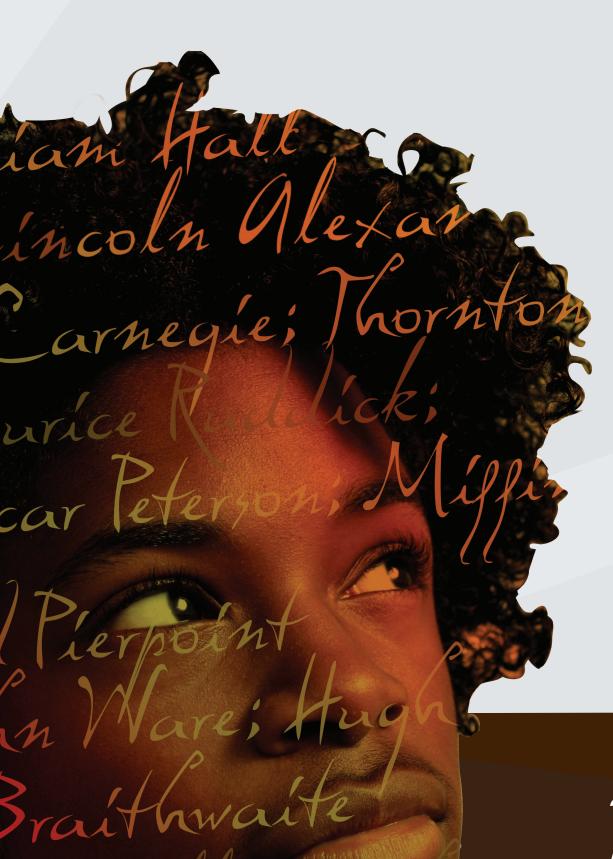


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Death by a million pinpricks. This is the fate that all those who are born to marginalized groups are condemned to. Even after obvious monstrosities such as slavery have been abolished, these marginalized groups still must suffer petty, quotidian pinpricks of disrespect and injustice which seek to bleed them of the entitlement they feel towards their inalienable rights as citizens. It is these pinpricks that Viola Desmond was all too familiar with.

Born in 1914, Viola Irene Desmond (neé Davis) was the daughter of James and Gwendolin Davis, two very active members within the black community of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Growing up in the Maritimes, Viola noticed a distinct lack of beauty parlours catering to black women. This was no accident. It was a pinprick. Under provincial law, it was illegal for people of African descent to train to become beauticians. Viola was undaunted, however, and moved to Montreal to seek training. After years of study, she returned to her community in Halifax and opened not only a beauty salon for the long neglected women of colour of Nova Scotia, but also a beauty school, so that black women dreaming of entering the field would not have to leap over the arbitrary hurdles that she did. Having to cross provincial lines to learn how to dress hair, however, would not be the last petty injustice that Viola would be forced to endure.

In 1946, on her way to a business meeting, Viola's car broke down in New Glasgow. As she waited for the repairman to arrive, she decided to watch a movie at the Roseland Theatre to pass the time. She requested a ticket on the main floor of the theatre, but when she entered she was told that she had purchased a balcony ticket and would not be seated on the main floor. This was no accident. It was a pinprick. When she returned to the cashier and requested to change her seat to one of the better ones on the main floor, she was told that "her kind," was not allowed to be seated there and that she would only be allowed to watch the film from the segregated balcony. Viola sat in the main floor anyway, and when she refused to leave she was violently ejected from the theatre by police and arrested. She was charged with attempting to defraud the provincial government, but her only crime was demanding to be treated like a proper citizen. When she later told her husband about what had happened at the theatre, he told her not to pursue legal reparations. He had grown up in New Glasgow and was used to these pinpricks.

Rather than submit to a fallacious charge as her husband suggested, Viola decided to challenge the theatre in court. The trial was ultimately unsuccessful, but Viola's acts of defiance generated momentum for the civil rights movement in Canada, particularly in the eastern provinces. Organizations such as the *Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People* (NSAACP) used Viola as the poster child of African-Canadians who were no longer willing to suffer the needless pinpricks of racism. Due to the work of thousands of brave men and women such as Viola Desmond, racial segregation was ended in Nova Scotia eight years later in 1954. What they did paved the way for the more equal and free Canada which we know today. Viola's bravery has recently been recognized by the government of Canada, as she will become the first Canadian woman to appear on the ten-dollar bill.

As a youth of the new millennium, it is often easy for me to forget the struggle that Canadians of all genders, colours, religions and creeds had to endure to be acknowledged as "Canadians" and to earn the respect which that entails. As the child of Jamaican immigrants, I remember how I would listen in horror as my grandfather told me stories of how he was subjected to discrimination and violence when he was my age because of the colour of his skin. He would tell me how, like Viola, he would suffer infinite pinpricks because others failed to see him as a fellow human being. The lesson that Viola Desmond teaches all Canadian youths, regardless of their background, is that history is not defined by single great people, but by everyday citizens who refuse to endure unnecessary pinpricks and who have the courage to stand up for what they know is right.

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