



Jordan Stanger-Ross

## Lessons in racism at a Country Grocer

I think I may have learned something new about the history of racism the other day in a neighbourhood store.

Sometime near the beginning of everything now happening, I walked into the Country Grocer by my house. For a grocery, it's a homey kind of a place, a place of familiar faces and smiles. One of the stock clerks, Neil, is a student at UVic, and once, maybe a year ago now, the two of us helped an older shopper navigate the condiments aisle. It's that kind of a place.

So, a day or two after UVic cancelled face-to-face classes, I went to the store. Everything looked normal to me. So much so, that, for my first few moments there, I felt a rush of wellbeing. Canadians will pull through the COVID crisis, I suddenly felt. The shelves weren't depleted by hoarders. The place felt as it always had. I was reassured by feeling that this was Canada. A place of decency, where people, in quiet fellowship, show respect for one another. We'll get through this together, I suddenly felt.

This image of Canada is of course naïve, even as it also holds some truth. But, for those first few moments in the Country Grocer, I wasn't making an argument. Rather, I was just feeling something. I was feeling that everything would be okay. Like many of us, I had been reading about partisan rancor in the United States, lock-downs in China, and chaos in Italy. But Canada, I felt as walked through the doors of a familiar local store, Canada really is different.

Then, as I pushed my cart through the aisles, starting with produce, then baked goods, and on to restock my peanut butter and Nutella supplies (essential goods with three kids shut-in), as I moved through the store, I began to experience people as I never had before.

I began to experience them as threats. Other shoppers, clerks, even the familiar ones, they all felt like biological hazards, dangerous, in their bodies, to me and my family. I wanted to get away from them and back home as quickly as possible. And, in the process of finding others so strange, I was also estranged from myself. I felt uneasily self-conscious in my physical movements and in my interactions with other people. It was an experience of fear.

The change was, I think, mostly invisible. Perhaps the woman at the checkout realized something was off (it seemed to me that she did, but then again, she was a threat, right?), but for the most part, I proceeded with outward calm, I got what I needed, paid-up, and went home. But inside of me, the story into which the Country Grocer fit, as well as my place in that story, had changed markedly.

Racism was one of the big stories of the 19th and 20th centuries. Hannah Arendt described it as "strong enough to attract and persuade a majority of people and broad enough to lead them through the various experiences and situations of an average modern life." Racism worked because it offered normal people a way to interpret the world and to understand their place within it.

Historians know that racism is more than just a subjective experience. It gets written into law and it organizes opportunities. It builds walls. But racism is also a way of experiencing the world.

In the short time I spent in the Country Grocer, I felt the tension between two big stories. One was a story about a peaceable Canada, a place of goodness and wellbeing. Another was a story of pathogens and pandemics. What has struck me afterwards was not that one was true and the other false,

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