

# Signing the Scarborough Charter: Notes on Looking Back to Move Forward

by Adelle Blackett; preface by Christiana Abraham & Rohini Bannerjee

**Author:** Adelle Blackett is a Professor of Law and the Canada Research Chair (Tier 1) in Transnational Labour Law and Development at the Faculty of Law, McGill University, Montréal, Québec. She holds a BA in History from Queen's University, civil law and common law degrees from McGill University, and an LLM and a doctorate in law from Columbia University. A fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, she is the recipient of several prestigious research grants and awards. She is widely published in English, French, and Spanish in the field of transnational labour law with a focus on decolonial approaches. Her 2019 book manuscript entitled *Everyday Transgressions: Domestic Workers' Transnational Challenge to International Labour Law* (Cornell University Press) garnered the Canadian Council on International Law's (CCIL) 2020 Scholarly Book Award. Her current SSHRC-funded research focuses on slavery and the law and supports her general rapporteurship for the International Academy of Comparative Law.

The virtual launch of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education was held on November 18, 2021. Attended by close to fifty university and college leaders, this landmark event in the history of tertiary education in Canada saw the collective official signing of the document by these leaders pledging to fight anti-Black racism and promote Black inclusion in higher education.

The official signing followed a year-long collaborative and collective work that involved extensive feedback from students, faculty, staff, senior leadership of partner institutions, Black political and civic leaders, and organizations. The ceremony hosted by Wisdom Tettey, Principal of the University of Toronto Scarborough and Chair of the Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee and was live-streamed to higher education communities across Canada. It featured presentations and round tables with key leaders and thinkers of the Charter where the document's grounding philosophies and implications was discussed.

Included in this event were these closing remarks offered by Professor Adelle Blackett, Canada Research Chair in Transnational Labour Law at McGill University and principal drafter of the Scarborough Charter. The

speech, delivered with English and French sections, has been transcribed for publication here and translated in full for French-language readers.

—Christiana Abraham and Rohini Bannerjee

## *Signing the Scarborough Charter: Notes on Looking Back to Move Forward*

by Adelle Blackett

Thank you, Wisdom Tettey, co-members of the Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee, signing partners, each insightful participant and audience member and all who have contributed to the year-long co-creation process, for the shared vision that inhabits the Scarborough Charter.

I am the descendant of enslaved Africans in the Americas, joining you for this historic launch from the traditional unceded territories of the Kanyen'kehà:ka nation of the Haudenosaunee confederacy. I am grateful for the heritage of ancestors who have relentlessly worked for emancipation.

As a daughter of Québec, given my family and community and social and economic positionality, I was not destined to be a university professor. Far from it, but I was able to benefit throughout my academic trajectory from encouragement, confidence, and engagement from teachers and other community members who worked to build an inclusive future. The Scarborough Charter aims to pay tribute to them all.

Drawing on the co-creation process and the discussion during the launching of this Charter, I posit that the Scarborough Charter may be seen as both an archive of special significance in this moment, and a framework of action inspiring our future engagements.

As an archive, the Scarborough Charter chronicles in its preamble Black communities' insistence against all odds upon our profound humanity. It offers at once an acknowledgement of how much academic excellence has historically been lost through exclusion and silencing, and a reclaiming of presence and belonging, grounded in purposeful centering of the experiences, contributions, and aspirations of people of African descent in Canadian higher education.

As a framework, it offers precise, detailed, and comprehensive guidance catalyzing action, within an architecture that enables institutional actors in the higher education sector to share data and informed practices, foster and strengthen implementation and hold each other accountable.

Both the archive and the framework offer "an ontological affirmation of Blackness", through a collective act of refusal, to draw on Kanyen'kehà:ka scholar Audra Simpson's work: that is, refusal of an exclusionary status quo. That refusal, and the archive and framework it has engendered, open up boundless possibilities.

To invoke legendary Caribbean historian, C.L.R. James' famous affirmation from his semi-autobiographical, "unending allegory" of cricket, *Beyond a Boundary*: "It is movement that matters; not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there."

Signing the Charter signals not an end point, but a commitment to keep moving, beyond where we were in Canadian higher education, captured in the archive, toward where we are going through a framework designed to propel us forward with determination, to realize the

## Charter principles

- of intersectional Black flourishing, which includes the spirit of *Sankofa*, or going back to get what's ours, cultivating and honouring the contributions to excellence that are in reality all around us;
- of inclusive excellence, or the opportunity to look anew at our academic world, changing what it feels like to walk into a room and know that it is inhabited by plural communities and traditions of excellence, broadening and fostering the emergence of alternative canon;
- of mutuality, embodying in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, our common, inescapable garment of destiny;
- and of accountability, challenging ourselves and our institutions of higher education in late poet Maya Angelou's words, to do better as we know better.

If we let it, the Scarborough Charter can be part of a living process, resolutely and steadfastly positioning Canadian higher education at the vanguard of transformative change. But forgive me for closing with a caution. My late colleague at McGill and former Royal Society of Canada president, Rod Macdonald, reminded us through CLR James that to know the rules, to clothe oneself in them and to act in conformity with them – even to know the spirit of the rules—is not enough. He stressed that the problem is resolutely not with attempts to adapt the rules to local context—that is to be expected, and is anticipated. Rather, he was concerned that "in the absence of an intention to organize conduct purposely to achieve its objectives," one is not "playing the game"; one is simply playing at the game, or possibly playing with the game.

In other words, we must avoid [deploying] "EDI with a vengeance," recalling instead the truth of the popular maxim, "nothing for us without us."<sup>1</sup> The racial reckoning [following the killing of George Floyd] is a reminder of the pernicious legacies of enslavement and anti-Black racism, and the extent of the trust that must be rebuilt with care and with a love of justice, to move beyond.

We have a tremendous opportunity through the Scarborough Charter's ongoing co-creation process—in the

Inter-Institutional Forum and Steering Committee<sup>2</sup> and the material support that member institutions must bring to these—to work with purpose to move beyond a boundary of anti-Black racism to foster meaningful inclusion in Canadian higher education of all equity-deserving groups. We can co-create an academia in the world where members of all communities can pursue truth in excellence, live, learn and flourish.

## Endnotes

1. The phrase “EDI with a vengeance” should be understood in reference to caution required in the risk that institutional actors are playing at anti-Black Racism equity work, without actually achieving equity. “EDI with a vengeance” is not an inclusive, participatory approach to redressing anti-Black racism. For more on this see Adelle Blackett’s Employment Equity Act Review Task Force Report (2023). <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/portfolio/labour/programs/employment-equity/reports/act-review-task-force.html>

2. See “Anti-Black Racism and the Signing of the Scarborough Charter: Insights, Processes, Challenges, and Inclusive Futures in Canadian Higher Education. An Interview with Dr. Adelle Blackett and Dr. Wisdom Tettey” in this issue.

# Signature de la Charte de Scarborough: Retourner our avancer

par Adelle Blackett; préface de Christiana Abraham et Rohini Bannerjee

Traduit de l'anglais par Yingjun Chen (elle)

Le lancement virtuel de la Charte de Scarborough sur le racisme anti-Noir et l'inclusion des Noirs dans l'Éducation supérieure canadienne a eu lieu le 18 novembre 2021. Presque cinquante dirigeants d'universités et de collèges ont assisté à cet événement marquant dans l'histoire de l'éducation postsecondaire au Canada, qui a vu la signature officielle collective du document par ces dirigeants s'engageant à lutter contre le racisme anti-Noir et à promouvoir l'inclusion des Noirs dans l'éducation supérieure.

La signature officielle a suivi une année de travail collaboratif et collectif impliquant des retours d'information approfondis de la part des étudiants, du corps professoral, du personnel, des cadres supérieurs des institutions partenaires, ainsi que des dirigeants politiques et civiques noirs et des organisations. La cérémonie, animée par Wisdom Tettey, principal de l'Université de Toronto à Scarborough et président du Comité de direction inter-institutionnel pour l'enseignement supérieur inclusif, a été diffusée en direct aux communautés de l'éducation supérieure à travers le Canada. Elle comprenait des présentations et des tables rondes avec des leaders et des penseurs clés de la Charte, où les philosophies fondamentales et les implications du document ont été discutées.

Cet événement incluait également des remarques finales prononcées par la professeure Adelle Blackett, rédactrice principale de la Charte de Scarborough. Ce discours a été transcrit et traduit en français pour les lecteurs francophones.

—Christiana Abraham and Rohini Bannerjee

## *Signature de la Charte de Scarborough: Retourner pour avancer*

par Adelle Blackett

Merci Wisdom Tettey, co-membres du Comité consultatif interinstitutionnel, partenaires signataires, chaque participant perspicace et membre du public ainsi que tous ceux qui ont contribué au processus de co-création d'une année, pour la vision partagée qui habite la Charte de Scarborough.

Je suis descendante d'Africains esclavagisés dans les Amériques, vous rejoignant pour ce lancement historique depuis les territoires traditionnels non cédés de la nation Kanyen'kehà:ka de la confédération Haudenosaunee. Je suis reconnaissante pour l'héritage des ancêtres qui ont travaillé sans relâche pour l'émancipation.

Fille du Québec, par la position économique et sociale de notre famille et communauté, je n'étais pas destinée à devenir professeure. Loin de là... mais j'ai pu bénéficier le long de ma trajectoire académique des encouragements, de la confiance et de l'engagement à la fois de nombreux membres des lieux d'enseignement et de membres de nos communautés qui œuvraient pour un avenir inclusif. La Charte de Scarborough vise à leur rendre hommage.

En m'appuyant sur le processus de co-création et la discussion lors du lancement de cette Charte, je soutiens que la Charte de Scarborough peut être vue à la fois comme une archive d'une importance particulière en ce moment, et comme un cadre d'action inspirant nos engagements futurs.

En tant qu'archive, la Charte de Scarborough relate dans son préambule l'insistance des communautés noires contre vents et marées sur notre humanité profonde. Elle