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Special Issue: **Dialogues and Reflections: The Scarborough Charter**
Introduction

Plumes of Progress: An Introduction to the Special Issue on the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion

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Rohini Bannerjee (she.her.elle), daughter of immigrant Settlers from Himachal Pradesh, India, was born and raised on unceded Mi'kmaki territory, on the Dartmouth side of the great harbour of Kjipuktuk. Chevalière de l'Ordre de la Pléiade, Rohini earned her PhD in French Studies at Western University in 2006 and is a Full Professor of French in the Department of Languages and Cultures at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. A scholar, translator, and creative writer, Rohini's primary research focuses on the literatures and cultures of the Francophone Indian Ocean. Papers on Mauritian literature have appeared in *Nouvelles Etudes Francophones*, *Indialogs,* and *portAcadie*. In 2021, she co-edited *From Band-Aids to Scalpels: Motherhood Experiences in/of Medicine* with Demeter Press and, in 2024, *Premières Vagues: Poèmes covidiens des espaces minoritaires et diasporiques de la francophonie* with L'Harmattan, Paris. During her tenure in senior academic administration, Rohini co-led the signing of the Scarborough Charter. Her short stories and poetry exploring themes on belonging, identity, and body image, written in both French and in English, have appeared in Canada, Spain, France and India.

Keywords: alternative university; anti-Black racism; Canadian higher education; Scarborough Charter; transformative change

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In an Embittered World, What is the Colour of Joy? Acrylic on canvas 60 x 48 in. © Ibe Ananaba 2021

Introduction

The signing of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions and Accountabilities in 2021 signalled an important milestone in Canadian higher education (Scarborough Charter 2021). When presidents and chancellors of forty-six universities and colleges, including the country's largest post-secondary institutions such as the University of Toronto, McGill University, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Calgary, came together in a joint virtual-signing ceremony, the symbolism of the moment was simply seismic. The nationally broadcast ceremony featured Black leaders, Charter drafters, students, and activists who introduced its vision for systemic change in higher education in Canada. This was followed by participating university leaders ceremoniously signing the document to signal their commitment to its principles as partner institutions. However, beyond the lights and cameras, what does this Charter really entail for higher education in Canada?

At a time when universities continue to grapple with how to address Indigenous and Black representation and inclusion, the Charter has been described as a historic "never before seen" framework for action. It is underpinned by four principles: Black flourishing, inclusive excellence, mutuality, and accountability. Commitments outlined in the Charter include increased hiring of Black faculty and staff in relation to their historic underemployment in the higher education sector, decolonizing and broadening curriculum, and the initiation of Black Studies programs across institutions, among others. The Charter has been described as a tool that provides universities with guidelines for their anti-Black racism strategies and a framework for action beyond mere talk, that is, "to be alive to complexity and proactive in the face of crisis; to foster fundamental questioning through rigorous, respectful engagements across difference; and to enable societal transformation" (Charter, 9).

The Charter also signals acknowledgement of what is often whispered in academe's historic hallways of knowledge but not spoken aloud: the existence of systemic anti-Black racism.

Institutional introspection regarding anti-Black racism in Canada was spurred by several incidents of racial profiling of Black students on Canadian university campuses (Tomlinson, Mayor and Baksh 2021) and the global soul-searching that followed the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man in the United States in 2020. This event sparked massive Black Lives Matter protests including the toppling of colonial monuments in North America and beyond (Abraham 2021).

Deliberations on the Charter began in October 2020 when institutional leaders, including Wisdom Tettey, Vice-President and Principal at the University of Toronto-Scarborough, initiated national conversations referred to as the National Dialogues and Action on anti-Black racism at Canadian institutions. These discussions, led by Black academic leaders and diverse partners from various sectors including students, faculty, staff, senior leadership of partner institutions, as well as Black political and civic leaders outside academia, deliberated on how to make meaningful change. Drawing from this collective work, so began the drafting of the Charter, where the principles, actions, and accountability measures took shape as a collaborative endeavour.

We suggest that the significance of this Charter can be viewed as threefold:

First, via its novel use of language about Blackness and excellence, it introduces into the vernacular terms such as inclusive excellence, intersectional Black flourishing, and Black traditions of research excellence, among others. The Charter calls for the broadening, re-shaping, and revisioning of the ways in which Blackness can be articulated beyond limiting definitions. In so doing, the Charter allows for the concrete re-thinking of necessary reparatory frameworks of space-making and alternative discourses that enrich the discursive space. To a large extent, the Charter provides licence to members of the academy and community to enunciate Blackness through a rich vocabulary that foregrounds evident gaps, absences, challenges, desires, and futures.

Second, the Charter broadens an articulation of anti-Black racism within the frame of the historical and colonial context of Canada[1] where such discourse tends to be ghettoised in closed spaces or otherwise spoken through what critical race studies researcher Yasmin Jiwani has labelled "discourses of denial" (Jiwani, 2006). Premised on a historical legacy that takes into consideration the distinct Black presence in Canada for more than four hundred years, including its history of trans-Atlantic slavery, the establishment of Black communities from the Loyalist era and historic structural Black exclusion, the Charter makes a compelling case for attention to be placed on anti-Black racism in Canada at this juncture (Charter, 5). While the Charter locates the case for anti-Black racism within the framework of Black reparative justice in the Canadian context, notwithstanding its intersections with EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusivity), decoloniality, and Indigenous presence, it makes an unambiguous case for a Black primacy. In so doing, the Charter provides a mechanism that actively reshapes a more radical and inclusive envisioning of pedagogy and, by extension, another kind of epistemology.

And third, the Charter is a concrete step-by step template for action and accountability on anti-Black racism. We suggest that the Charter should be viewed as a call for transformative change that ultimately envisions an alternative university. Rinaldo Walcott, Black Canadian scholar and Chair of Africana and American Studies at the University of Buffalo, argues for an urgent re-thinking of the university as it is currently a space where all is not well. To Walcott, the university remains a contested site of crisis where the most marginalized in its hallways have and continue to struggle for substantive representation at all its levels (Walcott 2023). Walcott suggests that in the face of the necessary reforms needed for the modern university as a fundamentally unequal and reactive site, what is required is the imagining of "a*nother university now!*" (2023, 63).

The Special Issue

This special issue on the Scarborough Charter emerged from our engaged interest in this historic moment. Informed by our combined lived and institutional experiences as Black and Brown identifying women academics who have been committed to the work of critical race studies, anti-Black racism,[2] and EDI[3] at our respective institutions over the years, we were eager to be a part of this important conversation. We wished to explore how these collective actions and accountabilities that the Charter seeks might actually occur. What happens beyond the signing of the Charter and individual universities' optics?

The idea for this special issue first took root a few months after the Charter signing as a call for a virtual academic symposium in collaboration with the journal *Atlantis*. After receiving only a handful of abstracts, most

likely attributable to the newness of the Charter, we issued a broader call for papers for a Special Issue on the Scarborough Charter. Collated here are contributions from scholars, academics, activists, artists, and students who have offered their critical interpretations and engagements with the Charter. While the signing of the Charter has signalled deeper questions, this Special Issue provides some emerging interpretations, along with reflective and creative contributions that surround this call to action. Varied research contributions and reflections propel the following questions and more: How will the Charter influence ways in which the academy frames and considers Black inclusion and excellence? What pedagogical challenges does the Charter pose in its quest to decolonise the academy? Does the mere existence of the Charter prioritise the processes and tangible actions of change? In alignment with the scope of the journal *Atlantis*, that is, exploring Black feminist theory and practice, gender, and social justice, we are pleased to curate wide-ranging perspectives in this Special Issue. These contributions acknowledge historical and current barriers facing Black inclusion in the academy with a focus on lived experiences. Together, these contributions remind us of a grassroots desire for change when dominant cultures, processes, and approaches to academia are forced to recalibrate and make room in such transformative moments.

As a living document, we are keeping in mind that the Charter should also be viewed with continuous critical oversight by Black scholars and critics regarding its implementation and do-ability. For instance, we can explore Rosalind Hampton's (2023) robust critique of current institutional discourse of Black excellence within the neo-liberal university in Canada. She argues that the urge to use the discourse of Black excellence has generated insatiable and unsustainable demands that encourage sacrificing one's health and well-being in exchange for being recognised as exceptional when Black scholars already must be more than exceptional to succeed in the academy. She raises the concern that "institutional discourses and awards structured around Black Excellence both exceptionalize Black students and academics and place us into competition with one another *as Black students and academics*. To enter and exist within the university under the guise of Black Excellence is to distance ourselves from Black averageness, from quotidian Black life and everyday people" (Hampton 2023, 67). Hampton further argues that although the Scarborough Charter focuses instead on inclusive excellence, in reality, the term is often merged into EDI rhetoric in the academy and may be inadequate to address the specificity of anti-Blackness and its related governing infrastructures.

Starting with an interview with two stewards of the Scarborough Charter, Dr. Adelle Blackett and Dr. Wisdom Tettey, we engage in a robust behind-the scenes conversation about the Charter and its implications. In this riveting discussion, Tettey and Blackett share their own experiences of leading this historic initiative and take us on a journey from the beginning to various processes in the development of the Charter. They lay out the grassroots consultations that framed and informed the context, foundational principles, and spirit for action on anti-Black racism. This conversation also offers an in-depth analysis of the meanings of the novel language deployed by the Charter around inclusive excellence. As Tettey suggests, the idea of Black flourishing is to ensure that our institutions are places where Black people—faculty, staff, students, and community members—can feel a sense of belonging, where they can see themselves as a part of the mission of the institution where they are supported in order to flourish. This conversation also addresses some of the challenges and difficult terrain around accountability and change that the Charter demands within institutions.

The multi-vocal piece "Poetic Fabulations: Chartering Relationalities of Black Flourishing, Mutuality, Inclusive Excellence, and Accountability" is a creative offering that infuses poetry, risk, and accountability. Along with Black feminist lived experiences and practice, this contribution demonstrates the power of the language of the Charter and how it mobilizes persistent structures in post-secondary spaces. Rooted in poetics, with intention and hope, Anita Girvan, Maya Seshia, Nisha Nath and Davina Bhandar advance non-linear reflections of the grassroots work of the Charter, questioning what happens when institutions sign on to it. In this original approach that merges critical and literary thinking that results in a uniquely poetic prose, readers engage with multiple metaphors intersecting institutional fragility with the "wait and weight" of coalitional politics along with the diverse flavours of performance leadership and the muffling of racialized labour of anti-racist change.

In a data-driven reflection entitled "Moving Beyond Diversity: Using Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought to Foster Black Inclusion through Undergraduate University Admissions," Christopher Stuart Taylor and Grace Gomashie focus on pathways for university

undergraduate admissions. This critical contribution offers insights on current undergraduate admission practices framed through diversity and inclusion initiatives in selected Ontario universities, as well as the limits of such in disrupting systemic barriers faced by Black undergraduate applicants. The authors issue a clarion call for universities to devise concrete paths to making admissions more accessible and inclusive for Black students in Canada. They make the case for the employment of the four principles of the Scarborough Charter as workable frameworks through which Black admissions can be approached. In this provocative work, Taylor and Gomashie also make space for the intersections of critical race theory and Black feminist approaches as deliberate space-making strategies for tackling anti-Black racism.

Eva Cupchik's interview with Karima Hasmani, former Executive Director of Equity Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto and convener of the Scarborough Charter, offers notable insight on looking far beyond EDIA (accessibility) policies and practices within the post-secondary experience. Cupchik's questions distinguish themes in relation to the Charter, intersecting identity (re)construction of Black diasporas, accessible education, and allyship. Hasmani's direct experience convening the National Dialogues and Action, along with her intersectional identity, allows for answers that provoke more questions for the reader. How can senior academic leadership ensure that the grassroots pathways to education move to the forefront? Are universities committed to promoting recruitment practices that provide inclusive strategies for the retention and thriving of all our students? The echoes of hope from the Charter resound throughout Hasmani's considered answers to Cupchik's purposeful questions.

Karine Coen-Sanchez offers a reflective paper that honours her lived experiences as a Black woman pursuing her doctoral degree in Sociology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa. Coen-Sanchez taps into the wisdom of her own daughter's poetry, one where the individual experience may differ from what the status-quo narrative of graduate studies is promising: an equal experience for everyone. This rich reflection touches on the multiple dimensions of the Black student experience, including acculturative loss, that is, the losing of a part of oneself in order to acquire approval and acceptance by a dominant system. Coen-Sanchez leads many of her paragraphs with the anthem *I wish I knew*, harkening readers to wonder the same about the polite racism and microaggressions experienced and consequently, almost automatically, dismissed.

Similarly, Shanice Bernicky's personal reflection offers thoughtful insights on the reception of the Scarborough Charter from a graduate student's perspective. Bernicky, a doctoral candidate at Carleton University, lays bare her educational journey through personal anecdotes that have marked her lived experiences with higher education as a Black-identifying student. She meticulously weaves through a rendering of the many challenges that she has faced and continues to face throughout her educational endeavour by critically juxta-positioning the promises of the Charter against the dominant structures and practices of the Eurocentric academy that students like herself often experience as an unwelcoming space. She warns against lumping disparate needs of the many who are traditionally "othered" in the academy in exchange for concrete targeted actions against anti-Black racism. In this important and engaging contribution, Bernicky sometimes makes use of a playful narrative approach by referencing her own living body in unpacking the Charter and its implications. Parts of the body are separated (mind, body, hand, and heart) in order to elaborate the un-learning that she sees as critical to the remaking of whole new selves that the Charter provokes.

When Black students do not feel that they belong in spaces of learning, hopelessness can replace curiosity. The Charter, however, infuses hope into the Black student experience and along their educational journey. Hope is tangible when navigating the punctuated rhymes and epochal rhythms of Dáminí Awóyigà, a 16-year-old student-poet and founder of Damini Creatives, situated in Halifax, Nova Scotia as the city's Youth Poet Laureate. "Rising Black Sea" embodies bravery and redemption, calling upon themes of suffering and transforming via the allusion of waves and energies that erode and transport but, ultimately, heal. Awóyigà's collective we that bejewels her verses invites the reader to unload pain and bias on the shoreline and, with intention, let the waves of the rising Black sea manifest a future of hope.

This special issue ends with closing remarks that were delivered by Adelle Blackett, principal drafter of the Scarborough Charter, at the launching ceremony in 2021. We thought it pertinent to transcribe and also, for wider circulation, translate into French, this time-defying and meaningful prose that sets out both the "daringness of firsts" that surrounds the Charter and the forward thinking vision that it beacons. Grounded in her lived Black-

Canadian and academic experiences, Blackett situates the Charter in historic and social contexts as an archive and framework that should catalyze action. Employing colourful metaphors, she cautions against the inadvertent and reckless use of EDI as a reactive response and end-all approach to the evident gaps in representation in today's academy. Instead, in dealing with the specific issue of anti-Black racism, she calls for Black-led and focused initiatives that involve the full participation of Black members of institutions, suggesting: "Nothing for us without us." In this speech, Blackett makes the case for a reparatory response to the extensive legacies of historic injustice and exclusion as chronicled through Black communities' insistence, against all odds, on their profound humanity, presence, and belonging as something to be reclaimed. For Blackett, what is required is a deliberate, racial reckoning founded on social justice principles in order to rebuild trust and move forward.

Conclusion

With close to sixty institutions as signatories of the Charter at the time of writing, several universities have announced concrete actions for tackling anti-Black racism such as Black faculty cluster hires. These include McMaster University, Western University, University of Calgary, University of British Columbia, and Dalhousie University, among others. As well, attention to student security and dedicated safe spaces and the setting up of Black-focused administrative offices have been initiated. Some universities have also launched Black Studies programs in order to broaden curriculum offerings.[4] These are important, visible signals. However, the holistic range of actions that the Charter provokes will require concerted and sustained long-term planning, funding mechanisms, and adherence to the accountability frameworks that the Charter envisages to ensure that the place of Black history, knowledges, and the Black experience are validated and felt throughout the academy as decolonizing pedagogy and praxis. Intersecting connections with the quest for Indigenous knowledges and inclusion across the academy, while at the same time stressing EDI initiatives, makes the work ahead compelling and challenging.

Reflecting on these many critical perspectives, this Special Issue sparks curious and critical thinking about the iterations of Black flourishing, excellence and promise still to come in Canada's post-secondary landscape.

We would like to share a work of art that we believe captures this moment of promise. The above image, entitled *In an Embittered World, What is the Colour of Joy?*, is by Nova Scotia-based, African inter-discliplinary artist Ibe Ananaba. We are grateful for permission to publish this image, as well as the image on the cover of this issue. We feel that Ananaba's depiction of a "conversation with the future" captures well the current dialogue around the Scarborough Charter. *In an Embittered World, What is the Colour of Joy?* depicts three women sharing a moment of joy and reflection. We interpret this powerful and complex rendition of Black lives as enacting the momentary pause required to savour the transformative joy and promise of the Charter. The artist's use of abstract black and white, layered with flecks of colour, frames the distinct faces of the women who beckon the viewer to not lose sight of the historical significance of the moment. At the same time, we suggest that the painting captures a vision for a deliberate future that comprises a continuous and dertermined step-by-step struggle for change that will involve all of us.

As Audre Lorde reminds us, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not lead single-issue lives. Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities."[5]

Upwards and onwards, we continue!

Endnotes

1. A persistent myth suggests that people enslaved in Canada were treated better than those enslaved in the United States and the Caribbean. But since the belief that Black persons were less than human was used to justify enslavement in all three places, it stands to reason that the treatment of enslaved Black people in Canada was comparable. See Henry-Dixon 2016.

2. Christiana Abraham has been an integral part of Concordia University's Task Force on Anti-Black Racism since 2021, serving as the subcommittee lead on Concordia History and Relations with Black Communities, as well as a member of the Task Force final-report writing team. She sits on the Advisory Board for the implementation committee of the Task Force recommendations.

3. Rohini Bannerjee served as Associate Vice-President, Diversity Excellence from 2021-2023 at Saint Mary's University. She was a member of the EDI Committee for Universities Canada and represented her institution on the Education Committee for the Black North Initiative. Before senior administration, she served as President of the Saint Mary's University Faculty Union for two terms and was a member of the Canadian Association of University Teachers Equity Committee.

4. See, for example, the following programs introduced by Dalhousie University, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and York University, among others: https://www.dal.ca/news/2023/10/30/dalhousie-black-african-diaspora-studies-major.html; https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/cbse; https://educationnewscanada.com/article/education/level/university/1/1069370/black-studies-program-expands-to-include-major-minor-options.html

5. A quote from a speech "Learning from the '60s," which was delivered by Black feminist lesbian poet, writer, and activist Audre Lorde at Harvard University in February 1982. It is one of the speeches included in her book *Sister Outsider*.

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