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Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice

Always (Un)learning

A PhD Student's Reflection on the Scarborough Charter

Toujours (dés)apprendre

Réflexion d'un doctorant sur la Charte de Scarborough

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[See table of contents](#)

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Always (Un)learning: A PhD Student's Reflection on the Scarborough Charter

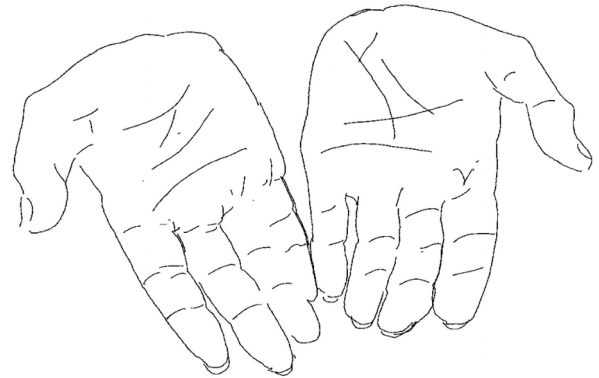
by Shanice Bernicky

Keywords: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; mental health; care; social justice; student perspective

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As a multi-racial PhD student (Trinidadian, White Settler-Canadian, and so many other pieces of me, some lost with my ancestors), I have wandered through post-secondary education with very little interactions and meaningful relationships with the few other Black students I crossed paths with. In graduate school this feeling of alienation has been heightened as there is only one of us per cohort. Reading the Scarborough Charter (2021), I am emboldened by its calls to action and principles for equitable worldbuilding and for positive Black educational futures. But I am also afraid that these words, written by those committed to this future and proactive present, will be overshadowed by the many equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) plans that post-secondary institutions have released, which lump together the disparate experiences of all those historically and contemporarily Othered, while evading some sort of firm accountability to the communities involved. I teeter between the cathartic process of learning my place in this historic moment, but I demonstrate the stickiness of a Eurocentric academic upbringing, and the process of unlearning to think of myself only as a token or worse, an imposter, still struggling to accept the power of my voice and experiences in the higher education system. In this reflective piece, I weave together sections of the Charter along with my own experiences as a Black-identifying graduate student in this most recent wave of EDI practices in a settler-colonial state. I do this by separating parts of all living beings, that is, the body, the mind, and the heart, which produce contradictory reactions for me, but are what make us whole.

Body



Bodies—casings for our hearts and minds. Bodies—skin, scars, stretch marks. Stretch marks to trace how we have grown—stretched through time and space. As a PhD student who has taken very little time off between degrees, my body has grown to be comfortable in educational settings. It did not begin this way, however, as I struggled to carve a place for myself during my undergraduate and master's degrees.

Few bodies with medium-dark skin and coily hair like mine have the opportunity to enter higher education be-

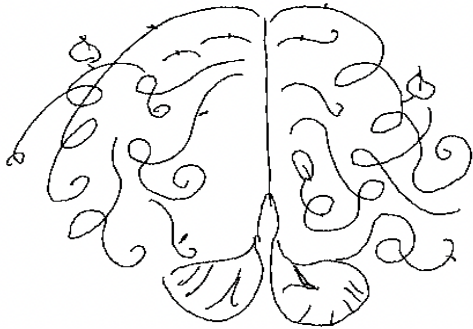
cause of the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect Black bodies from enrolling (James 2021; Statistics Canada 2022). Reading the Charter, section 2.3.2. is an essential step: “providing scholarships, bursaries, fellowships and related, dedicated support including increased research opportunities, mentorship and alumni engagement to support” (13). I received an entrance bursary that covered most of my undergraduate degree. Without it I would not have been able to attend. Increasing the number of scholarships for Black students is a first tangible step that alleviates one major barrier. Many EDI plans in higher education institutions have outlined this step, although before funding packages can be made, more Black students must apply, and their applications must be accepted. To go further, 4.4.2. stipulates that post-secondary institutions must engage in “retaining contact with professional orders and related regulatory bodies where they exist (including doctors, dentists, nurses, engineers, lawyers, social workers, teachers, skilled tradespeople) to be able to assess the admission and career progression of Black university and college graduates” (16). This passage suggests a way to mitigate biases in the enrollment process and should be extended to as many programs as possible. Applying to post-secondary institutions is nerve-wracking and I remember how shocked I was during my interview to enter a Bachelor of Communication Studies program. I was asked to interpret a random quote for an upper-year student and a tenured faculty member—both white-presenting. While I cannot remember the words, I do remember the sentiment. Something related to semiotics and representation. I burst into tears as I stumbled to respond. My body betrayed my mind. Struggling to regain control, I justified my reaction by telling them that I was bullied in elementary school. I was, but that was not why I cried. I cried because I was so afraid of failing my family, mainly both of my grandmothers. Grandma, who worked so hard for her grandchildren to succeed in this country and Nanny, who has only shared snippets of the violence she endured but let me be as weird as I wanted, just like her, regardless of the realities of our worlds. A short quote on a tiny piece of paper. Three bodies in a classroom with one long table between them. I’d fail them because I don’t have what it takes to be here. I wonder if such a process could have been avoided altogether. Some folks haven’t had the luxury to cultivate the confidence to promote themselves and their skills. Maybe if the procedure had been considered by Black faculty members, it would have been designed differently to ensure that all bodies who entered had a say in how they championed themselves and who was in the room

to guide them through the process was thoughtfully considered. I was accepted and both interviewers were extremely kind, but that moment left a scar.

My current department created an anti-racism committee to oversee the implementation of anti-oppressive approaches to communication and media studies course requirements and the organization of events on the subject of anti-racist pedagogy and communication theory. While the Charter calls for an inter-institutional forum, it should go further to require all departments to create an anti-racism committee for more individualized approaches for each institution involved. In addition, we must acknowledge that any form of committee work associated with anti-racism often falls on the shoulders of racialized individuals on top of their regular workload and “This takes away from time needed for research, publishing, developing curriculum, or building networks” (Hirji, Jiwani, and McAllister 2020, 177). Thus, for the equitable application of any of the calls in the Charter by Black, Indigenous, and racialized individuals, there needs to be some form of added compensation or the alleviation of teaching duties and in the case of upper-year undergraduate and graduate students, the awarding of course credits. This might be considered a large ask, but given the emotional, mental, and physical labour required, it is a considerably small payment. These individuals would be working to improve the environment for many. There is a pattern of those committed to these movements being the ones who would benefit the most from the culture shifts and power dynamics. I do not see this changing any time soon at many Canadian institutions, especially smaller ones, so we need to be realistic about how to support folks in a transition period.

I had to unlearn that my body didn’t belong in university settings. It wasn’t because we weren’t worthy that there were few of us here; it was because of the structures in place that kept us out. Once I learned this, I moved in and claimed my space because of the funding I had received to be there—and still have, to be here now. I burrowed into the building and brought my slippers. As I sit here and write, my feet are in the comfy sandals I change into every time I enter the PhD offices. This office is now another home, where I hold close my peers and I am held by them as we move through the trials and tribulations of graduate school.

Mind



I like to think of our brains as a clump of tangled vines, with each node capable of budding new leaves if provided the nutrients they need. My mind is often clouded with feelings of inadequacy and undeservingness. My mental health is managed by medication and cuddles from my companion species. I never wipe the tears from my eyes or walk away from what I am doing when a low period comes, where I repeat to myself, “I might be a token, but I still have work to do.” I cannot afford to take a break because I have no idea where to turn for safe support that understands and respects my circumstances in the university, if I ever let myself ask for help. I know that dread is a typical feeling for many graduate students, with plenty of memes to prove it, but the helplessness and isolation is amplified when you have limited examples of what your future might look like if you continue through academia. This is often modelled by Black professors, in my case, Black, female-coded professors. But in this country, they are so few and far between.

While the Charter calls for the increased appointment of Black faculty, it does not address the hardships that come with being the EDI hire. (While I do not believe that we should feel like this type of hire, a reality is that we can feel like this.) My field is currently reckoning with racial injustice and, as a result, is not the most hospitable place for Black students or faculty with lacking support systems. Our mental health is not considered in the Charter and should be. We need access to Black therapists and counsellors, or at least those with anti-racist training, and we need clear areas of the university (both physical and virtual) to retreat to when we are in crisis. A part of retention is ensuring the mental health and well-being of every diverse mind-body. Increasing Black faculty will increase the burden of caring for broken Black students

while Black faculty members are broken themselves having come through highly oppressive institutions. This is something that will inevitably happen for a few years while universities are in transition, adopting the Charter’s interventions and, thus, proactive access to support networks are essential.

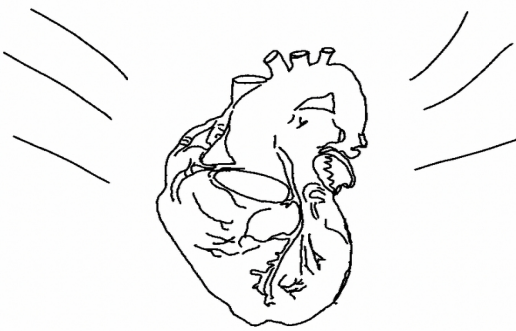
Our minds carry with them intergenerational memory—the roots clinging to moments we may not even remember. The Charter, however, carries forth the long history of anti-Black education practices and calls for education of such atrocities for all staff and students along with a commitment to anti-racist praxis (4.3.1, 15). This should not be compared to the internal bias training that EDI plans recommend. Specifying that this is a learning opportunity rather than a training session decentres the oppressor’s privileges, worries, and shame. Each of us can then sit with our own discomforts and do our own research to find ways of practising allyship. Moreover, anti-racism is an iterative process but what we have become used to is a series of EDI plans with specific yearly benchmarks. The Charter makes no mention of dates alongside each principle it offers us, cementing the never-ending commitment to decolonizing our minds, letting our vine-y brains intermingle and grow.

This said, intergenerational memory is just as sticky on the side of racist legacies. Calling for “inclusive excellence” (2 and 2.1 of the Charter) does not adequately address the assimilatory side of inclusivity in governance structures. As Black folk, we have our own internalized racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia to reckon with. This is, however, lightly balanced with the call for intersectional research and teaching and learning which grapples with the vast differences across members of Black communities (4.2 and 4.3). Furthermore, in practice towards students, it is not enough to develop courses with anti-Black racism as the subject or the inclusion of more pan-African history, as courses such as these end up relegated to special topics. The approval of course syllabi should also be a review of how an anti-racist lens has been adopted. This task can be relegated to anti-racism committee members, including undergraduate and graduate students who may have course material suggestions to provide a more kaleidoscopic view.

Minds are skeptical things. While first reading the Charter my mind raced frantically as I worried that its words would be filed along with EDI plans developed for all marginalized groups. The language of EDI still clings to the notion of the “equity-seeking” individual.

Not only this, but “When diversity becomes a conventional form of speech, what is being named as diverse becomes less significant than the name ‘diversity’” (Ahmed 2012, 58). The people behind the word become overshadowed by the word itself. I understand the need for categorization to a degree. Ultimately, we need to move beyond such delineations and, according to the Charter, this means “Underscoring the need to move beyond the notion of equity seeking groups to recognize that equity is deserved, as an incarnation of the principles of human dignity, substantive equality, and restorative justice” (7). Each diasporic community has their own unique challenges and processes for reparation. Not only is equity a right for all of us, it means something different to each of us. To develop a specific call to action for Black empowerment acknowledges this.

Heart



The heart—a big fleshy muscular lump that governs our approaches to care. My peers and I regularly find ourselves in our office questioning why we chose to pursue such a chaotic, depressing, and often solitary career path. After we take turns sharing our misery, we go silent, until one of us breaks it by asserting how they wouldn’t have it any other way and we all agree and echo the feeling. But it doesn’t have to be so hard. We go around the circle then sharing things we’d change about the university structure to make it more hospitable for those that come after us, noting what past and present faculty mentors have done for us to get by. The Charter feels like a warm embrace: Black students being encouraged to listen to our hearts and assert our own perspectives while we untangle the racist murmurs that intrude our minds.

Everything that is being called for cannot and should not be done by each institution alone. Signatories of the Charter are recommended to collaborate with others from coast-to-coast-to-coast by way of an inter-institutional forum (18). This way, knowledge mobilization may occur. Producing a single document that acts as a blueprint for meaningful change pulls everyone’s efforts together to breakdown old structures and engage in the shared process of putting new pieces together—and doing this process over and over again.

Community members are not left behind in this collective work and are in a position of power concerning mutuality with institutions, “requiring Black community prior-impact assessments as part of procurement processes, to move equity initiatives away from risk mitigation toward proactive, sustainable opportunity creation and integrating Black community impact assessments into any restructuring initiatives” (14). They are protectors of their kin, guarding us from scars we might receive. Moving towards a proactive rather than reactive process, we can lay the foundation for long-term practices of care.

I see the Scarborough Charter as a step for Canadian universities and colleges to act on their public commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Our bodies, minds, and hearts are implicated in every principle, passage, and page of it. Our bodies—Black bodies—belong and should bring our whole selves with us. Our minds are critical, invited to unlearn the so-called truths of harmful whispers and learn to work for more equitable spaces. Our hearts are urged to engaged in communal reparative care.

The Charter offers tangible ways each institution can support us, and now those institutions not only have to listen, but must be ready for the rocky transition period that will come—that is honestly happening right now, and the mental health of Black and kin folk must be cared for, and our labour compensated in more tangible ways. I feel a certain amount of trepidation critiquing some sections of the Charter because of all that it stands for, afraid that my words might be leveraged by ghosts in the ivory tower, although, the only way to build more equitable worlds is to continually find the gaps from whatever standpoint(s) we occupy. Moreover, my body, mind, and heart know that this is a journey that can’t leave anyone behind. The Charter is clear that we must “[Transcend] any suggestion that to redress anti-Black racism and foster Black inclusion is a zero-sum proposi-

tion by underscoring the complementarity of commitments to Indigenous communities and other equity groups” (7). As Black students, we have our own commitment to supporting and fighting for the freedom to experience and thrive in higher education. We do this for all who care for these lands and waters and we should hold each other accountable.

Notes

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