RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Knowing nothing about EDI:" A collaborative autoethnography exploring how an anti-racist project was created, publicized, and silenced

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ABSTRACT

This collaborative autoethnography explores how a group of students and professors from across Canada came together following racial justice protests of 2020. Driven by a desire to pressure Canadian higher education organizations to act on statements and commitments they had made regarding anti-racism, the group embraced a Students-as-Partners framework in the creation of a list of demands for institutions. Despite claims by such organizations that they were addressing racism, the demands were largely ignored. The authors explore both phases of the project, from factors leading to the successful creation of the demands to experiencing dismissal by the institutions they were designed to help. Twin messages are drawn from this work: Students as Partners is a powerful and useful method for engaging in conversations and taking action regarding anti-racism in higher education, yet this has little bearing on the institutions and structures which participate in oppression.

KEYWORDS

organic partnership, equity, diversity, inclusion, EDI, Canadian higher education

In the summer of 2020, global attention was once again drawn to what people of color, Black activists, scholars, and civil rights leaders have been exposing for decades: racism underpins society with deadly consequences. The murder of George Floyd was just one of the many that people of color, especially Black men, have experienced at the hands of police in the past several years. While all have sparked controversy, the especially heinous nature of Floyd's death, and the fact that it was captured on camera, ignited a massive new wave of protests for racial justice. Recognizing the systemic nature of racism and how it is produced and reified throughout various contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), students and professors in Canada were motivated not only to challenge racism in government institutions, but in the systems of higher education where we work. Following an initial meeting in June of 2020, an ad hoc working group formed outside the traditional higher education structure. Composed of both students and professors across Canada, our aim is to take action to address racism perpetuated through higher education, most notably through the national academic organizations and collectives of which we are members. After several initial meetings, we decided upon a primary course of action—to deliver a list of demands to these organizations, outlining what we believed to be the minimum necessary changes to begin to address racism in higher education. The following paper is an autoethnographic examination of both the process employed in the creation of our demands and the presentation of the demands to relevant stakeholders. Through this work, we emphasize how our Students-as-Partners approach allowed participants to engage in challenging conversations and produce a consensus list of anti-racist demands in opposition to traditional university equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work. However, we also note how our approach can limit compulsory power, especially in the face of institutions that are unwilling to change.

LITERATURE REVIEW: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnographic research is usually written in the first person, making the author(s) the subject of research, and is presented as a story with narration, characterization, and a plot line (Ellis, 2004). The story serves to disclose the personal and highlight bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experiences. Ellis notes four goals of this type of research: evoking emotional experience in readers, giving voice to stories traditionally left out of social scientific inquiry, producing writing of high literary and artistic quality, and improving readers', participants', and authors' lives. Self-reflection and analysis distinguish autoethnography from other self-narratives such as autobiography, memoirs, and personal essays.

Autoethnography as a research method seeks to bridge a gap between cultural understanding and personal lived experience. There exists a transparency in autoethnography and, as such, it allows researchers to cultivate an environment of mutual learning while emphasizing the interconnectedness of the human experience (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Couser (1997, 2017) proposes that life writing produced by marginalized groups offers a more incisive perspective on lives that are typically underrepresented; that is, life writing and autoethnography allow controlled access to lives and experiences that previously have been described by narrators other than the experiencers themselves. Indeed, such life writing is not only self-expression, but a "response, indeed a retort to the traditional misrepresentations seen

in Western culture generally" (Couser, 2017, p. 452). Further, this retort is not designed for reader or audience comfort, according to Couser; indeed, explaining (justifying) oneself and one's life experiences in ways that are designed deliberately to minimize reader discomfort tends to defeat the purpose of writing from a marginalized position. In the following, readers will encounter multiple voices and styles throughout; this is intentional as we seek to make not only our experiences, but also our comprehension of and reflection upon them, a polyvocal process.

LITERATURE REVIEW: RACISM AND EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION (EDI) IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As noted above, the durability and horror of structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism against Black and Indigenous peoples in North America gained unparalleled global attention in the summer of 2020, including within institutions of higher education. This intensified focus on experiences of racism faced by Black, Indigenous, or persons of colour (BIPOC) students, faculty, and staff belies the reproduction and expansion of these inequities across Canadian higher education institutions (Mohamed & Beagan 2019). Henry et al. (2017) note in their study of racialization and Indigeneity in Canadian universities that racialized and Indigenous professors are significantly underrepresented and underpaid compared to their white counterparts, even when controlling for years of service and academic level. Cukier et al. (2021) report a similar trend in the leadership of Canadian universities, noting that as power concentrates within university hierarchies, the presence of racialized administrators significantly decreases.

The inequities faced by racialized faculty extend beyond issues of compensation and representation into workload, treatment, and evaluation. When reflecting on her experience as a Black faculty member, Daniel (2019) highlights that students perceive her scholarship as "racist" whenever she discusses issues relevant to Black peoples and communities—a tendency that Samuel and Wane (2005) describe as a "range of reactions from polite indifference, aloofness, disdain, and arrogance to open hostility" (p. 81). Racialized students also face significant inequities within Canadian higher education institutions. Hampton (2016) interviewed Black Canadian students at McGill University and found that they had to navigate a complex web of institutional and social barriers that some describe as a "sea of Whiteness" (p. 159).

The processes of racialization that shape student and faculty experiences in Canadian higher education institutions have multiple sources. Abawi (2018) builds on previous studies of racialization in Canadian academe by isolating several factors that shape racial hierarchies, including the casualization of academic labour, the relationship between race and precarious roles, and the proliferation of diversity policies that perpetuate whiteness in academia. These policies, often levied in the form of expanding EDI initiatives, just as often mask institutional complicity in systems of domination and oppression through what Ahmed (2012) deems "performance culture" (p. 84). This culture is buttressed by a neoliberal orientation towards benchmarking, audits, and managerialism, and orients institutional action towards a veneer of diversity that, according to Hoffman and Mitchell (2016), diffuses responsibility for action by making diversity "everyone's business" (p. 285). These dynamics within Canadian higher education institutions warrant their interrogation as racialized organizations, which, according

to Ray (2019), reproduce schemas of sub- and super-ordination through entrenching ideas, cultural rules, and relations of power related to race. We intend to explore some of these concepts as they relate to the organizations to which we belong.

THEMATIC EXPLORATION: INITIAL PARTNERSHIP

The formation of our group, an opt-in group with no formal academic structure or consequences, allowed for what Bovill (2017) posits as three important foundations for partnership: high levels of equality, contribution, and participation from all involved. As our group began to work together and continued to work together for months after the demands were presented, each member was present because they were personally invested in the work. There was no institutional facilitation as is often present in partnership—the group was not encouraged or supported by an academic department or a post-secondary institution, nor did we receive any funding.

This organic nature of our partnership's formation can be credited for its success in producing the demands. Typically, a "common challenge to partnership is that students and instructors do not often organically come together to collaborate on post-secondary teaching and learning projects" (Foran et al., 2020, p. 29). In the group, which comprised more students than professors, the students did not classify themselves as "student partners" nor did the professors identify as "supervisors." Personal commitment to recognizing knowledges, skills, and experiences other than one's own was what interested the individuals in the group. With this, we entered into partnership without explicitly naming it as such. The ad hoc nature of the group, as well as its lack of formal naming or inclusion within an institution, aligns with Guitman, Acai, and Mercer-Mapstone's (2020) manifesto on unlearning hierarchy and embracing relational diversity, where partnership

> explicitly focus[es] on the equitable relationship rather than on labeling the groups partaking in it. Partnership need not only be between students and staff . . . students can also partner with other students to make their voices heard. (p. 62)

The lack of formal labels, along with the organic nature of our group's formation, makes this partnership unique and contributed to the strength of the demands. Beyond the initial structure of our group, we identify two themes present in our reflections that contributed to the strength of our process: coalescing over a shared commitment and successfully navigating identity.

Coalescing over shared commitment and plan of action

Members of this group came together following their concern about an organization making a public statement denouncing the murder of George Floyd with implicit action items suggested for the organization's members. Following Ahmed (2006), a higher education organization making such a statement begs the question: how does the organization benefit from such speech? Further, what internal anti-racism work would be done to carry out the statement? Jason reflects:

> Following George Floyd's murder, many institutions made statements denouncing individual acts of anti-Black racism and police brutality. Some institutions made more critical statements naming anti-Black racism as systemic, requiring systemic change. The organization subject to this paper made one which called for members to challenge racism, to learn about its ongoing history, and work towards eliminating it in our communities and institutions. Selected resources were shared to support this in members' teaching and learning. This statement sparked concern amongst a group of members, myself included.

And, Tari reflects:

> I found that I was unable to contain my anger at the wanton nature with which higher education organizations, who for years denigrated and ignored Black folks, began to issue statements expressing what I perceived to be a fake form of solidarity. Therefore, . . . when someone asked whether the [organization's sub-group] ought to issue a statement, I chimed in asking for more concrete and more meaningful action to be taken.

Christl explains that what drew her to the working group was the desire to go beyond statements and toward concrete action which would affect change within the Canadian higher education landscape:

> The commitment to action, informed by anti-racist theory [and] expressed by those who indicated interest in a working group to discuss and act on how the educational organization of which we were part, needed to address ongoing anti-Black racism and white supremacy.
>
> Relatively new to the organization, I was looking for just such a group of individuals [with whom I would be able] to do more than talk, to give back to community, and to take up to the best of my ability as a settler scholar the decolonial work and relationship-building that Indigenous scholarship and pedagogy called for.

Ahmed (2006) suggests that anti-racism statements become nonperformative when speech acts are not followed by respective actions to carry out rhetoric. Such statements are read as if they are being carried out, even when this is not the case. Ahmed notes that statements or policy texts are not finished as forms of action: they require being taken up and enacted, from text to action. Our ad hoc group found ourselves concerned with whether the spirit of the statement would be carried out. Jason reflects:

> Critical questions emerged in our process: Who in our institution is qualified to be challenging and transforming systemic racism? If the entire membership is responsible for being part of systemic change, what opportunities are there for members to learn and act on this work within the institutional community? What institutional resources

> are being invested to support this work? And who is going to bear the weight of the institution's statement, feeling pressure to lead and carry out the institution's stated commitments? There was grave concern for how this would impact racialized members.

As all of us in the ad hoc working group are members of the parent organization to which we submitted our demands, our sense of responsibility to act on the statement and be accountable to ongoing white supremacy and anti-Black racism within our organization propelled our collaboration and creation of demands for the organization to act on its statement. Once we recognized the authentic nature of each other's commitment, our group was able to begin the hard work of creating the demands. Ethan reflects: "After several meetings, I felt our group coalesced into a generative space where ideas were freely exchanged and we were able to easily build towards key action items." Théo reflects:

> In fact, every meeting . . . furthered my desire to learn from [the team], grow with them, and develop a list of demands that felt genuinely in line with what I believe to be concrete steps towards a more equitable organization.

Navigating identities

A further reason why our group succeeded in creating the initial list of demands was a successful navigation of identity. Discussions of racism are difficult topics, where racialized participants are often vulnerable to microaggressions, being silenced (or conversely—being asked to take on excessive labour), or being required to explain racism to white participants (Ahmed, 2012). Furthermore, non-racialized participants may experience unease over the appropriateness of their comments or the relevance of their experience, or become defensive if called out on problematic ideas by racialized participants.

While our navigation of identity was eventually successful, it was not without initial doubts and challenges. On the scale of race, Tari reflects that initially he was unsure of whether the group would place more responsibility and labour upon him as a result of his identity:

> When our group formed in the wake of [the June 2020] meeting, I felt a bit conflicted. I am the only Black member of the group and was one of two people of colour who participated, and I didn't know if I would be perceived to bear more responsibility to articulate the damage done by white supremacy [or] colonialism on racialized community members and beyond than other group members. I was concerned that I would take on the role of being the "only one in the room."

White settler members of the group also indicated that navigating their identity in the beginning of the work was challenging. Ethan reflects:

> When we first began our partnership, I was unsure of how best to contribute. I had little experience with anti-racist work, but was aware of common mistakes that "well-meaning" white folks often made when they engaged in anti-racist action. I wanted to ensure that the marginalized voices in our group had their experiences and truths listened to and elevated. However, I also was cautious of placing responsibility on them

> to educate myself or others on racism . . . I initially found striking this balance to be difficult and as such did not contribute much.

Heather felt similarly, commenting that:

> I intentionally did not share many thoughts at the beginning, as I did not want to take up too much space as someone with a lot of privilege, but as the group reduced in size, no one was a stranger to me, and I think that allowed (at least, myself) a sense of trust and vulnerability. I felt that I could participate fully.

Théo reflects that when another group member challenged white participants like them on their role, they were required to navigate and reconsider their place, given their identity:

> One of the co-authors of this essay . . . sent an email to all who attended the first meeting, directly addressing those "well-meaning white settler fellows" among us. They pushed everyone to question their place within the group, and to what extent we were actually experienced and capable of committing to anti-racism work. At [this juncture] I very seriously considered my presence within the group. What do I bring to the group? Do I consider myself educated enough to contribute to the work? Truthfully I am still asking myself these questions.

Despite initial discomfort, group members reported that a successful navigation of identity followed, and that this aided in the creation of the demands and the broader work. Tari explains that his concerns about having excessive labour placed upon his shoulders did not materialize:

> Importantly, however, I wasn't asked to take on [excessive] labour. For me, this was one of the few times that I've worked on a project in academia where those dynamics were genuinely absent. Instead, other group members were full-throated in articulating their opposition to surface-level engagements with anti-racist work. When we produced our demands, I felt pride at what we were able to accomplish together.

Not all navigations of identity were successful, nor should the group be viewed as an idealized space free of harmful ideas. Partway through the work, a racialized student member left, citing harm due to underlying whiteness and assumptions about her identity. Indeed, before her departure the group was made up of eight white members and two racialized members. This significantly affected group members, as Jason reflects:

> A critical and emotionally embodied moment for our working group was when one of our racialized colleagues departed the team. For me, this was felt deeply. It was a reminder that no matter how well intentioned or critical the work is that you are doing, racism permeates all spaces and relationships. Our attention needed to turn towards the harm done and repairing relationships.

Further reflecting on the departure of this student, Théo explains:

> I was surprised, as I considered our group fairly educated and capable of respecting the minority voices among us. [But] we have not been without fault. Whiteness and the privilege it lends does not dissipate within the context of our committee.

Following a period of individual self-reflection and critique, we met again as a group, sharing our thoughts and returning to our work even more conscious and aware of voice and partnership dynamics and more committed to the creation of the demands and the broader work. This "turn to the harm," in which non-racialized members of the group shifted to yet greater opposition to surface-level engagements with anti-racist work, not only strengthened our partnership, but also reinforced our learning about the practice of student-faculty partnership.

In addition to issues of race, issues of power are also present when navigating identity. As previous research indicates (see Kehler et al., 2017; de Bie, 2020), there is an inherent power imbalance between students and professors—while Students-as-Partners work arguably decreases this power differential, it does not eliminate it. A successful navigation of student-professor power dynamics was also required for the group to operate well. Ethan explains that the dynamic within the group was unique:

> There was little hierarchy, which was very freeing. In my past experience, student-professor groups are often characterized by students pressing for big change, with professors tempering expectations and reducing the scope, for better or worse. In this group, it was exciting to work with professors who not only fully agreed with the students' assessments of racism in higher education, but encouraged us to go further.

Heather reflects further that the oft-idealized, seldom-achieved equality of students and professors was much closer to a reality within this group:

> The "partnership" element felt non-hierarchical. Even though it was a mix of students/recent grads and tenured faculty, I felt that we were on the same playing field. None of the "adults" ever made me feel young, stupid, novice, or inexperienced. It lacked the often present tokenization of students' voices. The presentation of students and faculty as equals is often an "ideal" in the partnership world, but I truly think we achieved it.

Successfully navigating various scales of identity, from race to student status, proved key to advancing creation of the demands. None of this identity formation and boundary-setting would have been possible if our efforts were subsumed into the confines of the organization that we were contesting. Instead, our connection would have been muted by the strictures of formalized meeting dynamics that would have left little room to engage with the thorny and uncomfortable dynamics of self-exploration that occurred in the context of our racial, gendered, and (dis)abled embodiments. Our partnership, in its non-hierarchical format, helped

to reveal that it is in fact the hegemonic nature of academe itself that produces partnerships with little ability to effect lasting and large-scale change. When we were able to engage as friends, neighbours, and peers navigating a brutal and unjust world, we were able to identify our differential relationships to power and to use those relationships to contest it in solidarity—forging a socially just pathway in higher education by operating outside of it. Combined with our shared commitment and goals, identity allowed us to craft a list of demands that authentically addressed the issues we saw present in higher education.

THEMATIC EXPLORATION: RESPONSE TO DEMANDS

Following the presentation of the demands to relevant stakeholders, there was minimal response. One sub-group of the organization issued a statement in support of our demands and began the process to address what issues it could. The sub-group, however, has little power compared to the organization as a whole. The response from the latter relayed existing plans to set up a taskforce with which it suggested the working group should connect. However, we recognized this as an attempt to subsume our work into the bureaucratic processes of the organization—exactly what we attempted to avoid by creating our group outside of the traditional structure. In reflecting on the response (or lack thereof) to our demands, two themes emerged. We saw the organization as not truly dedicated to anti-racism and instead focused on image management, and we felt the futility of seeking change through so-called EDI discourse.

Image management over action

As it has now been over one year since the demands were presented to the parent organization with no further response, group members felt that the priorities of higher education institutions are focused more on creating an image of diversity than pursuing anti-racist action. Tari explains that the organization appeared too involved with bureaucracy and process to even consider the demands and showed none of the compassion we had come to appreciate within our group:

> [The organizational response] was a mirror image of what I observed in our group. They issued the dreaded "statement." They created a "task force." We arm-wrestled the organization into a webinar that few Board members showed up to, and when we sent along our demands, they ignored us entirely. We later found out that we were described as "knowing nothing about EDI." It feels to me that they do not care about the content of their words, but are more invested in the prestige that the words themselves can confer. In this context, partnership cannot flourish—there is an inherent competition to accrue resources and status that has little to do with transforming the "rules of the game" in the first place.

As noted by Tari, the organization made outward-facing efforts to be seen as pursuing equity through statements and task forces. However, Ethan reflects that the wall of obstructionism we encountered showed underlying motivations:

> While I knew the initial work was worth it, I questioned why we had gone so far and done so much for an institution that seemingly had no desire to change—and if it did, it was only on its own terms.

Maureen explains that despite knowing several individuals who are involved in organizational-level EDI initiatives, she struggled to balance her faith in them with her views of the organization's goals:

> How is it that I feel like my requests, my demands are doomed to be categorized as non-operational, mundane, unrealistic? How can I support my colleagues who I believe to be acting in good faith but who are nonetheless captives in what feels like the corporatization of EDI? How can I enact an appropriate sensibility, take up Fanon's warnings about condemning citizens who can only act on the impossible choices they have at their disposal? I dwell in uncertainty and confusion.

Ahmed (2012) explains image management as the key goal of higher education institutions—not actually creating diversity or addressing racism: "diversity becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations* [emphasis in the original]" (Institutional whiteness, para. 4). As Ray (2019) notes, we cannot view organizations as race-neutral. Organizations are racial structures, whose very formation, hierarchies, and processes reproduce societal racialization and inequalities. Organizational formation, he reminds us, is premised at least in part on the inclusion of some and exclusion of others. By pursuing image management over action and failing to address racism in meaningful ways, higher education organizations reinforce racial hierarchy and reproduce division. The practices of such organizations—especially the reliance on bureaucratic processes to deny pressing concerns—indicate where priorities lie. Ahmed (2006) dissects the "relationship between the new discourses of racial equality and the extension of institutional racism" (p. 106) to expose the politics of non-commitment performance in organizational responses to racism and to calls for anti-racist action. Plans for task forces, statements of anti-racism, and other speech acts, Ahmed shows, substitute for institutional action. Declarations of commitment ultimately limit rather than enable action by becoming the action. Writing documents, producing policies, and setting up task forces are actions in performance instead of performed antiracism. "It all looks wonderful," Ahmed quotes a practitioner, "but the inequalities aren't being addressed" (p. 121). Perceived to fall short or fail in an area, the organization finds familiar past practices and routines sufficient, even admirable responses and action. Demands for anti-racist action? Time for another task force, commission, or confirmation of commitment.

The master's tools

The organization's lack of response to our demands spurred reflection on the inefficacy of what Lorde (1983) describes as using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. Applying this metaphor to Canadian higher education, the master's house is the pernicious manifestation of white supremacy that underpins the marginalization of Black and Indigenous students, faculty, and staff in higher education institutions. The master's tools, meanwhile,

were the subject of considerable reflection and concern for us. As Maureen notes:

> "The master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house." Audre Lorde wrote this over twenty years ago and its powerful premise still resonates with me. I want it to inform my thinking and my action, my praxis. When did EDI become a tool that feels more and more like one of the master's tools?

Maureen's question about the transformation of EDI discourse into one of the master's tools speaks not only to temporality, but also to intention. We question what the end goal of EDI work is, if not the unmaking of unjust and colonial systems of domination in process as well as outcome. From our experience, the "master's tools" are technocratic methods of engagement designed to filter complexity and nuance into disembodied, discrete benchmarks and recommendations legible to neoliberal organizations. Tari finds that these manifestations of nonperformativity in academic spaces provoke a deep sense of cynicism about prospects for radical transformation:

> All this [engagement with the organization] made me feel cynical about the promise of a reckoning with institutional and structural racism within academic spaces, particularly when the image of anti-racist work is enmeshed with a quasi-religious, highly financialized commentariat of upper-middle class people looking to burnish their own credentials.

Tari's concern about the correlation between stated anti-racist intentions, performance, and class identity invoked a larger anxiety within the group about our role in this particular form of performance. Being a non-hierarchical group with no institutional support allowed us to speak clearly and honestly about our demands, but it also left us without leverage to hold the institution to account, as Ethan highlights:

> The detached nature of our group led to what I felt was a stronger group relationship and better work. However, we sacrificed compulsory power by doing so. At the end of the process, I was struck with a feeling of "double jeopardy": if we worked within the institution through some kind of task force, I was certain our demands would have been watered down by a "traditional" professor-student power dynamic (if students were involved at all), and change (if any) would occur on the institution's terms. This I feel is unacceptable. However, working outside the institution, we arguably affected less change.

Ethan's comments demonstrate the ethical challenge our group faced in adopting an anti-institutional stance. Shunning the acceptance of the organizational hierarchy and sacrificing our compulsory power allowed us to maintain a sense of ideological consistency, but it also removed our capacity to effect the changes we were seeking. Ultimately, as Ethan points out, there was little that our internal workings could do to shift the dynamics of an organization entrenched in a harmful status-quo:

> In the wake of near-total dismissal, I am left examining our group structure as the only thing that we possibly could have changed or influenced. Despite this, one must note that group design dynamics are minimal concerns when a racist institution fails to hold itself accountable. Debates over the method through which you try to move an immovable object are arguably moot.

While it seems contradictory to experience enraging disappointment at the same time as experiencing not being all that surprised at all, these two paradoxical emotional states can indeed coexist. We entered this experience with hope, but not with naivete. After all, we were familiar with Ahmed's (2006) notion of nonperformativity. Ahmed flips Butler's (1993) definition that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act' but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that is names" (p. 2) and uses it to explain how anti-racist discourse, that is, "speech acts" deployed in institutional talk, writing, and images relating to EDI, are nonperformatives. They work precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name. Such speech acts do not do what they say: they do not commit a person, an organization, a state, province, or nation to an action. Instead, they are nonperformatives. They are speech acts that read as if they are performatives and this "reading" generates its own effects. Not bringing about the effects they name is not a failure of intent or circumstance. The nonperformative does not fail to act because of conditions that are external; it "works" because it fails to bring about what it names (Ahmed 2006, p. 104–105). We did not see the demands as being all that demanding. Indeed, they would be enacted in any organization committed to EDI. We hoped that our organization was taking EDI seriously. Instead, we discovered through various expressions and acts of axiological slippage (Peers, 2018) that our organization wanted instead to be taken seriously in their purported commitment rather than demonstrate authentic engagement in EDI.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

Our autoethnography reveals multiple points for consideration. The initial phase of partnership and demand creation stands as a strong, yet imperfect, example of Students-as-Partners work. Established outside traditional academic structure, our group avoided many of the issues which can reduce the effectiveness of student-professor partnerships, including contrived participation and explicit power dynamics. Our experience reinforces Guitman, Acai, and Mercer-Mapstone's (2020) assessment of what is needed for authentic and successful partnerships. Unintentionally, we modeled their call for "heterogeneity, variation, and self-determination in relationships," exemplifying a "partnership practice that . . . acknowledge[s] and critique[s] existing power structures—practices that aspire toward social change" (p. 64). Through this work we contribute that even within a structurally beneficial partnership endeavor, additional factors are necessary for success: coalescing over a shared commitment and navigating each individual's identity and relationship to power.

While we enact Guitman, Acai, and Mercer-Mapstone's calls to authentic partnership, we do so outside of the institutional structure. Indeed, when we attempted to hold an organization to account through the delivery of demands, we were largely ignored. Instead, we were subject to institutional capture, where our concerns could only be made legible to the institution through bureaucratic processes, task forces, and image management. We set out to

dismantle the master's house, yet were only given the master's tools. Since we refused to participate in this process, we are left seeking additional ways to enact change, beginning with this account of our journey. Performative EDI discourse and institutional image management practices are alive and well in Canadian higher education, even following the mass racial justice protests of 2020. Our experience serves to highlight the distinction Ahmed (2006) draws between institutional speech acts and anti-racism. The statements issued by the institution and the response to our demands expose the lack of desire for meaningful change, even if those at the top of institutions do not espouse explicitly racist views (see Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Our experience indicates not only the challenges of holding institutions to account for anti-racist statements, but also of bringing authentic partnership practices into an institutional setting.

Furthermore, experiencing critical autoethnography as a collective has both theoretical and methodological implications. It enacts premises of critical social theory in a praxiological manner in the service of an autonomous and participatory society (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). It also brings Ahmed's (2006) work on nonperformativity into a scholarship of application that included an equity-seeking and activist-oriented approach to an organization and a subsequent public critique of that organization's nonperformativity. Further, the description of our collective processes allows for qualitative transferability for other collective engagements with autoethnography.

CONCLUSION: MISPLACED FAITH IN INSTITUTIONS, MANAGING FRUSTRATIONS AND BEING IGNORED, ALONG WITH JOY

We started in rage. But we did not dismiss or ignore this rage as we continued our work together. Our rage was warranted, given the global and historical context as well as the institutional context (characterized by an-all-too-familiar email sent to the membership of our organization, riddled with words like "devastated" and "commitment," ending with "task force"), and eventually the rage became a necessary part of the joy.

Here, joy does not mean toxic positivity or otherwise dismissive optimism. It is perhaps best described by Montgomery et. al. (2017):

> A joyful process of transformation might *involve* happiness [emphasis in the original], but it tends to entail a whole range of feelings at once: it might feel overwhelming, painful, dramatic, and world-shaking, or subtle and uncanny. Joy rarely feels comfortable or easy, because it transforms and reorients people and relationships (Joy and the Spinozan current, para. 3).

This joy is our most valuable tool in managing our frustrations and tempering our initial optimism.

The presence of this joy was not coincidental. It required us to acknowledge the presence of each other in a way that is often not found in student-professor relationships. The professors in our group have the courage to transgress the traditional and what is for some more comfortable and familiar hierarchical structure, bringing forward their desire to exchange ideas mutually. Christl, one of the professors in our group, reflects that "compared to the students, I feel my contribution has been small," but explains her relief in this refreshing dynamic: "I am still not quite used to not being the one to carry the ball. This was so often my

experience and it is a relief not to be in that position at this time." Maureen, another professor, echoes feelings of relief, saying the group had "high energy and sense of purpose with a shared commitment to respectful process and learning from each other [and] an unfamiliar feeling (for me) of no trepidation whatsoever about being completely myself in this process." We did not have a blueprint or map. The fact that every member of our group was surprised at the positive working environment alludes to a greater problem in student-professor partnerships in academia: mutual recognition is largely absent, and for those who work to make it a habit, it often comes with an intense increase in workload.

It seems to be a point of contradiction: we arrived with optimism and yet were surprised at the actual benefits that arose out of our work together. We believe this to be indicative of a greater trend in academia: we anticipate burn out, group tensions, and disillusionment just as we aim for change, recognition, and some spark of joy.

The organization that we describe is by no means unique in its privileging of speech acts over policy transformation. Partnerships, within and outside of the academy, will not transform institutions and structures if they are committed to reproducing and amplifying harm. They will, however, make that harm easier to contextualize and foster solidarity in the battles to come. We go forward with our political and activist work with a more jaundiced view of institutional commitment to EDI. We remain skeptical, but undaunted.

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