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Newsletter of the
Canadian Poverty Institute
at Ambrose University
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In recognition of Black History Month and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, this special issue of Spero offers reflections on racism and the experience of Black Canadians.

Reflections on racism and the experience of Black Canadians

Forward to Special Issue

Dr. Rita Yembilah

On the heels of February, Black History Month, there is momentum for continued dialogue around the elimination of racial discrimination for Black people and all people who experience discrimination because of their pigmentation.

March 21st every year is set aside to foreground the ugly truth of racial discrimination, but also to recognize the strides made to eliminate such bias and needless anguish for countless numbers of people.

March 21st is also set aside by the United Nations to mark the *International Decade for Peoples of African Descent*, dedicated to the protection and promotion of their rights.

This quarter, the Canadian Poverty Institute has put together a Special Issue of *Spero*, our quarterly Newsletter, curating thoughts and actions from the community on these topical issues. Charles Odame-Ankrah and Dibora Mehari refocus our attention on the buried histories of Black experience, and renaissance, whilst Clare Jagunna, writes about her “small steps” highly needed, gap closing effort to address an often-undiscussed aspect of discrimination for Black women who are also newcomers to Calgary— pregnancy, childbirth and post-partum depression. Noah Boakye-Yiadom writes about the cost of racial discrimination on mental wellbeing, bearing for us a truth many people affected by racism know all too well— western systems are not built for the experience of non-white persons and, that needs to change.



Taking an introspective, poetic approach, Ike Kenzo reminds us that not all hope is lost, there is time to course correct, *we just have to listen* (emphasis mine).

Happy reading of this issue of *Spero*. If you want to connect with any of these thoughtful contributors, I will be happy to facilitate. Contact me at Rita.Yembilah@ambrose.edu.

Dr. Rita Yembilah is the Senior Researcher and Evaluator with the Canadian Poverty Institute at Ambrose University. Rita is also an evaluation consultant with the Institute of Peace and Development IPD) in Tamale, Ghana.



The Amber Valley Story Is the History, Not the Future of Alberta

Dr. Charles Odame-Ankrah

Nine minutes, nine excruciating minutes ... I am sure you are wondering where the first two phrases are coming from. That is how long George Floyd's neck was kneeled on a concrete surface by the now convicted former police officer. George Floyd painfully died on camera. The events following this incident changed our world because everyone saw it and our humanity and empathy became obvious without skin color being a determining factor to condemning such an act, simultaneously changing the conversation about racism and about Peoples of African descent in North America.

Prior to the fateful May 25, 2020, numerous similar events and worse had happened to thousands of black people in North America and around the world dating back centuries. The UN declaration on the promotion, protection and full respect of the human rights of people of African descent is to help us refocus on the inherent humanity of peoples of African Descent and to assert the inalienability of their human rights. It is no coincidence that, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is aligned with the International Decade of Peoples of African descent.

On this occasion of International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and of People of African Descent, few people in Alberta are aware of the magical stories of Amber Valley, a story that remains fully untold. Their sports team. The greatness of the people. The vibrant social life. The humanity of its residents. Today, Amber Valley is no more. It begs the question, "what

happened to the history of Black people in this province, in Canada, in the United States, and around the world?" The "extinction" of Amber Valley is rooted in the histories of racism, and the erasure of the histories of black people, not just in Alberta but also in Canada. Of course, there have been some efforts in recent years as evidenced by attempts by Governments to institute and celebrate Black History Month, as well as the appointment of Black people to prominent roles such Kaycee Madu, the First Black Minister of Justice and Attorney General, who is now the first Black Deputy Premier of this province.

Alberta has a black population of 4.3%, yet the experience of black people leaves much to be desired. I live in Calgary and hear many stories of blunt racism in housing discrimination, to denied school admissions and non-recognition of foreign credentials of people trained in Africa. The frustrations a significant number of Black people go through just to be accepted still exist but it is very difficult to convince the larger society of such occurrences unless it is captured on video just like in late Mr. Floyd's case. The rising question then being, why are some people able to perpetuate these acts of racism towards Blacks without consequence? Why is the pace of progress to eliminate anti-black racism (and racism in general)



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so slow? Why is so little room made to recognize and affirm the histories of people of African descent, including their stories of invention, education, heroism, the human spirit and even normalcy as humans?

We may find some of these answers in systemic racism that undermine efforts to eliminate racial discrimination and honor peoples of African Descent in this part of the world.

Many people in charge of many influential roles are not aware of the historical

backgrounds of some of the policies they implement. They continue what is the norm. However, what the norm had been in the past no longer holds true for today's diverse populace. We cannot blame the current generation for what we came to meet, but we can hold them accountable for refusing to change what we know does not work fairly for all. These policies continue to work in favour of the majority, to the continued oppression of the minority-black people highlighted for the sake of this article. There are consequences of systemic racism such as income disparities, health outcomes, mental ill-health, breakdown in family cohesion, school dropouts, and juvenile crime. An unfunded report produced by the Foundation for Black Communities showing how Canadian philanthropy has avoided investing in Black communities, is the clearest evidence of how this society has been developed to protect some to the neglect of others,

Stepping Up to Dignify Pregnancy and Childbirth In a New Land

Clare Jagunna

potentially eradicating or oppressing them into submission, and oblivion.

My work with the Calgary African Communities Collective (CACC) has told me different, taught me different and convinced me of a Black renaissance in this city, seeing how blacks are coming together to open businesses, establish non-profits and collectives that truly cater to the needs of Black people in culturally sensitive ways.

Umoja Community Mosaic is a shining example of how a Black organization, when well-funded, can spearhead poverty eradication. It is time to tackle these serious root causes of poverty found in every system. It also time for leaders to not be penalized for speaking up against the injustices meted out to people based on their skin colour. The majority who have never seen any physical attributes of racism deny the existence of any such acts of hatred. I do not blame them. As part of efforts to combat covert instances of racism, and the elimination of systemic racism, the Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion framework can be implemented taking into considerations lived experience insights. It is only in such an atmosphere that these two days would have attained impact and we will see the evidence of a thriving community within the shortest possible time. We cannot do this alone. This write-up is a clarion call for all of us, including our allies from the majority race, to join forces with us and right this wrong, which has plagued this society for centuries.

Charles Odame-Ankrab, PhD is an analytical chemist and principal scientist at Everpur Air Inc. He is also the President of the Ghana Canadian Association of Calgary (GCAC) and Co-Founder of the Calgary African Communities Collective (CACC)

My name is Clare Jagunna and today I write about the experiences, and motivations that shaped my journey to help black women to mark the International Day to Eliminate Racial Discrimination. I founded Hands Lifting Hearts (HLH) Initiatives, a non-profit organization with a mission to provide support and hope to African immigrant women and families coping with pregnancy and postpartum anxiety/mood problems. HLH aims to increase overall awareness and stigma reduction surrounding postpartum depression and other perinatal mood disorders through intergenerational knowledge sharing. This is to help parents feel heard, acknowledged, and supported, so they no longer feel alone or afraid.

Working in partnership with local providers, organizations, and agencies, HLH works to strengthen the support network in the Black community to ensure women receive screening, treatment, and/or referred throughout pregnancy and into the first two years after childbirth. As an individual, I saw a need to support African immigrant pregnant women; because this is a phase I passed through several years ago with little or no help. This was after I lost a child and went into a depression. Personally, I was discriminated against in pregnancy, and it was a horrible experience. Part of my experience was to have a doctor tell me that even if my unborn baby comes out alive and needs medical support, she will not be given. To form, my daughter was born and left to die without support. My cousin-in-law experienced the same treatment and her son passed away few hours after birth. Pregnant women and especially those of black heritage, who left families behind in Africa, face these untold discriminations. My goal with Hands Lifting Hearts is to raise awareness of this silent discrimination, support women as best as I can and help to address this issue as it gradually gets a light shone on it.

Clare Jagunna is the Founder of Hands Helping Hearts, a Calgary initiative dedicated to Black, newcomer women to Calgary in need of pregnancy-related supplies and support.



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Awaken(Ed) To Awake: Praising Current Progress While Addressing Persistent Forms of Oppression

Dibora Mehari

As a Black 1st generation migrant writer from a war-torn country, let me tell you, you are in for a ride. I applaud and honour you for your interest in celebrating a noble anniversary such as today, March 21st. Two hundred and fifty Freedom Soldiers, I like to call them, put their lives on the line to fight for themselves and me all the way here in Canada. The physical act (expression) of solidarity halted the habitual way of life in Sharpeville, South Africa. It cut the flow of complacency and unveiled the blinds of justice. Although our champions fought and were unjustifiably killed, I urge us to continue the courageous efforts our South African counterparts applied in their unrelenting fight for equity. Apartheid not only yields physically detrimental consequences such as Black genocide but also has invisible implications, currently known as systemic racism. Covert racial discrimination thrives best in xenophobic narratives. I have always found it fascinating how the narrative is that minority groups (specifically individuals within) are weaker than the dominant society, but we are those who have fought against and overcome almost all of the adversities through time.

Segregation and racism are such unproductive and counterintuitive systems to operationalize when navigating a world marked by diversity. As much credit as we give



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ourselves relative to our cognitive superiority over animals, we have failed. For centuries, Black people have suffered the consequences of fallacies perpetuated by Eurocentric psychology. The misrepresentation of Black skin colour alongside the reduction of our biology. It is clear in the 21st century, that the colour of someone's skin does not determine the content of their heart; the content of their brain and the contribution of their existence in society. What had been taken for granted (Eurocentrism) was confronted and deconstructed by the legendary South Africans who initiated the revolution, of which we now bear the fruit. As a student, I find it my calling to fight for and maintain justice for those who have no means of doing so. Given that racism has no sanctioned setting like in the past (i.e. red zoning), today's activism looks very different—it has no contextual boundaries, so at any moment, we must be committed to standing up to the identified threat to human dignity.

I am thankful for the platforms that highlight Black peoples ever-present gifts. Recognition brings what would have otherwise been marginalized and even suppressed to the front-

lines. Social promotions such as International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and Decade of Peoples of African Descent are rightly ascribed to a resilient people. We juggle many things as Black immigrants. I see my counterparts negotiating identities because of the intersectionality of their lives. We face what is supposed to make a cohesive personal narrative on the soil of our antagonist. I hope you have a visual image of my experience. However, that is all it could ever be for someone untouched by the abuse of racism, an impression.

The demarcation of March 21st as a day to celebrate Black people is an incredibly hopeful step towards equity. That said, I find that as a society, Initiative analysis tend to lean towards quantitative data in assessing our advancement. We commit a great disservice to actual progress when we do not account for, or look to, qualitative measures as an apparatus for sustainable change. For example, the Decade of Peoples of African Descent will no longer be in 2024. Is that then it? Are the policies (quantitative) and life satisfaction tests (qualitative) in place? If appropriately answered, these questions will lead to a sustainable appreciation of marginalized populations and the appeasement of the legendary soldiers.

Dibora Mehari is a third year Psychology student at Ambrose University who is aspirationally marking her steps towards leadership in politics. Dibora is also working hard to establish an Ambrose University Black Students' Association.

Eliminating Racial Discrimination For Our Mind's Sake

Noah Boakye-Yiadom

Our mind's well-being is central to coping with challenges and stressors and enjoying life. We have positive mental health when we feel good, think clearly, and behave in ways that allow us to maintain and sustain our relationships. In Canada, being Black, Indigenous or a Person of Colour (BIPOC) requires a fortified mind that makes us a walking contradiction. Our mind must always think in dualities, feel one thing but express the opposite, suppress the urgent desire to behave one way, and ultimately control our actions. This state of existence is undoubtedly due to the racial discrimination experienced on individual, institutional, systemic and structural levels.

An interpretation of the UN Decade of People of African Descent recognition that is unpalatable to many is a focus on a systemic acceptance of the humanity of Black People of African Descent. The consistent brutality that Black People have endured on the continent and in the diaspora continues to require the UN to commemorate an International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Some factors and forces determine the income inequalities and inequities that produce poverty in our society. Well-known and documented factors affecting our poverty status through influencing our productivity include health, employment, education, and housing. Colonialism is a colossal force that affects how every individual experiences these factors in Canada. The power that colonialism exerts on these factors is through the

hierarchical structure it normalizes in our society, such as the different racial levels and privileges to which Black people are at the very bottom. The factors determining our mental health are freedom from discrimination, social inclusion and access to economic resources.

In Canada, Black people face a different reality than the rest of society, even regarding challenges like poverty. For example, let us consider employment as a determinant of poverty. The government creates an employment support Centre in the city to support those who have lost their jobs and are experiencing poverty. However, accessing this support requires travelling to the Centre, which can be challenging for Black people due to the negative experiences they may face while using public transport or walking in the streets. Even if they manage to access the Centre, the employment system is colonial. It requires Black people to meet Eurocentric standards, forcing them to downplay their Blackness to be considered employable. And, they must deal with individual racial discrimination in the form of microaggressions in the workplace.

These stressors can significantly affect the mental health of the Black community.



Our mind must always think in dualities, feel one thing but express the opposite, suppress the urgent desire to behave one way, and ultimately control our actions.

The individual, systemic and structural racial discrimination experienced by BIPOC in Canada exacerbates our mental health problems and drives us deeper into poverty. The resolution for this, eliminating racial discrimination, requires an intentional, strategic, intelligent and active resistance to the forces that subjugate, abuse and dehumanize BIPOC. This work requires “allies,” people

who use their privilege in the social structure to create spaces for BIPOC to disrupt the status quo. More importantly, there is a need for more “accomplices,” people who risk their privilege to disrupt the injustices and inequities in the structures and systems of colonial Canada. Those who wish to eliminate racial discrimination do not look for BIPOC to prove their humanity by searching for humanity in historical individuals or individual acquaintances and friendships, but instead admit and operate from the place of BIPOC are Humans.

NOAH Boakye-Yiadom is passionate about improving the mental health of Black People through public health interventions. Noah is currently a PhD student at the University of Calgary. Noah obtained his Masters of Public Health at Lakehead University and an Honours Bachelor of Health Sciences degree from Western University, both in Ontario.

On Realization, Othering and Activism

Ike Kenzo

“Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.”

For some, the quote above will be very familiar. It was taken from a book and its subsequent film adaptation called “A river runs through it”. My name is Ike and I am a community organizer here in Calgary, Alberta. I was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, and after a few detours in life, I found myself in Calgary. I have now been in this city for 20 years. I am still awestruck by how beautiful this land is, from the prairies to the mountains and of course to the mighty Bow and Elbow rivers running through our city. In the time I have been in Calgary, there have been three notable floods. One was in 2005; another in 2013 and the latest one was in 2020. The flood of 2013 was by far more damaging in a physical sense, but all of them came with important lessons.

In 2005, I was a high school student at one of Calgary’s renowned high schools. I was just graduating and about to start my university career. I was a shy soft-spoken young man that had a chip on his shoulder. At the time, most of my friends were white, I knew I was not white but I felt like I fit in enough. I struggled to respond when individuals used the N-word around me or other racially insensitive comments but I felt as though I still mattered. The

flood of 2005 washed those pretensions. In the summer of 2005, I faced several instances of overt racism; all of a sudden, I went from being the token black kid to being forced to create a community around a new group of friends who looked like me.

By 2013, I was finished with my undergraduate studies but had no job and was struggling to find my place in society. The flood had a sobering effect. For a moment, it seemed like the river successfully merged our city into one people but simultaneously underscored our differences. When the flood first hit, rich or poor, black or white, all had the immediate need for safety and shared concern for their loved ones. In the aftermath of the flood, it became clear that areas like downtown Calgary were back up rather quickly and that indigenous communities were more adversely affected.

At the time I got a job as a mover, I was paid to help individuals clean up their lives and start all over. Most of the clients I had, were well off financially but emotionally drained. Years later, in 2017, I got a job working for a not-for-profit that worked in indigenous communities within the Treaty Seven Area. I was absolutely shocked to find out that most assistance programs were underfunded and that many families had not yet been relocated into



Hearing about people like John Ware, Viola King, and Charles Daniels impacted me greatly because I had no idea individuals who looked like me lived here and did great things.

permanent housing. I was in Morley Alberta, home to one of the oldest churches in the province. I stopped my car on a chilly fall day after working and just stared in awe at the beauty of the River, the mountains, and the city of Calgary in the distance. In that moment, I felt like I had clarity and context.

The river invited me closer, and through it, a soft still voice, the words of Maya

Angelou from “*On the Pulse of the Morning*” responded.

*Come, rest here by my side. Come,
Clad in peace, and I will sing the
songs*

*The Creator gave to me when
I and the*

Tree and the rock were one.

*Before cynicism was a bloody sear
across your*

*Brow and when you yet knew
you still*

Knew nothing.

The River sang and sings on.

In 2020, I experienced a cathartic moment, that one could also describe as a flood. The protests that took place in our city in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and specifically protest against the killing of George Floyd had a national impact. Suddenly, a group of people who seemed systemically invisible here in Canada, had a strong voice

and had support both financially and emotionally from various levels of government. It made it difficult to deny the existence of anti-black racism and it served to validate the work that organizations that I have been a part of here in Canada were doing to address this issue. It felt like a palpable change, we as blacks were no longer toiling in obscurity. Like all floods, it seemed like we were all the same for a brief moment we were all on the same wavelength. However, it did not take long before we had to deal with an anti-woke wave.

Some actions of allies can feel performative and even Black People in the community started to wonder what blackness truly represents and if all Black People share in those commonalities. The flood of 2020 was successful in changing the narrative and washing away all pretensions that Calgary is a white city.

There is a history of pain and suffering on this land, that I do not yet know how to honour. In my struggle to find my place in this society, I have found solace by standing on the shoulders of those who walked before me. Hearing about people like John Ware, Viola King, and Charles Daniels impacted me greatly because I had no idea individuals who looked like me lived here and did great things. I wonder what words these heroes of mine may have spoken to the mountains and the rocks. I now firmly believe that all of our stories are connected, and

a river runs through it to remind us of what is important. I do the work that I do not out of altruism, but out of a self-serving hope that the words that I spoke may be heard to others in the future regardless of race and creed. It no longer feels like toiling in obscurity because someone at some point in time will hear.

During this time to eliminate racial discrimination, intersectional discrimination and recognize people of African descent, I end by paying homage to the peerless Maya Angelou and her poem “*On the Pulse of the Morning*”:

*The singing River and the wise
Rock.*

*So say the Asian, the Hispanic,
the Jew*

*The African, the Native American,
the Sioux,*

*The Catholic, the Muslim, the
French, the Greek*

*The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest,
the Sheik,*

The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,

*The privileged, the homeless, the
Teacher.*

They hear. They all hear

Ike Kenzo works with Canada Bridges Foundation and is a Founder of SOS Congo. He is passionate about youth and community engagement, taking roles with young people he is not very much older than.

Upcoming Events

- **Summit For Strength: Communities Ending Poverty Virtual National Gathering.** April 25 – 27. Join the Tamarack Institute for the Communities Ending Poverty virtual national gathering. Learners across Canada will convene to co-create a plan for resiliency that moves beyond ending poverty and toward economic mobility in ways that honour people, partnerships, and planet. For more information visit: <https://events.tamarackcommunity.ca/summit-for-strength>
- **The Poverty Studies Summer Institute.** May 1 – 19. Join the Canadian Poverty Institute for the annual Poverty Studies Summer Institute. This is a unique study opportunity that brings together practitioners, students and community members into an intimate learning community to explore the causes and impacts of poverty and best practices in how to reduce and end it. The program consists of a variety of workshops and courses that provide both the knowledge and skill base to work effectively in the practice of poverty reduction. Courses may be eligible for credit for Ambrose University degree programs. The theme of this year's program "Where We All Belong" focuses on inclusion and includes the following:

Workshops

- The ART of Hope: A Healing Approach to Poverty Reduction
- Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Poverty Reduction Practice
- Collaboration for Understanding and Development
- Purpose and Performance: Engaging Business in Poverty Reduction
- Ending Poverty Together Boot Camp
- Poverty and Human Rights – Introductory Workshop
- Eyes to See: Engaging Faith Communities in Poverty Dialogue and Action
- Poverty in Canada: What We Know from the 2021 Census

Academic Courses

- Psychological Impacts of Poverty (PS307 / SC507)
- Poverty and Human Rights: Theory, Theology and Practice (PV502)

Courses and workshops offered in-person at Ambrose

University and online. For more information visit:

<https://www.povertyinstitute.ca/poverty-studies-summer-institute>

Support the CPI

- **The Canadian Poverty Institute is a community partner of Sponsor Energy.** Customers of Sponsor Energy can direct a portion of all profits from their utility bill to the Canadian Poverty Institute. For more information, please visit: www.sponsorenergy.com/charity/cpi/
- **The Canadian Poverty welcomes individuals and organizations who wish to support the Canadian Poverty Institute financially.** If you wish to become a supporter, please visit <https://www2.ambrose.edu/donate> and indicate you wish to designate your gift to the Canadian Poverty Institute.



About the CPI

The Canadian Poverty Institute is an inter-disciplinary research and teaching institute housed within Ambrose University in Calgary. Our mission is to contribute to the healing of poverty in Canada through teaching, research and public education.

We are grounded in the Christian tradition of extending compassion while seeking justice and reconciliation for the marginalized and oppressed.

The Canadian Poverty Institute is a member of:

- Vibrant Communities
- Canadian Council of Churches, Commission on Justice and Peace
- The Calgary Alliance for the Common Good



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