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## Poetic Fabulations

Chartering Relationalities of Black Flourishing, Mutuality,  
Inclusive Excellence, and Accountability

## Fabulations poétiques

Charte des relationalités de l'épanouissement des Noirs, de la  
mutualité, de l'excellence inclusive et de la responsabilisation

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### Article abstract

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# Poetic Fabulations: Chartering Relationalities of *Black Flourishing, Mutuality, Inclusive Excellence, and Accountability*

by Anita Girvan, Maya Seshia, Nisha Nath, Davina Bhandar

**Abstract:** This collective work (four authors) demonstrates how persistent structures in higher education are mobilized in the signing of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions, and Accountabilities. We read this event against the grain, as an act requiring relationship-building and accountability. Recognizing the promises and risks of this work, and inspired by Black Feminist/coalitional practices which disorient from pre-mapped routes and knowledges in universities and reorient to otherwise ways of being, we name this process “poetic fabulation.” We begin with poetry and proceed with seven stanzas that orient thematic reflections in each prose section that follows. The multi-vocality of the piece gives evidence to the experiences of the authors in this work. The interregnum which follows stanza 4, functions at the simultaneous and unruly registers of poetry, analysis, affect, and the somatic, to interrupt the flow, signalling how we experience labouring within the academy. Our work is collaborative, but also entails being hailed and responding in different ways. Using a full spectrum of creative and analytic skills, we navigate towards shared goals to process what we witness in and across post-secondary institution(s), to hold and care for the impacts of discretionary power.

**Résumé :** Cet ouvrage collectif (quatre auteurs) montre comment des structures persistantes dans l’enseignement supérieur sont mobilisées dans le cadre de la signature de la Charte de Scarborough sur le racisme envers les Noirs et l’inclusion des Noirs dans l’enseignement supérieur canadien : principes, mesures et responsabilisation. Nous considérons que cet événement est contradictoire, un acte qui nécessite d’établir des liens et de faire preuve de responsabilisation. Conscients des promesses et des risques de ce travail, et inspirés par les pratiques féministes noires et coalitionnelles qui se détournent des voies et des savoirs préétablis dans les universités et se réorientent vers d’autres façons d’être, nous nommons ce processus « fabulation poétique ». Nous commençons avec de la poésie et poursuivons avec sept strophes qui orientent les réflexions thématiques dans chaque section de prose qui suit. La multiplicité des voix de cet ouvrage témoigne de l’expérience des auteurs dans ce domaine. L’interrègne qui suit la strophe 4 s’inscrit dans les registres simultanés et indisciplinés de la poésie, de l’analyse, de l’affect et du somatique, et vient interrompre le courant des choses et illustrer notre façon de travailler au sein de l’académie. Notre travail est collaboratif, mais il implique aussi d’être interpellé et de réagir de différentes manières. En faisant appel à tout un éventail de compétences créatives et analytiques, nous évoluons vers des objectifs communs afin de comprendre ce dont nous sommes témoins dans les établissements d’enseignement postsecondaire, de tenir compte des effets du pouvoir discrétionnaire et de nous en préoccuper.

**Keywords:** Scarborough Charter; fabulation; anti-Black racism in higher education; Black feminist poetics; women-of-colour and labour; discretionary power and EDI

**Authors:** We are academic workers—at various institutions—who came to know each other through work in a shared institution. We each contributed in different but equally-important ways to this article and to the wider project that brought us together to unpack and move toward the goals of the Scarborough Charter. Anita Girvan (she/they) is a settler of Afro-Caribbean diaspora in syilx Okanagan land and Assistant Professor of environmental justice and cultural studies at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan. Anita’s research and teaching are informed and

inspired by Black feminist and coalitional collaborative approaches to world-building, including through metaphor, stories, music, and other cultural productions. Maya Seshia (she/her), a mixed-race settler with South Indian and British Ancestry, is an uninvited guest living and working in Châ Úpchîchîyen Kudebi (the area colonially known as “Canmore”), located in Treaty Seven Territory. Maya is a scholar specializing in critical feminist race theory and practice. She holds an MA in Political Science. Nisha Nath (she/they) is Associate Professor of equity studies at Athabasca University and based in Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton). Her work looks at the intersections of citizenship, race, security, and settler colonialism. In addition to collaborating on the Insurgent and Resurgent Knowledges Lab, she is lead author on a co-authored forthcoming manuscript titled *The Letters: Writing Lives through and against the University* with Drs. Rita Dhamoon, Anita Girvan, and Davina Bhandar. Davina Bhandar (she/her/they) is Associate Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Victoria, located on the lands of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples. Davina’s research and teaching interests are in the intersecting fields of critical race theory, anti-colonialism, abolition, feminist studies, contemporary theories of democracy, freedom, citizenship, sovereignty, and borders.

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## Adrift, Tethering, Collective Wayfinding

*1. Adrift on passages  
Seeking relations  
Watery flows of diasporic movement  
Across traffics of colonization  
Drawn together  
To learn, to be, to nurture  
In spaces that hold promise  
But are cartographically violent  
In their re-mapping of existing relations  
Out of conceit of supremacy*

*Uncharted and misrecognized,  
We find each other  
And tether together  
To ride the swells and crests  
To the shoals<sup>1</sup>*

This work begins poetically to metabolize the experience of collectively working on a report on the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions and Accountabilities. The report was initiated by one of us who had been tasked with many forms of labour to ameliorate institutional harms—labour shouldered by one of the few Black faculty members. Burdened with fixing the problems of the institution that invalidate one’s inclusion, such labour remains a tremendously self-jeopardizing act (see Dhamoon 2020). The report-writing was undertaken in the context of a post-secondary institution where little has been institutionally accomplished on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), nor in countering racism—anti-Indigenous and anti-Black in particular.

Another one of us was contractually hired as a “subject matter expert” to provide an environmental scan of institutional signatories’ take-up of the Charter’s action plan. This scan was to serve as a site of comparison for our own institution. The two others in our team stepped in to “co-supervise” the project, gesturing to our broader practice of engaging in redistributive forms of labour. As we write, we recognize that there is *power* in naming, yet also *fear* in naming, and *real risk* in naming. For these reasons, the report and the institution have not been named in this piece. “We” is used throughout our writing, not in a universalist appeal, but in signalling our collective authorship in which there is also a generative tension given our structural locations, and our different embodied and affective experiences.<sup>2</sup>

From our jointly held perspective, we were curious to trace how an institution that had accomplished so little vis-à-vis EDI was such a quick signatory to the Charter. To this end, we carefully documented the trail of mishandled and obstructed institutional EDI initiatives, including the perspectives of those who had been involved at various stages. This information contextualized and named the terrain in which the Scarborough Charter was signed.

Inspired by Black feminist creative and political practices, such as those of Dionne Brand (2002), El Jones (2022), and Audre Lorde (2017/1977), we have chosen a poetic form mixed with reflective analysis. This mixed form allows us to metabolize, make sense of, and ground the ways in which we are called to do social transformation in the university, yet often still remain abandoned by the university, among other institutions of power (Gilmore 2015). Poetry provides a way of integrating *thinking and feeling* as a “revelation or distillation of ex-

perience” that offers not merely word-play, but insight and a “disciplined attention” to truth (Lorde 2017/1977, 8–9).

We have each experienced uneasy relationships within higher educational institutions, and some of us are still in precarity; we haven’t yet entirely given up on the possibilities of sustaining community in and beyond this institution. As a way through what often *feels* intractable in our work together, “Poetry is not only dream and vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before” (Lorde, 2017/1977, 9).

We also witness the ways the university *thinks* it wants “us,” but *feels*—in its reactive affects of self-protection—hostile to the transformative justice that our presence and labour entail. While we struggle to gain access, feel our way through, and arrive, the structures of the institution move in on us as we push back. Despite the Scarborough Charter and many other policies, charters, offices, and positions instituted to ameliorate structural harms in universities, numerous forms of exclusion remain (Edmunds and Lind 2021). This continues in a context where EDI, DEI, EDID, IDEA and other ‘taming’ acronyms have been initially embraced so thoroughly by the neoliberal university in attempts to manage a diverse host of colonial and exclusionary foundations. Even as we are critical of these management strategies, we are currently witnessing strong conservative backlash in some universities against any small gains provided by attention to what EDI evokes. The roots of these acronyms can be traced to the generative provocations of the 1960s civil rights movement, and framing has shifted from tolerance, to multiculturalism and, over the past two decades to some permutation of an often-amorphous iteration of equity. These acronyms tend to conflate and flatten important diverse communities and specific interventions. While there are often common targets of critique that we work on coalitionally, each of these elements has particular histories that also need attention. As Black scholars constantly remind (Cooper 2022; Ibrahim et al 2022; Henry 2023; Nelson et al 2020; Thompson 2022), anti-Black racism has a longevity in the Canadian post-secondary environment, so even when shifts take place that selectively ‘incorporate’ Black communities and knowledges, we must cautiously navigate ecologies that are persistently hostile to Black, Indigenous, and other racialized presences and knowledges.

Existing terms of engagement in the academy protect that which has always been protected—colonialism, white supremacy, power, *qua* the institution itself.

Because of the institution’s self-protective posture, we are often left combing a non-existent archive. Such a process is not our experience alone but is structured in communities that articulate the methods of “critical fabulation” as a way of marking and archiving presences out of absences without the conceit of restoring a completeness to an always violent archive (Hartman 2008). We thus connect the creative–imaginative poetic form with a political–creative act of fabulating.

This poetic fabulation is not an easy articulation. We are not suggesting that the commitments of the Scarborough Charter to transform institutional practices that have absented Black bodies from curriculum, erased Black histories, and muted Black presence are caught up in a lie that we are attempting to expose. By choosing this use of “poetic fabulation” we engage Saidiya Hartman’s process of “critical fabulation,” as further developed and explored in Tavia Nyong’o’s generative “Afro-Fabulations” (2018). Thinking with Nyong’o, we resist reading the term “fabulation” as simply a lie, but read it as that which “exposes the relation between truth and lying in an other-than moral sense” (2018, 6). Nyong’o positions his interest in “fabulationality—the entangled and angular socialities generated by fabulation [which] is of course also inspired by the ‘poetics of relation’ pioneered [SIC] by Édouard Glissant” (6). What we are calling “poetic fabulation” enables us to write through the narrative of that which is absented by the institutional presencing of the Scarborough Charter. Amidst the swells of familiar institutional directives to provide timely “deliverables,” we pour in time and labour with intense care that haunts racialized bodies. In our labour processes as we are subjected and subjectified (Bannerji 2023) our scholarly work is a constant proving ground of “legitimacy.” Through the power grid of the institution, we wait precariously, we ride crests of possibilities. Not knowing the degree of change possible, though knowing there *must* be change, collectively and creatively we come together in a politics of navigating, questioning, (surviving) all that is named, yet institutionally unaddressed. But we also think about small discursive shifts that we witness that may yet enable change if we think of the long histories that have landed us here and of the possibilities yet to come. Resting in a space of inertia is not a healthy course of action for our own well-being in institutions/in life, nor the well-being of com-

munities we work with and those to come inside and outside of academia.

We turn to poetics to consider what it means when institutions sign onto the Scarborough Charter, to explore the relation between truth and lying and all of the discursive, insurgent, possibilities in between. This poetic fabulation simultaneously disorients yet collectively reorients as we dream, vision, and imagine new paths. We do so in multiple nested contexts where our encounters in one university are both specific to that university, and at times generalizable to a larger landscape of higher education. In form and content this piece also reflects how steadying ourselves through eddies and currents is a process of balancing multiple and simultaneous affective and analytic registers in which we enter this work. Beginning with poetry, the seven stanzas structuring this piece orient thematic reflections in each prose section that follows, a multi-vocality that gives evidence to the relationally intertwined experiences of the authors in this work. An interregnum titled “metabolizing affect” follows stanza 4, providing a moment of intentional interruption, drawing together the simultaneous unruly registers of analysis, poetry, affect, and the somatic through which we experience and engage in our work within academe. In doing so, we articulate a breathless fatigue in the midst of swimming in troubled waters, even as we pull ourselves out, drawing from lifelines of those that have come before and that are with us now.

## Scarborough Charter in the 2020 Conjuncture: Histories, Possibilities and Foreclosures

*2. Following ancestral traces,  
A charter arrives  
Naming the unfinished matter of abolition  
The currency of the “afterlife of slavery,”<sup>23</sup>  
Charting re-humanizing pathways  
Through thorny brambles  
That reveal just enough daylight,  
But that also cut and scratch  
Institutions scrambling to charter (virtue?)  
Saying the sweet words  
Mapping routes to ‘inclusion’*

*Is it a living breathing document  
that will pave the way for you  
to capture and dream of better worlds?*

*The map is laid out for you (2020 moment)  
Causing the violent disruption,  
the cycles of crisis  
that could no longer be ignored,  
now is your chance to emerge  
and make the demands  
that will let you belong.*

*But Lee Maracle reminds us  
That “maps never lead to uncharted places”<sup>24</sup>  
And Dionne Brand shows the folly of  
Mapping routes, roots and return.  
Those colonial projects,  
Extracting origins and essences,  
Leave only fissures,  
Displacement and dislocation  
Marine ecologies bear witness  
To salty tears*

*As yet un-chartered tracing  
Destination deferred  
Performative pre-celebrations,  
Tokenized bodies,  
Whose presence is  
All-too-soon revulsed  
Yet, finding each other,  
together, we push on.*

The emergence of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education was preceded by decades-long contestations to support Black Canadian Studies, as well as to support Black scholars and students in the hostile spaces of Canadian academe (Ibrahim et al 2022). These lineages of contestation were felt in the crystalizing moment when graduate student/emerging scholar Shelby McPhee was racially profiled in 2019 at the University of British Columbia during the annual meeting of the Black Canadian Studies Association. The association’s annual meeting, where he was presenting his work, was being held under the umbrella of the annual Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, where multiple scholarly associations meet simultaneously (BCSA 2019). The treatment of McPhee echoes patterns where other Black students, faculty, and staff are regularly questioned and carded on university campuses (Elghawaby 2019). The practice of carding on campus grounds is an extension of racial surveillance and segregation deeply rooted in histories of Canadian anti-Black racism, such as municipal “sundown laws,” property ownership restrictions, and contemporary anti-Black

policing practices (Maynard 2017; Walcott and Abdillahi 2019).

These forms of anti-Black racism constituted a tipping point in the Canadian context, and along with that conjunctural May 2020 moment, have paved the way for a number of institutionally supported but Black and relational community-led initiatives, including the Scholar Strike labour action and teach-in network, the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies 2022 meeting, “Another University Now,” and critical Black Studies programmes emerging in several Canadian universities, joining longer-standing programmes at York University and Dalhousie University (Cooper 2022). The violence against Black bodies on the streets neither ended nor began with George Floyd, nor did protests against this violence begin or end with Black Lives Matter. Similarly, the attempt to ‘fix’ academe’s anti-Black racism has neither begun nor ended with the signing of the Scarborough Charter (Walcott and Abdillah 2019). However, the Charter initiates a way forward as it explicitly names the fact of anti-Black racism in the academy. Thus, it offers a possible anchor to ground the long lineages of demands in order to steady life in these institutions (Cooper 2022).

The other context of the Charter connects with the Scarborough campus of the University of Toronto, where the Charter-forming dialogues began in October 2020, but also to the complex set of relations and presences in that district. Witnessed by the palpable shift in the Canadian literature and film scene, Scarborough is a site of long-standing Black presence, including the presence of other diverse arrivant communities for whom the margins of Toronto have been home (Chariandy 2018; Hernandez 2017; Leung 2018). The name Scarborough is also a colonial imposition upon the land of Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Anishnaabeg, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples whose presence is invisibilized in the naming of the Scarborough Bluffs as a colonial echo of limestone cliffs found outside the town of Scarborough in England (Hodge 2020). The Scarborough Charter thus holds tensions of colonial roots and routes of diverse communities.

Returning to the higher education ecology, the signing of the Charter operates on at least two levels: the first is as a point of challenge to the hegemony of a universalist (white, colonial) institutional culture that does not understand—nor want to—the implications of how it has remained structurally inaccessible and hostile to Black

people. The signing of the Charter, its explicit naming of anti-Black racism, and its subsequent referencing and amplification act as a sonar disturbance in the watery depths of institutional navigation. The sound waves bouncing off the Charter not only cause a ripple effect but potentially cast adrift those institutional practices that have intentionally silenced those barred from access, or those who gain access and are then subsequently abandoned. Pointing to a different direction from the shallows of EDI, these waves emerge from a more robust set of principles in their articulation of *Black Flourishing, Mutuality, Inclusive Excellence, and Accountability*.

The second level at which the Charter operates turns on the specific actions it demands of signatories. If institutions get beyond the shock and defensiveness of naming anti-Black racism, there is much direction within the Charter. Two aspects are immediately useful in our contexts: 1) collecting disaggregated data to establish targets and timelines to remediate gaps, and to develop mechanisms and resource commitments to support inclusion of students, staff and faculty (ss. 2.1.1. and 2.1.2); and 2) reviewing systems that govern discipline with a mind towards protection against reprisals (s. 1.1.2.)

On the first point, the collection of data at this particular institution has been decidedly superficial, with such shallow “data” foreclosing any forms of accountability. When one of our collective was asked by the university to write something for Black History Month during her first year of employment, she asked (as a non-expert in Black history) if there were other Black scholars, staff or students to collaborate with and was told that the university *doesn’t collect this data*. Of course, her question was not simply about demographics, but served as a prompt to recognize a general and structured invisibility/non-presence or precarious presence of other Black scholars and staff and students within this university. For Black scholars, there is a paradox of invisibility *and* hypervisibility even when numbers are few (Girvan 2021). Black people have occasionally been celebrated in the still relatively few number of “equity hires,” but often continue to be read as threatening.

This connects to the second point on discipline given the constant hum of punitive effects when simply showing up in the institution in the “skin we are in” (Cole 2020). Although the Scarborough Charter and our work was discursively celebrated prior to the release of our report, the ways that we and other Black and Indigenous colleagues have been disciplined, surveilled, and con-

strained even as we were tasked to transform, demonstrates that we cannot exceed our skin; we are interpellated from the moment of entry within an institution that resists the very work that we have been hired to do. In their work on the “undercommons,” Fred Moten and Stefano Harney name this tension:

Call out to it as it calls to you. But for the subversive intellectual, all of this goes on upstairs, in polite company, among the rational men. After all, the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. (Moten and Harney 2013, 26)

With this built-in institutional defensiveness and fragility, securing any specific actions and processes has been difficult in the three years since the signing of the Charter. The challenge comes as we continually point to the Charter in order to demand that impact is made, and in doing so get read as provocative irritants in those moments when we simply evoke the Charter as a *course of movement*, rather than as virtue signal. Nonetheless, we do witness that more of our colleagues are aware of the Charter and are joining the call to move in inclusive directions and also connect these struggles intersectionally, and alongside the struggles of Indigenous colleagues in rigid colonial institutions.

## Coalition, or Divide-and-Conquer Politics?

*3. And what of the ecologies of other charters?  
Brampton, for international students?  
Okanagan, for mental health?  
What cruel neo-liberal institutional tricks  
Bring us to divide and conquer  
That which is entangled?*

*Anansi trickster agency reveals  
belonging is always contingent  
—the web ensnares you  
even as you seize hold  
of precarious structures  
to spin a different web  
to hold communities  
Charting contingent route—  
“Come here! No watch your step!”  
“Pose, don’t speak, back.  
“We don’t want to hear, step back.”*

As these histories render clear, naming and *redressing* the specificity of anti-Black racism in higher education are integral. In thinking expansively and relationally of the Scarborough Charter, a crucial aspect of this work lies in charting mutually-supportive pathways. The Charter itself makes clear a commitment to:

[Transcend] any suggestion that to redress anti-Black racism and foster Black inclusion is a zero-sum proposition by underscoring the complementarity of commitments to Indigenous communities and other equity groups. (7)

We take this commitment seriously. In university ecosystems, a structured pattern of treating each “equity issue” as discrete, erects boundaries around siloed identities and, thus, threatens to ignore or undo decades of work that has demonstrated the imperative of intersectionally-bound struggle (Crenshaw 1989). This does not mean that we conflate all struggles in higher education as equivalent: differences must be named. However, the white settler colonial neoliberal institution’s fractured logics of identity work to submerge our naming of these intersecting, interacting, and relational structures of power, especially when critique comes through coalitional and reciprocal politics practised in real time, in the everyday. Moreover, the walling off of intersecting structures of dominance into discrete identities to be managed and regulated by the university often enacts divide-and-conquer tactics. Particularly within contexts of structured scarcity, this boundary-making cultivates competition for space and resources, even manifesting in fleeting, yet structured, calendar logics as Girvan, Dove and McGreer have recently described (2023). The attempted fracturing of time, space, and ultimately relationality reinforces a political status quo in its attempt to let *division* flourish: “Let ‘them’ fight it out amongst themselves so that ‘we’ can stay the course.” In the case of Black faculty in many Canadian institutions, due to structured barriers there simply are not enough people in institutions to lead the charge and continue to remediate structures that are hostile. Under these conditions, the racialized labour of anti-racist institutional change is further entrenched, with the substantive impacts on anti-Black racism, unclear.

In a context where the stakes of our collective engagement are high, we also witness a proliferation of charters. For example, the Okanagan Charter pulls post-secondary institutions to commit to a transformative vision for health in all aspects of their operation. And the Bramp-

ton Charter attempts to interrupt the erasure of the experiences of international students in a context in which the predatory academy continually extracts from them in the movement to ‘internationalize’ (Bhandar, forthcoming). In our shared experiences pushing for implementation of the Scarborough Charter, we see how a charter can anchor how we coalesce to work differently, in support of Black faculty, students, and staff. Moreover, in an academic context that is replete with intersecting harms, the Charter can help to render the complexity of these structures more manageable. The Scarborough Charter can be one of many tethers for a coalitional politics that invites a process of intentionally coming together with focused energies, only to regroup and coalesce in other contexts for other struggles. This kind of sustaining coalitional work is necessary under conditions in which our labour could be infinitely extracted to remediate everything, everywhere, all at once.

Paying attention to those who have come before us, struggling in some of the same ways as we do now (Ferguson 2012; García-Peña 2022), we also see how we must maintain an ethics and posture of vigilance. What do we know of these other charters? From what histories of struggle do they emerge, and how and why are universities responding? What relationalities are being charted through these moves? How do we draw the lines of possibility and peril, but ensure that the locus of our energies does not foreclose us from (en)acting otherwise?

We name these tensions here, as opposed to resolving them; a coalitional politics requires the constant collaboration and negotiation around sustaining expressions of futurity and hope as an abolitionist “discipline” (Kaba 2020) when individuals in our collectives are so depleted. Regardless of the vocabulary we engage, our commitments are shaped by our witnessing work, and the readying of spaces for those who come after. A call for a coalitional politics, then, is operating at multiple interconnected registers, including a fundamental analysis and understanding that “Black histories on Turtle Island are complexly interwoven with foundational genocides of Indigenous communities, and their own perseverance, resurgence and sovereignty” (Girvan 2021). This coalitional relationality (Girvan and Chua, 2021; Girvan et al. 2020) requires a listening and learning from Indigenous colleagues, who have carefully navigated how institutions take up the calls to act from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Tait and Ladner 2017). In witness of the ‘wait’ and ‘weight’ of this work, particularly when insistence gets met by a disciplining institution, we

learn alongside Indigenous colleagues that the investment is not in the institution that is suddenly committed to Indigenization or to fighting anti-Black racism. Rather, the investment and commitment are to each other—to presence scholars, epistemes, and communities, amidst political insurgence and resurgence that is never solely located *within* the institution, nor solely located as a reaction *to* the institution (Gaudry and Lorenz 2018; García-Peña 2022).

As we try to make sense through poetic narrative, we acknowledge that one of our goals is to charter uncharted relationality. Witnessing colleagues mobilizing so persistently and insistently to render the struggle against caste-based discrimination legible to a broader anti-colonial and anti-racist politics, we see that part of the task is to un-charter the usual routes and roots of knowledge (Patel 2016; Soundararajan 2022). These over-trodden paths of hegemonic canons and communities have attempted to evacuate knowledges and communities that have long existed. Too many of us come into universities believing that we shouldn’t be here, and that our knowledges don’t count. The Charter calls us to “[decentre] epistemic Eurocentrism,” but most critically “[hold] open space for expansive, world-inspired learning that broadens disciplinary canons to include Black expertise and knowledges” (Charter, s. 2.3.1). The attempted evacuation of those non-dominant lineages of knowledge has accompanied the ebbs and flows of people coming into and often leaving inhospitable institutions. We have heard and witnessed those tales of departures. They are not well-documented but they have come to us in whispers, so we work to hold open this space for a (re)turn.

## Laboured Breath

*4. Who bears the burdens  
of charting and acting?  
Breathwork  
Gestures which signal institutional change,  
Igniting skeptical optimism,  
The hope returns, then taken away,  
Fear feared perseverance  
Inhale  
the realization of familiarity  
of this pattern,  
the labour involved  
in piecing together  
the pieces of hard heart work  
Quickening, beating, pulse  
to subvert and continue*



*to push on and push  
and protect and support  
through connections and creativity  
Exhale*

## Metabolising Affect: Interregnum

We are affected and effected through efforts of chartering/charting. Institutional gestures acknowledging anti-Black racism are held to account by those who recognize overdue movement—discursive dressings which assuage white supremacy's reign, its state a combination of persistence as well as an always *in-crisis crisis*, due to decades of critical questioning, constantly destabilizing its stubborn reign.

Seismic waves fracture.

Costume change after costume change—acknowledgements, apologies, public gestures of possibilities and shifts to come. Yet, as we hold up the mirror to 'you,' the institution, the reflection reveals you have just morphed, yet are still much the same. Raising, reminding, researching what Black scholars, staff, and students have long named.

Task forces and various forms of documentation are required to "prove" *again* and even then, recommendations are undertaken and made public at discretion. The institution repeatedly evades its work to name and address racism flowing through organizational charts, policies, everyday actions and interactions, surveillance, and profiling.

Careful reading of contracts, legalistic language makes clear who is protected and who is not. Evoking fear, as legalistic language reminds that holding up the mirror is inherently and increasingly risky. A task too big to be bounded by start and end dates, nevertheless, reminders of power ebbing through contractual relations—

'time is of the essence'

...for those doing the research, yet not applied to those who receive "deliverables." Work can be owned and selectively shared by those who did not write. Contracts create possibilities, but also protect institutional power, evoking and disciplining, through constraints and fear, dictating what is, and is not shared, and with whom.

To take up this work is inherently risky for the racialized bodies who are tasked with this labour.

Walking into dangerous waters

...sometimes because we are compelled, sometimes because tasked (Henry 2023). Performative gestures which nod to change suggest possibilities. Utterances in meetings reveal and disrupt.

Tentative moorings

...and non-performative signals of change are mixed with the familiar yet still painful backlash, or fear of such.

## Discretionary Power

*5. Open waters,  
use your discretion  
Amidst discretionary power  
To navigate landmarks,  
Hardened edifices  
Shallow waters  
Dive in at your own risk*

*No life-guard on duty  
Protected/unprotected  
The signing of charters,  
the signing of contracts  
Transactional? Contractual?  
Good faith  
What faith?*

Our experience of pushing for institutional change with the report on the Charter also reveals the patterned responses of the institution (and actors within the institution) who continually veer, steer, and strategically maneuver away from accountability. These responses are not unique to the Scarborough Charter backlash or counter-critique across time and space, such as contemporary attacks on critical race theory. There have been past pushbacks to developing anti-racism offices on Canadian post-secondary campuses in the mid-1990s (Sefa Dei 1993), and there is a longstanding, always slippery invocation of academic freedom to silence critique of the structures of heteropatriarchal whiteness at universities who are invested in occupation and imperialism (Salaita 2015). There *is*, however, a distinct specificity to the long lineage of backlash against Black faculty and students in

the Canadian post-secondary context. The Scarborough Charter was signed a long *52 years after* Montreal riot police stormed Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) to break up a two-week long peaceful protest that had coalesced in support of unanswered complaints of racial discrimination launched by six Black and Caribbean students—students who came into an even longer history of anti-Black racism in the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2007, 6) where Black people have been read as fungible, disposable, threatening, devoid of intelligence, etc.

In the experience we narrate, the discretionary—and often disciplinary—use of power is one mechanism through which we have witnessed and experienced backlash when pushing for institutional accountability as a signatory to the Charter. Drawing from Nath and Allen’s research, we see how discretionary power mobilized by the university is never actionable vis-à-vis accountability (Nath and Allen 2022; Nath and Allen 2023). There are few askable demands of discretionary power *because* it is so ephemeral and untethered, even if authorized and legitimized through the institution’s assertion of jurisdiction (Nath and Allen 2023). To the contrary, the kind of institutional power variably made available to Black, Indigenous, and other racialized scholars is residual; this kind of power is always met with a demand that it/we be rendered institutionally accountable. Residual power, too, must be answerable.

Consider how seriously the institution takes enunciating that it is a signatory to the Charter, raising questions about where and how the Charter is invoked. In faculty-wide meetings, or institution-wide strategic objectives? As a regular agenda item, with no substantive time for updates, discussion, and collaboration? The sudden appearance of the Charter within an institutional landscape can be disorienting. Of course, the suddenness is anything but, reflecting decades of pushing, struggle, and institutional intransigence with respect to fighting anti-Black racism (Carty 1991). Yet, the seeming sudden appearance can signal a politics of hypervisibility that Black, Indigenous, and other racialized scholars are pulled into. In *these* institutional contexts, again the rockiest of waters, Black scholars are regularly disappeared, but can be selectively pulled up and out when the institution itself feels it needs to be saved. What a weight it is to be the life preserver for an institution that enacts its discretion by choosing who to submerge and when.

The multiple iterations of discretionary power we’ve witnessed are moments where those invested in the institution *qua* institution *could* act otherwise, particularly in deciding when to delay or defer action, and how. These deferrals happen in multiple ways: delaying for further study; subjecting proposals to hyper-surveillance around ‘bias’ and ‘accuracy’; undertaking ‘risk assessments’ for legal compliance or exposure; asserting the importance of a project to move it up the institutional hierarchy, but also *away* from continued dialogue and collaboration; and, normalizing all these exceptional processes, effectively gaslighting those who have done the work. These points of decision can render the Charter (and work mobilizing the Charter) increasingly distant from the politics, labour, care, and communities animating it in the first place. This severing can feel particularly violent. What happens to the politics animating the Charter as it is moved through and digested in the body of the institution? *How might we stay close to this work and refuse the discretionary enactment of its disappearance?*

Discretion can also animate the impetus to sign the Charter (or engage in other commitments to anti-racism, equity and decolonization) in the first place. Where the intention *is* for universities to formalize their responsiveness to the struggles that animate the Charter, the sudden appearance of these sites of cross-institutional coalescence invite attentiveness to process. If the impetus for the enunciation as signatory is, for example, compliance with external funding bodies, this shapes what becomes possible or imaginable to the institution. *How might we disorient and (re)orient the university’s discretionary processes (or sometimes discretionary turn to process) to cultivate other imaginaries?*

Through a kind of discretionary temporality, just as swiftly as the Charter can appear, it can disappear when Black faculty and those in coalition assert that remediation of ongoing harms must occur. Discretion is also invoked spatially by the institution, in its attempt to regulate when and where, public and private. The Charter can be declared publicly, but ongoing harms are privatized, individualized, and distanced from the lineages, patterns, and systems the Charter urges us to name. The Charter can be invoked openly, but the careful questioning of what is being declared, and why, is jettisoned to the privacy of email or individual follow-up or, in harsh backlash, to public and private disciplining and a dismissal of concerns. Even the language of “anti-Black racism” is selectively disappeared by the institution in its truncated reference to the title of the document: The

Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions, and Accountabilities.

The institution's attempt to rewrite how we engage in space and time is political, even as it works to strip the Charter of its politics. Demands and assertions that are rooted in lineages of insurgent and resurgent political struggle get sequestered to the terrain of complaint, litigation, and contract. How must the institution see or understand the Charter such that it enunciates the commitments therein while at the same time enacts ongoing violence against Black faculty, staff, and students? How, to engage the language of El Jones (2023), does the institution become reconciled with its own audacity? What does it mean to be signatory to a document, when the institution empties it of all of its embodied (past, present and future) struggles?

## Disorienting (the) Institution

*6. Mirror held up -  
the reflection/echolocation  
of violences registered,  
as contracts end,  
months pass,  
communications unanswered,  
communications closed;  
Attempted silence unsuccessful,  
Dust collects,  
Is then wiped off,  
Gravitational pull,  
Tide in, tide out  
Un-ceasing waves.  
Finding ways  
Through hallways,  
Under closed doors,  
In gatherings,*

Instead of residing solely within critique, loss, or lack, this pausing on our collective experience enables not only a tracing of the institution's power, but of ours as well. Discretionary power derives its authority and legitimacy from structures, but also relies on a context of scarcity, in which benevolence and discipline trade on each other. The discretionary power mobilized to frustrate Scarborough Charter commitments is also relational; through the exertion of discretionary power, there is an expectation that, in return, we deploy a kind of residual power that is granted as a favour, but is just as easily pulled back. Indeed, the report that grounded how

the four of us came together was initially only possible because of "residual funds." When we collectively resist the terms of this invitation to engage institutionally sanctioned power, we have witnessed how the impacts of our coalitional power can both disorient and (re)orient, as we pry open and attempt to creatively grow something through the cracks.

These disorienting and (re)orienting possibilities are tethered to *how* we struggle and mobilize. In asking and expecting that the Scarborough Charter be treated as more than a document and in mobilizing it as a mirror to hold up to the institution, we have witnessed what it can look like to profoundly disorient the institution. For example, for the institution who presences the Charter as an agenda line and brief time allocation in meeting documents, insisting that the time and space allocated to the Charter be grounded in demonstrable action, has challenged a politics of inclusion and declaration that is regularly mobilized to buttress the institution itself. In publicly asserting that the Charter be removed from meeting mentions if no goals, plans, or metrics accompany its presence, this constitutes a profound refusal of an institution that is wanting to interpellate Black scholars into the role of accepting presence at all costs. To recast and reflect this back disrupts how the institution writes itself as benevolent in their provision of the most minimalist space of presence.

Or, in carefully laying the groundwork for understanding how our institution had come to be a signatory while being one of few Canadian post-secondary institutions with no equity plan, framework, or office, we simply began to ask questions in light of the (at best) ambivalence and (at worst) obstruction vis-à-vis equity-related matters. As opposed to directing our questions towards those who can exert their discretionary power to closure, we treated our questions as a kind of interventive evidence gathering (Allen et. al. 2023), approaching those who had been enlisted as institutional 'champions' (Ahmed 2012, 131), and querying *them* to follow the impact (or lack thereof) of their own labour. *Siloing is strategically valuable to an institution that does not want us to put the pieces together.* The act of questioning, which is enabled through the vocabulary of the Scarborough Charter, holds potential to unmask discretionary power. Questioning disorients by mirroring and amplifying violent disjunctures that the institution is reconciled with, but never wants to presence in the same moment or space as its declaration of its "commitment to action." This mirroring exposes the institution's investment in se-

curing and consolidating itself in the face of a set of disorienting politics that challenge hegemonic forms of common sense which maintain anti-Black racism and directly protect some over others.

## Tentative Moorings and Futurities

Our collective experience in this project, and more broadly in multiple institutions, urges us to consider the Scarborough Charter not as a panacea to longstanding anti-Black racism, but as a provisional map for tracing harms of existing maps in institutions, and a provisional, aspirational movement, borne out of long lineages of past efforts. The exact coordinates for this movement remain elusive since the work of documenting harms, revealing them to the university, and attempting to remediate these harms remains weighty and frustrating (Ahmed 2007). We know that this weight has led to very public departures from Canadian universities for some, like Charmaine Nelson (Khan 2022), and more quiet ones for others. What is more, we know that Black flourishing depends upon, and is in relation to, the thriving of other communities for whom universities have not always been healthy and supportive destinations. As we witness the gathering of others across universities and other institutions in “community as rebellion” (García-Peña, 2022), we are fabulating new relationality that we have proven exists beyond the confines of this one project, one contract.

This work of defying the disciplining and siloing of communities is not incidental, as it breathes poetic, affective, somatic, and analytic life into how we choose to come together in institutions that would rather choose for us. For us, the prying open and growing something within the cracks includes incubating creative practices which foster communities and knowledge production among marginalized groups. This mutual and relational flourishing has included presencing the material practices that are intrinsic to our insurgent and resurgent ways of knowing (e.g., singing, weaving, playing dohl, growing and nurturing other-than-human life), reclaiming space for these practices, and reorienting our attention away from the repair of the institution. We (re)witness these practices as part of our epistemic labour within the academy, even if—or perhaps precisely because—they are not legible to academe (Bhandar et. al, forthcoming).

In writing this piece alongside others in this collection, we wish to provide tentative moorings to navigate institutional waters with the Scarborough Charter and so

many other elements and poetic maps. Dionne Brand poetically suggests the routier or “ruttier” as a long oral form poem memorized by sailors as embodied knowledges which sailors hold to provide orientation for those adrift on the water (2002, 212-13). The ruttier’s key orientational knowledges are infused with non-linear, multi-dimensional and elemental bearings from the sky, from shifting lively waters and from land. Christina Sharpe similarly picks up these rhythmic incantations in a call-and-response, evoking Brand’s ruttier in her “wake work” (Sharpe 2016).

Wayfinding in institutions is often non-linear and requires tracing knowledges that have not been archived, so we seek out and listen in non-linear, multi-dimensional ways to charter through the gaps. Gaps are found in the movement in between the space of something resembling the truth, and the relational exposure of something that resembles the lie. To “critically fabulate” (Hartman 2008) our way, charting from “here” to “elsewhere” (*otherwise* worlds) as a set of aspirational moves with an undefined destination that rings with liberatory tones, expressive forms are the sites of our dreaming. As one important expressive form, “poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (Lorde, 2017/1977, 10). As we make demands in the name of this Charter and other uncharted relationality in higher education, we acknowledge the highs and lows of the swells that we ambivalently ride:

*7. Adrift on passages  
Weathered by prevailing winds  
Anchoring together  
To stabilize  
Against chronic institutional disorientation  
Dropping small anchors  
Strategically, in small acts  
Sonic disturbance  
Seismic waves  
Challenging conventional cartographies  
Reorienting resurgent resonances*

*Fabulating futurity  
Without guarantees<sup>5</sup>*

## Endnotes

1. See Tiffany Lethabo King's 2019 theorization of "the shoals" as an oceanographic term for a ridge or shallow place in the water that may interrupt smooth navigation. King metaphorically suggests the Black shoals as an interruption to the flow of white settler colonial possession and thus, its enacts a potential place of coalition with Indigenous decolonial projects.

2. Where the designation of discrete categories of identity—through acronyms like IBPOC—risks reducing people and communities to individualized "others," positionality and structural location are politically salient as we work to map relationships to anti-Black racism in higher education. We have returned to this generative tension many times during our collaboration, also noting that this piece, and the report that brought us together, are only possible because we have intentionally come together (as women-of-colour) in coalition. We also note that this piece doesn't and perhaps cannot articulate the many conversations we've had about the potential and perils of the Scarborough Charter—conversations that cannot be pulled apart from our positionalities and structural locations.

3. See Hartman 2008, 6.

4. See Maracle 2015.

5. With thanks to Stuart Hall for the notion of a politics "without guarantees," a phrase which appears in many of his talks and essays, including "Race, the Floating Signifier" (2021/1997). With this orientation in his thought and politics, he cautions those of us with transformational desires to proceed without relying too heavily on the stability of essential and fixed categories which often emerge from the logics of a hegemonic science that produces racism itself.

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