



Black Canadian Studies Association

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Statement regarding 2021 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

February 9, 2021

The BCSA would like to thank our colleagues and fellow association leaders for your emails and messages in recent months asking about the BCSA's participation in Congress this year. We are especially grateful to those of you who have invited us to collaborate on presentations and panels this year, and who have expressed concern about **the fact that a Congress centred on the theme of "Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism" has yet to be realized.**

Last year, we refused the online congress format, citing our deep concerns about the rush to normalize online post-secondary education and proceed with "business as usual" amidst a surging global pandemic [1]. At that time, we implored our fellow members of the Federation to focus on our collective well-being and to take the opportunity to re-imagine anticolonial activism under conditions of forced physical distancing. "This is the time," we wrote, "to be exploring the role of humanities and social sciences within the context of global pandemics" [2].

While we have all now had almost a full year to adjust to online platforms for teaching, meetings, gatherings, and presentations, the prospect of participating in a virtual congress in 2021 is not, for us, just a matter of whether we have adjusted to the use of new technologies.

The pandemic has both highlighted and furthered profoundly racialized disparities in relation to employment, housing, health, and well-being. By the end of June 2020, it was already clear that Black people in Canada are both more likely (than Canadians overall) to hold a job that requires them to work with people face-to-face, *and* more likely to have lost hours or lost their jobs due to COVID-19, more likely to struggle to meet their basic needs due to pandemic-related financial loss, and more than three times as likely to know someone who has died from COVID-19 [3]. These "Black people in Canada" are us, they are our loved ones, our students, our communities.

Indigenous peoples are also being severely impacted from the pandemic, with the rate of reported cases of COVID-19 on First Nations reserves currently 40 percent higher than in the general Canadian population. Should this come as a surprise, recall that in Canada, "There are 58 communities under a boil water advisory across the country, and many living on reserve do not have access to consistent health care, adequate housing or dependable social services" [4]. In the past month COVID-19 cases in Indigenous communities are at the highest ever, peaking so far at 5,571 reported active cases in Indigenous communities in Canada as of January 19th 2021 [5]. Despite the pandemic "lockdowns," pipeline projects and unwelcome man camps [6] remain present and operational in Indigenous territories, spreading the virus and placing Indigenous communities at even greater risk [7].

By now it is widely known that Black and Indigenous people are severely targeted for police violence and overwhelmingly represented in police-involved deaths [8]. Black and Indigenous people are severely over-represented in Canadian prisons and assigned the worst security scores [9]. More than one third of the people incarcerated in Canadian prisons are Indigenous, with Indigenous women accounting for 42% of women incarcerated in this country [10]. By the end of last month, over 5,000 COVID-19 cases were linked to Canadian carceral institutions [11].

Suffice to say, the pandemic and how we experience it has been and continues to be deeply shaped by pervasive and worsening structural inequity. Added to this, is the stress and harm resulting from abusive verbal and visual online attacks (i.e. “Zoombombing”) predominantly targeting gatherings of Black, Indigenous, racialized, queer and disabled people [12].

Congress 2021

Given all of the above, the BCSA Executive team consulted the full association membership regarding our options for an annual gathering this year. Collectively, it was decided that the BCSA will arrange a half-day or one-day conference; the executive determined that we will not charge registration fees for this gathering.

With a history of having been subjected to interpersonal and structural racism *within Congress* in the recent past, and having committed our time and good faith to countless meetings, consultations, and negotiations with the Federation leadership; the BCSA conference organizing committee again approached Congress with two requests:

1) That Congress fees be waived for BCSA student-members and community members; and 2) That a formal commitment be made to a Black Studies theme for Congress in the near future.

Both of these requests were denied, with reference to potential compromises and the work of our colleagues on the Federation’s newly formed “Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Decolonization Committee” [12], and accompanying language of “historically under-represented groups” and “members *who have felt* marginalized.”

We determined that was just not enough of a commitment, especially given the extensive bureaucracy and planning that Congress participation entails. We cannot and will not co-sign this continuing refusal of Congress to be accountable to Black scholars in Canada. No amount of symbolic public gestures can or will cover-up their epic failure to meet our demands of 2019 in good faith.

The BCSA will host an independent gathering (mini conference) and AGM outside of Congress again this year, where among other topics we will discuss the future of our membership in the Federation. We thank all of our colleagues who have shown us their support, and we remain in solidarity with all who share our deep commitment to truly confronting and eliminating colonialism and anti-Black racism throughout the humanities and social sciences and all of Canadian academia.

Notes.

- [1] <https://twitter.com/BlkCdnSA/status/1242437206956036097/photo/1>
- [2] <https://twitter.com/BlkCdnSA/status/1242437206956036097/photo/2>
- [3] <https://innovativeresearch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ACCEC01-Release-Deck.pdf>
- [4] <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/a-year-later-indigenous-communities-are-fighting-twin-crises-covid-19-and-inequality-1.5280843>
- [5] <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-covid-19-update-1.5887968>
- [6] <https://www.secwepemculecw.org/no-mans-camps>
- [7] <https://www.princegeorgecitizen.com/news/local-news/health-care-workers-join-call-for-closure-of-work-camps-during-pandemic-1.24264552>
- [8] <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2020/07/15/police-brutality-in-canada-a-symptom-of-structural-racism-and-colonial-violence/>
- [9] <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-investigation-racial-bias-in-canadian-prison-risk-assessments/>
- [10] <https://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/comm/press/press20200121-eng.aspx>
- [11] http://tcp-canada.blogspot.com/2021/01/covid-19-cases-linked-to-canadian_15.html ;
<https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/inmates-fear-leaving-in-a-body-bag-as-covid-19-outbreaks-in-prisons-worsen-1.5253369>
- [12] <https://twitter.com/BlkCdnSA/status/1354413186745856000/photo/1>
- [13] <https://www.ideas-idees.ca/media/media-releases/federation-appoints-congress-advisory-committee-equity-diversity-inclusion-and>