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**HIGHER RACISM:  
THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA — ON THE  
WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY BUT RIGHT SIDE OF OPTICS**

However seductive, narratives suggesting that “universities are liberal, multicultural institutions” and “rational enterprises” are entirely misleading (Bergin & Khosa, 2007, p. 2; Tuchman, 2015, p. 55).<sup>1</sup> In this era of Black Lives Matter (BLM), these narratives are especially comforting for higher education managers as they invest in optics to sustain rankings and revenue. “Elite racism” depends on these types of narratives for avoiding implication, denying experiences, and dodging accountability. Higher education “elites often see themselves as moral leaders and will therefore generally dissociate themselves from anything that has to do with racism as they define it.” “That is,” van Dijk (1993) continues, “their denial of racism presupposes a definition of racism that conveniently excludes them as part of the problem” (pp. 8-9). While it is difficult for managers to deny blatant discrimination, Black faculty members often experience denial of everyday racism underwriting the lack of mentors and peers along with demands of “excessive race committee work and counseling of students of color” (Jay, Packer-William, & Jackson, 2010, p. 100).

Our concern addresses racist practices working against current and potential African ethnic, diasporic, and Indigenous scholars, and all scholars of colour, including east, west, north, and south Asian scholars. This article specifically draws on the case of the University of British Columbia (UBC) to address the racial demographics of hiring and appointing African ethnic and diasporic faculty and administrators. Accounting for what is inconvenient for managers necessarily begs the question of accountability. This is not about assigning blame or credit: Accountability “is about owning a result and providing a reckoning of the actions taken— and the actions not taken— that led to the final outcome” (Bina & Rosenberg, 2015, p. 23).

As White faculty members within this institution, we have a share of privileges but also feel a serious obligation to speak up and out on inequities, power dynamics, and racism (Petrina, 2004; Petrina, Mathison, & Ross, 2015; Petrina & Ross, 2014; Ross, 2016). We have served in various administrative capacities and know the difference between effective management and mismanagement. We have high standards. With Said (1994), we still like to think that the role of intellectuals “cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), [and] to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted” (p. 11). We are nonetheless not so naïve to forget that intellectuals serve very functionary roles as well.

Insider knowledge of employees is crucial as managers respond to racism within their workplaces. In this case, as UBC managers try to get out in front of BLM and control the optics, it’s important to provide a critical analysis of reality and recent history of administrative inaction. Controlling optics refers, in other words, to the management of perceptions. It is not limited to media relations and nor is it necessarily deliberate deception or trickery (Poole, 2014, p. 45). Yet with the potential of optics to deceive, the practice demands vigilant, critical analysis. Data and insights within this article provide a fuller picture of practices around the optics. This and similar critiques might just be enough to puncture the filter bubble in which higher education managers readily confine themselves.

Much of the analysis of UBC herein will likely be framed as “cringe criticism,” where the intent might be to embarrass managers from optics into action (Salvato, 2013). While managers are trained or prefer to avoid public embarrassment, especially if it reflects negatively on their image and practices, employees and whistleblowers nonetheless rely on generative critique. We use the case of UBC to expose the mismanagement of racism in higher education but the intent is not to embarrass. The intent is to account for inconvenient data and truths that managers are wont to avoid as we join in making higher education anti-racist from top to bottom. In addition to blatant discrimination and white supremacist ideologies, we agree with van Dijk (1993) that racism includes

the everyday, mundane, negative opinions, attitudes, and ideologies and the seemingly subtle acts and conditions of discrimination against minorities, namely, those social cognitions and social acts, processes, structures, or institutions that directly or indirectly contribute to the dominance of the white group and the subordinate position of minorities. (p. 5)

What Robyn Maynard (2017) infers from history education practices in Canada sums up the case of UBC: “a discernable lack of awareness surrounding the widespread anti-Blackness that continues to hide in plain sight, obscured behind a nominal commitment to liberalism, multiculturalism and equality” (p. 30). Hence, in this case of UBC, we provide various examples of how the institution functions through racial bias and prejudice but argue that leaving the explanation to structural or systemic racism makes it too easy to deny elite individual and everyday racism, especially racist attitudes and decisions of the managers and their means of employment discrimination (i.e., blocking and undermining racial minorities’ access to career advancement and opportunities).<sup>2</sup>

### **Right Side of Optics: The Case of UBC**

It did not take long for counter-movements to co-opt BLM, whether globally or more locally at UBC. [Quickly on 1 June 2020, UBC President Santa Ono conjoined](#) BLM with Asian concerns and [within two weeks had expanded](#) to “Black, Indigenous and People of Colour” (BIPOC). The Office of Equity & Inclusion then quickly [switched the first letters of the acronym](#)— Black cannot be first or prioritized— and so the President and UBC converged on “Indigenous, Black and People of Colour” (IBPOC).<sup>3</sup>

By deprioritizing African ethnic and diasporic interests, equilibrium was rapidly restored for “social justice” and the University’s equity system was normalized. UBC’s demographic data now appear better to onlookers. About 0.4% of a [total of 6,282 FT and PT faculty members at UBC](#) are Black but the total optically jumps to 20% when BIPOC is the measure (UBC, 2019a, pp. 7, 13-14).<sup>4</sup> Likewise in Vancouver, [Blacks are just 1% of the population](#) but when the measure is BIPOC (Aboriginal + racial visible minorities) the total is about 52%. Critics within BLM more accurately see UBC’s quick transformations as forms of racebending and whitewashing immediate and longstanding inequities and racism.

An op-ed in the [Los Angeles Times](#) sums up UBC’s problem here: “a one size fits all mentality toward diversity erases the specific needs of the most vulnerable communities.” “The terms ‘women of color’ and ‘people of color’ are meant to be inclusive,” Nadra Widatalla (2019) writes, “but, from my perspective, they only help to leave black people behind.” Indigenous Peoples stress this as well along with the problem of conflating culture, ethnicity, and race. There are significant [specificities of anti-Black racism in Canada](#) that have long been clarified and merit specific attention (James et al., 2010).

One gets a sense of the backdrop to UBC’s racial inequities and optics through its equity committees and task forces along with their reports and strategic plans. For equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) at UBC, picking a report to start with is fairly arbitrary. For instance, we can begin in 2007, the President’s Advisory Committee on Equity, Discrimination and Harassment, and *Addressing Equity and Race: A Report for the Equity Office* (Wai, 2007). From this, the Equity Office (2009) developed a *Strategic Plan, Valuing Difference: A Strategy for Advancing Equity and Diversity at UBC*. Recommendations such as “Strike a Task Force” and “Form a Working Group” initiated the next cycle of optics (pp. 7, 12). Sure enough, *Implementing Inclusion* recommended a Provost’s Advisory Committee on Equity and Diversity (Iyer &

Nakata, 2013, p. 6). On cue in 2016, the [Associate Vice-President \(AVP\) Equity & Inclusion's Strategic Implementation Committee for Equity and Diversity](#) recommended more advisors, committees, task forces, and working groups. On these advisory committees and task forces, more committees and task forces are stacked. On these plans and reports are piled more plans and reports. Dozens of recommendations are numbered after dozens of recommendations. And so on. On 16 June 2020 amidst BLM, the President promptly repeated the “diversity is our strength” motto and created a [new Committee on Systemic Racism](#). On 23 June, the AVP Equity & Inclusion re-introduced the new [Task Force on Trans, Two-Spirit and Gender Diversity](#) (est. Feb. 2020). All these committees, groups, and task forces were evidently not enough for optics so yet another new task force was announced and [opened for membership on 18 January 2021](#). Over and over, it's the same routine and basically many of the same colleagues and managers recycling what are invariably ineffective ideas and recommendations. How many kicks at the can do they get?

Just like the 2010 [Equity and Diversity plan](#), the 2019 [Inclusion Action Plan](#), indicates that channels are open for accountability yet when discriminatory policy and procedure breaches are reported, managers proceed with no accountability and business as usual, refuse to open a dialogue with critical faculty, or simply retaliate. At some point insincerity and mismanagement questions have to be raised.

Prior to the initial appointment of AVP Equity & Inclusion Sara-Jane Finlay beginning 16 March 2015, the President's Task Force (2014b) asserted the new AVP would “better support the faculties and administrative units in addressing issues related to equity and inclusion, through education, assessment and leadership” (p. 7). Clearly, this never happened. On 9 July 2020, AVP Finlay was reappointed without accountability to the record on equitable hiring and appointment practices.

Two months later, in August 2020, the Board of Governors (BoG) promptly reappointed President Ono to a second five-year term with no accountability to his record on racial equity. One of the President's first executive appointments was Provost and Vice-President Academic Andrew Szeri, who began on 10 July 2017. Consideration of his reappointment was announced on 1 February 2021. The precedence is reappointment without accountability. Reappointment committees make these processes a mere formality.

Since President Ono's initial appointment in the summer of 2016, five Deans were reappointed without due consideration of their record on racial equity and with undue attention to representation. The ongoing practice of consistently extending terms of non-racially diverse Deans to ten years works against the potential of hiring African ethnic or diasporic leaders. The last four new Deans hired through the President's Committees are not racially diverse. Conforming to [trends in secret executive searches](#) across Canadian and US universities, in September UBC's [BoG proposed amendments to the Deans Appointment Policy \(AP5\)](#) to require confidentiality agreements or the equivalent under a pretence of privacy protection (Groarke, 2019). Holding hiring committees and anyone accountable is nearly impossible. EDI-friendly managers and employers, despite the optics, nonetheless discriminate (Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun, 2016).

Across the University, the Deans are noticeably uniform and without an African ethnic or diasporic Canadian (Figure 1) (0/18 are Black). There is an abundance of examples like this among the managerial ranks on both the Vancouver and Okanagan campuses. Considering the optics in June, BLM concerns were pressuring the University for action so pictures of Black faculty and students appeared overnight on the Deans' websites and in tweets. And evidently, UBC's Vice-President, External Relations seized on the optics of profiling President Ono himself. Since June has been a proliferation of pictures of the President while Media Relations added a [Songs of Comfort webpage](#) to his Office, ostensibly to draw attention to what weighs on his conscience at whim of a moment, such as BLM, expressed in cello performance videos.



Figure 1. [Meet the Deans](#) (UBC-V) and [meet the balance of 6 UBC-O Deans](#). Image source: UBC public website.

[Visible minorities are defined](#) in Canada’s *Employment Equity Act* as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” Employees and researchers use a variety of methods for demographics, including self-identification and observation of readily apparent or “visible” characteristics (Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019; Song, 2020). UBC’s (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) core methods include Employment Equity Surveys, Systems Reviews, and [Workplace Experience Surveys](#) (WES). Demographic methods have unique limitations and cautions. For example, in transforming invisibility to visibility, employers and researchers risk creation of hypervisibility for visible minority faculty, or “heightened scrutiny and surveillance where failures are magnified and individuals lack control over how they are perceived by others” (Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019, p. 63). We also acknowledge that racial visibility can be ambiguous and, with discretion, feel the reward outweighs the risk of helping UBC make its demographics visible and overcome color-blindness.

There are currently 94 Associate Deans, Assistant Deans, Vice-Deans, and Senior Advisors at UBC but zero are African ethnic or Black diasporic (Table 1). This is 2021 not 1951 so it’s worth repeating: 0 / 94 middle managers at UBC are Black; 0 / 18 Deans are Black. The Faculty of Education and Sauder School of Business (Commerce), next door to each other on campus, have appointed and assembled a small army of 24 middle managers but not a single one is Black. However much senior and middle managers try, no optics, altered perception, website, or nuance will coverup or change these data.

Table 1. Middle managers at UBC (Associate Deans, Assistant Deans, Vice-Deans, Senior Advisors) (January 27, 2021). Source: UBC-V [Calendar](#), UBC-O [Calendar](#), and public websites.

<b>UBC-V Faculties</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>T</b>		<b>B</b>	<b>T</b>
Applied Science	0	6	Graduate Studies	0	4
Arts	0	8	Land & Food	0	5
Commerce	0	15	Law	0	3
Dentistry	0	3	Medicine	0	5
Education	0	9	Pharmacy	0	5
Forestry	0	8	Science	0	8
<b>UBC-O Faculties</b>					
Applied Science	0	3	Health and Social Dev.	0	0
Arts & Social Science	0	5	Management	0	1
Creative & Critical Studies	0	2	Southern Medicine	0	3
Graduate Studies	0	1			
<b>Total African Canadian / Black Middle Managers at UBC</b>				<b>0</b>	<b>/ 94</b>

Preoccupied with image and optics of anti-Black racism, UBC senior managers overlook the elite racism manifested in their attitudes and decisions. The BoG, Office of Equity & Inclusion, and offices of the Provost and President refuse to regulate the appointment of Associate, Assistant, and Vice deans across the UBC system. Concerns and requests over the past six years submitted to President Ono, three of his predecessors, two Provosts, AVP Equity & Inclusion, AVP Human Resources, and the BoG to create a hiring policy for these middle managers were dismissed out of hand. UBC's Board of Governors (BoG) manages 91 policies, introducing and renewing policies annually, but none regulate these appointments. Without any policies, Deans readily circumvent employment equity to appoint allies and supporters to the exclusion of Black leaders. With no checks and standards for equity, cultural matching prevails as evidence suggests that senior managers prefer to appoint middle managers that look and think like themselves (Rivera, 2012). The result? 0 / 94 middle managers at UBC are Black. No statement from managers, including "diversity is our strength," will overcome this nor will it sweep the data under the rug of history. UBCs [Multicultural Education Chair Annette Henry \(2020\) adds](#) a reality check:

Hoping and wishing are not enough to create a racially diverse or better still, an anti-racist institution. Search committees cannot continue to delude themselves with talk of diversity whilst continuing to hire white people with whom they are more familiar— including their recent white graduates at the expense of equally competent or superior racialized applicants.

In the Faculty of Education, entire Departments and Schools— Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (n=0/45), School of Kinesiology (n=0/27), Okanagan School of Education (n=0/22)— do not have even a single African ethnic or diasporic faculty member. The balance of units is only slightly better (n=1/42, n=1/39, n=3/36). Some units have not shortlisted a Black candidate for twenty years despite 45+ searches. In our Department, Curriculum and Pedagogy (EDCP), we approved an [Affirmative Action Plan](#) on 18 January 2007 but this has been ignored by the Dean, Associate and Assistant Deans, President, and Provost since that moment. On 1 July 2016, the Dean of Education was reappointed with no accountability for this record. On 2 September 2020, when the Dean responded to [The Tyee's report of anti-Black racism](#), he trumpeted his new Task Force on Race, Indigeneity, and Social Justice (Hyslop, 2020). What he failed to report was the fact that the African and Caribbean Canadian members resigned from this Task Force with no confidence. A request made to this Task Force to remove the [Faculty's noted celebration](#) of a student occasionally appearing in blackface (i.e., [Justin Trudeau](#)) was denied.

Evidence of managers routinely fixing and rigging jobs to the exclusion of African ethnic and diasporic applicants is summarily dismissed or ignored by Equity & Inclusion and the offices of the Provost and President. Even when the fixing and rigging backfires and Deans are called to account by the BC Human Rights Tribunal (HRT), the University's senior managers rally to their defence (e.g., [Oya v. University of British Columbia and Dean Blye Frank](#), March 2020) (Chan, 2018; Wakefield, 2012).

This lack of accountability compounds the lack of redress for employment equity activists and seekers (Chan, 2018; Moodley, 2020). For instance, for 1 July 2018 - 30 June 2019, the [Office of Equity & Inclusion reported 91 race-based complaints filed](#), including 11 from faculty, but none were formally investigated. Even in demonstrable cases, employment equity seekers have little recourse but to go to the BCHRT. [In October 2018, eight employment discrimination cases](#) against UBC were filed. Alarming, since 2016 there have been 12 discrimination cases heard against UBC at the BCHRT, including racial discrimination. This is unprecedented, as comparatively, none were heard against Simon Fraser University during the same period. How are managers circumventing and exploiting loopholes in UBC's employment equity policies (e.g., Policy HR10)? By federal law, basically all that are required is the existence of equity policies and maintenance of a standing Office (i.e., Equity & Inclusion). Agocs and Osborne (2009) accurately observe:

In practice, then, implementation of Canada's employment equity policy is left largely to the discretion of employers, who face insufficient government and public scrutiny and few consequences for their failures to comply with the legislated requirements. As a result, equality seekers remain disappointed that the promise of Canada's *Employment Equity Act* is unfulfilled,

and a large gap remains between the intent of employment equity policy and practice at the workplace level. (p. 246)

Following the managers' preference for optics, the Executive Committee of the Faculty Association of UBC (FAUBC) [released an Anti-Racism Statement](#) on 5 June 2020. Like the employer, no African ethnic or diasporic faculty member or librarian has served on its Executive for the past 25 years, if ever in its history. Its *Collective Agreement* with UBC includes a "No Discrimination" clause (Article 4) but to our knowledge the FAUBC has neither grieved nor arbitrated a single racial discrimination case in 25 years, if ever.

The recent, [cancelled search for a new Dean of the Faculty of Education](#) immediately encapsulates and reveals all that is wrong with employment equity at UBC and the failure of managers to effectively account, respond, and take responsibility (Olusanya, 2020). The search began on 9 June 2020 with an announcement of the President's Advisory Committee (16 members, including 7 managers) charged with advertising, shortlisting, interviewing, and recommending a new Dean. On 20 November, a group supporting Samson Nashon, an immensely competitive, experienced African Canadian applicant, was informed he was not shortlisted. In response, we coordinated a petition, which [in 5 days registered 150 signatories](#) (54 UBC faculty, 64 students and alumni, 14 staff, 18 external). On 26 November, we forwarded the petition to the President and Provosts, pointing out the Committee's inability to maintain employment equity standards and requesting that he be added to the shortlist. On 3 December, the Provosts defended their Committee by simply asserting that "the search is being conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Joint Board-Senate Deans/Principals Appointment Policy (AP5)." Forced by faculty pressure on the BoG, on 9 December 2020 the President reluctantly shut down the search: "During the interim period, the Provosts will identify an Interim Dean" but no procedures or transparency will govern this decision.

The current Dean's term ends 1 July 2021, so again, a group of faculty moved to recommend our African Canadian colleague who was excluded by the Advisory Committee. Wanting to talk with the President or Provosts about this and some of our findings described herein, we requested a meeting on 21 January 2021. On 25 January, the Provosts replied: "Given the suggestions and explanations you offered in your letter and the other communications you have forwarded, we will decline the invitation for a meeting." Back to the President we went, who on 28 January then reiterated, "We will not be granting a meeting regarding your letters at this time." Guarding their perceptions while exercising discretion, managers just do not want any dissonance introduced into their echo chamber.<sup>5</sup>

With evident circumventions and transgressions of University equity commitments, policies, and procedures, the cancelled Dean search raises a fundamental question: Do the search firms contracted for recruitment come up empty or are the hiring Committees simply dismissive of African ethnic and diasporic applicants (i.e., are they anti-Black, are they racist)? Either way, the head-hunters get the money. Over the past six years, UBC paid out \$2.8m to [Boyden Canada](#) for executive recruitment.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, the University added [McDermott + Bull](#) to its recruitment contracts. Optically again, senior managers appear to be proactive in creating large contracts for head-hunters to recruit diverse candidates for a range of leadership positions at UBC, including the searches for Deans. The lack of results speaks for itself.

Instead of directly addressing employment inequities in the faculties and holding managers to account, the Vancouver Provost and President are creating a perception of action by queuing senior advisors. In July 2018, a Senior Advisor to the Provost on Racialized Faculty was appointed and on [9 September 2020 was reappointed](#). Not to be outdone, on 27 November, the President announced the appointment of a new [Senior Advisor to the President on Race and Inclusive Excellence](#). To magnify the optics, on 26 January 2021 the Senior Advisors launched an ["Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence" website](#). With intensification of racism and urgent calls for action by African ethnic and diasporic faculty, staff, and students in the institution and external, what exactly is their advice? There are no sources of inequities clarified or identified on the website, as this detracts from the optics. There are no affirmative action data or employment equity quotas or targets, as they tarnish the image. Course buyouts and \$30,000 bonuses or stipends are given to the Advisors on top of salaries. Granted, the Advisors are well-respected leaders and scholars. However, given a failing economy and BC Ministry of Advanced Education budget cuts on top

of a \$100m+ deficit at UBC, it's logical to pause and ask: Why cannot the AVP Equity & Inclusion, with a \$216,000 salary, advise on racism at UBC? As [Bathseba Opini \(2020\) concludes](#), “forming antiracism advisory groups, doing antiracism workshops, and posting equity, diversity and inclusion statements on institutional websites are great but also hollow words and actions if the racist structures in place are not changed.”

Currently, in the throes of an economic crisis, senior managers recommend [crowdfunding and donations for students](#). Memos circulating in September and October 2020 and again in January 2021 by a faculty member are stamped with impassioned appeals for support of a [new GoFundMe and Foodbank](#) campaign targeting a subset of UBC's international graduate students desperately in need, albeit some but not all from Africa. Yes, international students on campus are in need of food donations while on the west side of campus, overlooking beaches along Burrard Inlet, the [President lives rent-free](#) in a \$18m house (i.e., \$15,000/month) and drives a complimentary new car. With a \$59m+ budget, the Education Dean's Office consistently passes this plea for donations down to faculty and staff. It is not easy for students from Africa to live on campus, given high tuition, cost of living in Vancouver, and so few African ethnic and diasporic faculty mentors. As it goes, Nigeria (n=71) is the only African country among UBC's top 15 countries listed as sources of international undergraduate and graduate students (UBC, 2019d, p. 2).

We should not expect President Ono, an ophthalmologist by training, to excel in leading or fully understanding anti-Black racism. Equity was never his commitment. [As he sees it](#), “my job is to optimize revenues coming into the university” (quoted in Lirette, 2016). There is nothing in his \$630,000+ contract that mandates that he lead in anti-racist practices. [At moments when the President is asked](#) about it, he code switches, noting that “I'm a person of colour and so I know what our faculty member [Sara Ghebremusse] feels like” as she speaks out about anti-Black racism at UBC (quoted on *The Early Edition*, 2020). Indeed, a [popular article in the Harvard Business Review](#) asserts that the most important 21<sup>st</sup> century skill is managerial code switching to establish power appeal and empathy (Molinsky, 2012). Code switching means adjusting one's speech and behaviour to “[optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment](#)” (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, & Durkee, 2019). Hence, University managers are wont to assert that they readily relate to experiences of all faculty, staff, and students in exchange for a pass on their unaccountability.

As they say of second term reappointments, the honeymoon is over. Surely by now, the President must expect critiques of a record no optics can coverup and realize he can no longer take comfort in nostalgia for an ecstatic popular press. For example, [BC Business wrote reverently in 2016](#): “looking closely at the way people have gathered on this pleasantly sunny day in mid-August, it soon becomes clear that Santa Ono — wearing his trademark bow tie, in UBC blue and gold, and regulation white shirt and dark pants — is the main attraction... strong enough to reshape the emotional perception of the institution” (Bula, 2016). Eventually, results catch up with images and optics. Irreverence becomes a necessary reality check on the reverence. Trademarks grow old. Halo effects fade and leniency errors are corrected. And bowties in so many selfies are finally given psychoanalytic treatment (Boothby, 2005, pp. 7-10).

Similar doubts can be raised of UBC-V Provost Szeri's capacity and commitment to address anti-Black racism and redress long-standing inequities. A mechanical engineer specializing in fluid dynamics, Szeri continues to be active in his discipline but has not produced any research on equity and race. Whether UBC-O Provost Ananya Mukherjee Reed, appointed in the summer of 2018 with a depth of anti-racist research, can hold the senior and middle managers accountable is unlikely. In the Education Dean search fiasco of 2020, she was said to have resigned from the Advisory Committee once the heat was turned up but made no public statement indicating why or how she upheld equity against peer pressure to otherwise conform. The problem is not necessarily the inadequacy of leadership inasmuch as the fallacious belief that social status confers all matters of expertise. This notion, i.e., ‘Ono is *President* and Szeri is *Provost*, therefore they are accomplished in employment equity,’ merely affirms the consequent.<sup>7</sup>

UBC has quite the record of avoiding administrative accountability. When the heat is on, the tendency is to create a scapegoat to deflect attention. In the summer of 2015, when Indo-Canadian [UBC President Arvind](#)

[Gupta resigned amidst serious controversies](#) across the senior management ranks and the BoG, the government appointed Chair was scapegoated and left the University. In a controversy reaching down to the Deans and Associates and resulting in a non-confidence vote by faculty members, Mr. John Montalbano was held accountable. This past summer, as questions of anti-Black racism at UBC intensified, a student group [doxed the BoG Chair for liking a few conspicuous pro-Trump tweets](#) (e.g., by Ann Coulter and Dinesh D’Souza). Again, the government appointee resigned, creating a façade of accountability. In late [April 2020, Mr. Michael J. Korenberg was pronouncing](#) the greatness of UBC’s “senior leadership team, including President Ono” and they were fist-bumping their response to Covid-19 (Figure 2). Two months later [the President was announcing](#) that the BoG Chair “was stepping down after social media interactions.” These low-risk dismissals are easy as they have little to no implication for the President’s or Provosts’ social capital. In effect, there is no real accountability.



Figure 2. BoG Chair Korenberg and President Ono joined at the hip since their arrival in 2016 (Image by Zubair Hirji, copied with permission from *The Ubyssy*, 5 December 2019).

To reiterate, allegations, complaints, and reports of racist practices within UBC’s middle and senior management ranks are met with ambivalence and dismissed. When African and Caribbean diasporic faculty are appointed to leadership roles, they are often undermined. Education is a prime example where reports of managers bullying Black leaders and excluding them from decisions and meetings are dismissed. For optics, UBC’s managers advertise “zero tolerance” toward racism one day and the next turn the other way from complaints about those in their ranks intimidating Black administrators (e.g., slamming doors). One month it’s circumvent employment equity to exclude an African Canadian applicant from the shortlist for a Dean’s search and then next it’s celebration of Black History Month.

Despite existence of an [academic freedom clause within the Collective Agreement](#) along with various statements in support, UBC managers are hostile toward the practice of academic freedom and have a low threshold of tolerance for criticism of their policies and practices. In response to a recent and particularly egregious attack on academic freedom by Faculty of Education managers, EDCP was moved on 21 January 2021 to pass a motion against institutional censorship. The Department was compelled to affirm faculty members’ right to express opinions, including those concerning racism, about the administration and institution without reprisal or suppression of any source.<sup>8</sup>

UBC managers’ use of the *Respectful Environment Statement (RES)*, effectively a speech policy, is part of a disciplinary regime of neoliberal managerialism. The *RES* suppresses dissent and intimidates marginalized faculty, staff, and students raising questions of mismanagement and maladministration or speaking out on racial inequities. Like audit culture, which normalizes metric-based competitions within the university, the *RES* normalizes UBC managers’ investigative powers, which effectively suppress academic freedom and criticism of institutional policies and practices. Retaliation is common against critics and whistleblowers as they find themselves submitted to star chamber investigations that often result in

forced leave, suspension with reduced pay, non-renewed contracts, or outright dismissal. UBC's new [Investigations Office](#), established in May 2018 for sexual discrimination and misconduct cases, was expanded in 2020 to investigate faculty members' *RES* transgressions, as if critical speech and sexual misconduct are now somehow equivalent.

These are especially pernicious effects of neoliberal managerialism and rise of the "all-administrative university" (Ginsberg, 2011; Spooner & McNinch, 2018). University managerialism includes anxieties over league tables, rankings, reputation (institutional and personal), and a gambit to marginalize faculty in decision-making and intimidate those wanting to exercise criticism or dissent. This helps partially explain UBC managers' preference for optics over action in response to BLM and anti-Black racism. Managers' careers are inextricably tied to non-academic goals, such as reputation. For Smyth (2017), optics play on meaningless, synthetic marketing hype of "zombie ideas"— ideas killed by evidence, but nonetheless still walking among us "because they suit a political agenda" (p. 75).

### **Wrong Side of History: The Case of UBC, cont'd.**

In *North of the Color Line*, Sarah-Jane Mathieu (2010) concludes that "in truth, Canadians shared many common threads with the de facto segregation model of the American North and West, but with the added pernicious element of denying that racism could ever thrive in Canada in the first place" (p. 210). However fringe, there was a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan at UBC as recent as 1981 (Sanford, 1981). Unquestionably, this "pernicious element" of denialism continues to mark UBC.

Like most institutions of higher education in Canada, United Kingdom, and United States, UBC was founded on the wrong side of history. Elite and systemic racism are first and foremost rooted in the unceded Indigenous Lands, on which UBC is precariously built and managed. Let's just say from 1640 and the incorporation of Britain's Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), from 1792 and Captain George Vancouver's naming of Point Grey after his buddy, from 1827 and the building of Fort Langley, from 1858 with the creation of the Colony of British Columbia, from 1886 with the establishment of the city of Vancouver, from 1907 with the creation the University Endowment Lands on which to build a university (UEL, 3,000 acres of what was traditional *xwməθwkwəy̓wəm* [Musqueam] Lands for 4,000 years), from 1908 when the University of British Columbia was created and named as such, or again in 1988 with the spinoff of UBC Properties Trust and its aggressive land and property development, UBC's prehistory and history are mired in racism, greed, corruption, and avarice.

The name "British Columbia" is itself racist in the memories of many Indigenous People. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, for example, does not mince words: "British Columbia" is "colonial, ugly, creepy, Canadiana racist." The name has to change, he continues, "so we can start to realistically negotiate in trust, in stewardship of this land" (quoted in *Metro News*, 2016). Of course, "British" venerates the "British race" and temporal extension of "British North America" while "Columbia" idolizes Columbus's "discovery" of the "new world" (Merrell, 2012; Power, 2010; Schlereth, 1992). The American Columbia established independence in 1776 but named its seat of government the "Territory of Columbia" in 1791 (District, ca. 1793) (Tindall, 1920). The imaginary was popularized through *Ode to Columbia*, a song penned in 1777 to commemorate Columbus and the "new world," beginning and ending with: "Columbia, Columbia to glory arise, The queen of the world, and the child of the skies!" The Colony of British Columbia was named in 1858 by Queen Victoria upon considering her United Kingdom's cartography and imaginary (Martin, 1978). British Columbia, "that outpost of empire," inspired imperialism and the right of conquest (Milner, 1908/1913, pp. 305, 306). Naming in the *University Act* of 1908 was additionally a convenient inheritance from "McGill University College of British Columbia," established in 1906 and given over to UBC in 1914.

It was no surprise that UBC's inaugural President Frank F. Wesbrook's first motion to the Board on 18 April 1913 was to grab more Musqueam Land, as he moved to add 100 acres to the initial 250 granted for developing the Point Grey campus. He passed away in October 1918, seven years before any academic buildings were erected, yet UBC continues to attach his name to everything from Wesbrook Crescent or

Mall (1925) to the Wesbrook Building (1951), and the expansive Wesbrook Place or village (2005). His official biography provides no evidence to indicate he was blatantly racist, other than appropriation of Musqueam land, nor is there evidence that he acted against [racist practices and Jim Crow segregation](#) in Vancouver and his discipline, medicine, or did anything at all for racial justice and reform (Gibson, 1973). To say the least, Wesbrook's contributions to UBC are highly exaggerated. Comparatively, you won't find a Musqueam, African, or east Indian Commemorative name on this campus. As of 2018, you will find Musqueam language (hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓) translations beneath colonial names on some signs.

It's unclear whether UBC's senior and middle managers will finally awaken to the fact that it's *not* 1908 or 1951 or 1981 anymore. It's 2021. At this moment 0 / 112 Deans and Associate, Assistant, and Vice Deans are Black. Over 112 years of UBC's history one can likely count on just one hand the African ethnic and diasporic senior and middle managers. This is the case of UBC for Black History Month. *This* is UBC, on the right side of optics but wrong side of history.

## Conclusion

Anti-Black racism in higher education requires specific attention to history and action, whether affirmative or equitable. We argued that elite racism and everyday racism experienced by African ethnic and diasporic faculty, staff, and students and made visible through demographic data can no longer be dismissed or overlooked. Through the case of UBC, we demonstrated various ways in which the higher racism of managers works to maintain individual and systemic discrimination. Preferences of managers for image and optics over action— surface over substance— is especially shallow in this era of Black Lives Matter. We also raised questions of the logic of popular shortcuts to intersectionality (e.g., IBPOC) and stand with scholars explaining that therein, equity claims of African ethnic and diasporic faculty, staff, and students are readily deprioritized or marginalized. Code-switching has its limits. At UBC is an established record of defending middle and senior managers' inequitable, and often enough for concern, racist, practices. Cases introduced by racial equity seeking individuals are routinely deferred, dismissed, or misdirected to external agencies, where again senior managers agitate to request dismissal of the complaints. Finally, we articulated concerns that managers are preferring to isolate and shield themselves from critical conversation and critique. Critics of problematic and racist practices risk disciplinary measures as managers grow increasingly intolerant of commentaries on mismanagement and whistleblowing.

Despite the significance of socioeconomic status (SES) for Black Lives Matter and current or potential African ethnic and diasporic faculty, staff, and students, UBC's President and Provost ignore it altogether. Class and SES are simply not in their vocabulary, which is to say not on the University's agenda. One can read through the [President's announcements, articles, "Letters from Santa," speeches, statements, tweets, and updates](#) and will not find a single reference to "economic status," "social condition," or SES. What's worse, the Office of Equity & Inclusion excludes "class," "disadvantage," "social condition," and "SES" from its [Glossary of 31 Terms](#) (Ross, 2018). There are institutions of higher education where managers at least give lip service and optics to SESism (e.g., [MIT](#)). But UBC and its managers are now "all in" on the side of the privileged "haves" rather than underprivileged "have nots" even as [Vancouver's income disparity and wealth inequality](#) are intensified to alarming levels. Managers of higher education in Canada might defend themselves by noting that class and SES are not included as "prohibited grounds of discrimination" in the [Human Rights Act](#) and are therefore irrelevant to equity. With the [BC Human Rights Commissioner \(2020\) proposing](#) to amend the [Code](#) to include "social condition" as a new ground, UBC's managers and Equity & Inclusion are nevertheless in for another late, and likely rude, awakening.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bergin and Khosa (2007, p. 2) express the full romantic sentiment: “Universities represent the ‘battle of ideas’. Historically they are sites of struggle. Universities are liberal, multicultural institutions which represent modernity. They are places where men and women, irrespective of background, gather to be educated in an open environment where they can challenge conventional wisdom.” Of course, counter to this is a “perception that higher education is isolated and largely oblivious to the real needs of society; and a perception that colleges are inefficient, unaccountable, and seemingly insulated from the pressures that have caused massive restructuring in the private sector” (Uchtmann, 1997, p. 274).

<sup>2</sup> We rely on the Supreme Court of Canada’s (1989) definition provided in [Andrews v. Law Society of British Columbia](#): “Discrimination is a distinction which, whether intentional or not but based on grounds relating to personal characteristics of the individual or group, has an effect which imposes disadvantages not imposed upon others or which withholds or limits access to advantages available to other members of society. Distinctions based on personal characteristics attributed to an individual solely on the basis of association with a group will rarely escape the charge of discrimination, while those based on an individual’s merits and capacities will rarely be so classed.”

<sup>3</sup> An alternative is the UK intersection of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME). The logic of IBPOC is “First Peoples first,” which we honour in full. But at the same time this dismisses another fact of temporality, that of the African source of all humanity. Certainly, common experiences matter but the swift transformation of BLM into IBPOC also reinforces a sense that African ethnic and diasporic people should step down a rung toward the bottom of the equity ladder, as problematized by the City of Vancouver in its [Addressing Anti-Black Racism report](#) released September 2020. It overlooks the facts of gross inequities between Asian Canadians’ incomes, property, and faculty appointments [compared with those of African Canadians](#). There is a longstanding debate on this, much as in the order LGBT2SQIA+. That said, although women have longstanding equity claims, the reality and effect of the normative restoration of priorities at UBC is in the order of w+LGBT2SQIA+IBPOC+PWD.

<sup>4</sup> This 0.4% figure is derived from [UBC’s \(2019b\) Employment Equity Report](#), which indicates that there are 108 Black Faculty + Staff aggregated members (pp. 41-42). Disaggregated, we estimate that just 20%-25% of the 108 are faculty members. About 88% of all BIPOC employees at UBC are staff. Compare with demographics at the University of Washington (UW), UBC’s peer Tier 1 university, in Seattle, Vancouver’s global peer city just a 2.5 hour drive down the highway. Albeit still extremely low, [UW \(2019\) has 5x-6x](#) the number of African ethnic and diasporic faculty members (p. 1). Seattle’s Black population is about 7% of the city. For Vancouver compared with Seattle, see [Dembicki \(2018\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> Curious as to why UBC’s executives are avoiding meeting with faculty members while arranging meetings with students, on 10 February 2021 we requested a copy of the President’s and Provosts’ calendars for the last few months. They chose not to disclose and instead forwarded the request to the Office of the University Counsel as a Freedom of Information request. Transparency of what public executives or officials do and who they meet with is key to accountability and access to information. How UBC’s executives manage their time can provide insight into their preference of optics over action against anti-Black racism.

<sup>6</sup> Contracts with Boyden are compiled from [UBC’s Consolidated Financial Statements](#) (2015-2020).

<sup>7</sup> The competing affirmation that executive status instead indicates forms of psychopathy or sociopathy is increasingly well founded (Perry, 2015). Morse (2004) observes: “Chances are good there’s a psychopath on your management team.”

<sup>8</sup> Text of the motion: “Academic freedom always entails freedom from institutional censorship and includes the freedom to express one’s opinion about the institution, its administration, and the system in which one works without reprisal or suppression by the employer or any source” ([CAUT Policy Statement on Academic Freedom](#), 2018). The Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy reaffirms the academic freedom of faculty members including the right to express their views on all matters of education and its

management, whether on campus, in meetings, online, or through any form of mass and social media. Rather than attempting to suppress the rights of members, Faculty of Education managers have a positive obligation to defend the academic freedom of academic staff.

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