

## ***If I had a magic wand: Speculative everyday anti-racism for addressing workplace racial discrimination in British Columbia's public sector***

*Farid Asey, Carleton University, Ontario*

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2020, when mass protests, vigils and demonstrations erupted across Canada in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd, the debate on systemic and persistent racisms in the country reached its crescendo (Brownhill, 2020; Deliso, 2020; Stein, 2020). Institutions, particularly those staffed by social workers tasked with delivering critical human services, were forced to grapple with allegations of systemic racisms. Many joined the chorus of voices to strongly denounce racial discrimination in systems and structures of society. However, considering the history of more restrained societal and institutional reactions to such events in the past, this was an anomaly. Although police brutality and other forms of state-mediated atrocities against racialized Canadians and Indigenous Peoples are unexceptional, public outrage in such cases is ordinarily muted and fizzle out of collective consciousness, often almost as quickly as they (re)surface (Brownhill, 2020; Cole, 2020; Comack, 2012).

It is to be noted that discrimination targeting racialized minorities has a long history in Canada (Alladin, 1996; Blackstock, 2010; Cannon and Sunseri, 2018; Day, 2018; Driedger and Halli, 2014; Henry and Tator, 2002; Jedwab, 2016; Madibbo, 2004; Mensah and Williams, 2017; Moghaddam, 1994; Nakano and Chan, 1980; Neuman, 2019; Palameta, 2004; Pleasant-Jetté, 1996; Razack, 1998; Stewart, 2004; Tator and Henry, 2006; Walker, 1985; Warry, 2007). Similarly, over the past four decades, researchers have directed attention to analyzing the phenomena of racisms in Canadian workplaces (Al-Waqfi and Jain, 2007; Andiappan et al., 1989; Block and Galabuzi, 2011; Block, Galabuzi and Tranjan, 2019; Derek and Wayne, 1999; Esses et al., 2007; Henry, 1978; Howland and Sakellariou, 1993; Galabuzi, 2006, 2008; George and Chaze, 2014; Henry, 1985; Jain, Singh and Agocs, 2000; James, 1998; Lopes and Thomas, 2006; Pendakur and Pendakur, 1998; Ramjattan, 2015; Stewart, 2004, 2009; Teelucksingh and Galabuzi, 2007; Thomas and Novogrodsky, 1983; Zureik and Hiscott, 1983). However, what is missing from these studies is an exploration of the salience of race as a targeted identity at work and how research participants would have addressed racisms if they had the powers and resources to act upon their wish.

To address this gap, the present study offers a qualitative investigation of participant-proposed solutions to employment racisms. More specifically, analyses presented are underpinned by responses to a speculative question posed to participants who had lived experiences with racial discrimination in their workplace, or the primary site for establishing and maintaining White dominance. The guiding idea for posing this question was that if workplaces are to foster inclusive workplaces and respond effectively to allegations of racial discrimination in their midst, racialized workers ought to play a key role in identifying issues and proposing solutions.

In terms of the organization of this paper, after a brief review of the different conceptualizations of anti-racism, the article will present the findings in form of three subthemes that have emerged from data analysis using hermeneutic phenomenology. These thematic findings, which also secondarily stress the insidious, ambiguous and sophisticated mechanisms that perpetuate racisms at work, are: 1- demanding accountability, 2- reforming systems, and, 3- enhancing interracial dialogues. After a discussion of these findings, the paper will conclude that insights provided by participants offer possibilities for tangible and meaningful anti-racist action for not only social work practitioners, educators, advocates and activists but also managers and leaders of public sector and human service organizations.

### **Theories of anti-racism: integrative, everyday, and the speculative everyday iterations**

This article is concerned with what I have termed as speculative everyday anti-racism, which is an adaptation of the everyday anti-racism as originally propounded by Essed (1991). The *speculative* qualifier represents my conceptualization of the variation in this form of anti-racism since, as will be detailed in the next section, participants offered an analysis of racial targeting, control and domination at work by responding to a hypothetical question on how they would address workplace racial discrimination if they had all the power and resources they needed. This invites the question of what constitute anti-racism and everyday anti-racism?

In its simplest form, anti-racism is the practice of acting against various forms of racisms (Bonnett, 2000). Anti-racism has multiple forms: everyday anti-racism, multicultural anti-racism, psychological anti-racism, radical anti-racism and anti-fascist or anti-Nazi anti-racism, just to name a few (Bonnett, 2000). The evolution of anti-racism is driven by the constantly changing nature of racism – and the fact that “[i]f racists as a category all wore horns, the battle against them would be a great deal easier” (Barrett, 1987, p. 16). Thus, the form that anti-racism takes is influenced by the manifestation and complexity of racisms in a given context (Gillborn, 2000).

Nevertheless, the most common definition of anti-racism outlines it as the sum of “activities that identify, resist, and transform all forms of race-based oppression and domination carried out by individuals and institutions” (Hogg and Jackson II, 2010, p. 25). For an additional perspective, anti-racism also constitutes “an intellectual discourse as well as an educational advocacy for social change” (Sefa Dei, 2007, p. 191). However, as a theory, anti-racism extends beyond the “narrow questions of interpretations and meaning to strategies for political and social action” (Sefa Dei, 2007, p. 191). Ultimately, anti-racism entails challenging race-based domination using personal, institutional and ideological means by directing attention to systemic and structural sources that perpetuate racial oppression (Bonnett, 2000; Hogg and Jackson II, 2010; Sefa Dei, 2007; Taguieff, 2009).

Integrative anti-racism, on the other hand, recognizes that systems of oppression operate in concert and in tandem with one another (George, 1995; Samuel, 2005; Sefa Dei, 2007; Taylor, 2006). As Sefa Dei (2007) notes, integrative anti-racism formulations require a recognition of the intersecting and interlocking nature of oppressions to account for “the situational and contextual variations in the intensities of human oppressions” (Sefa Dei, 2007, p. 189). Integrative anti-racism, therefore, expresses a resistance strategy that examines “interlocking” and “relational aspects of race and social difference” (Sefa Dei, 2007, p. 189).

In this vein, the everyday anti-racism iteration (Bonnett, 2000) describes the quotidian and independent resistance of racialized groups against racist conditions (Aquino, 2016; Bonnett,

2000; Pollock, 2008; Whitehead, 2015). Specifically, closely linked to Essed's (1991) seminal work on "everyday racism," everyday anti-racism encapsulates individual responses to racism in interpersonal and other spatial everyday racist encounters (Aquino, 2020; MacLachlan, 2017; Mitchell, Every and Ranzijn, 2011; Young, 2017).

This can include the actions of victims confronting perpetrators, witnesses speaking out against racism, practices that bridge cultural difference, material and subjective strategies deployed by those on the receiving end of racism to repair stigmatized identities, and aestheticized expressions through popular culture such as forms of music, youth cultures and media that challenge racism (Aquino, 2020, p. 216).

Lastly, and as it pertains to the objectives of this study, speculative everyday anti-racism is a conceptual framework that encapsulates a hypothetical variant of everyday anti-racism. It is identical in all but one aspect to everyday anti-racism: the fact that it is expressed in the counterfactual. As such, this framework would be appropriate in guiding the ensuing analysis since by sharing speculative perspectives, participants were ultimately expressing their desire to confront racist conditions at work if they had the means to do so. In other words, although their responses were solicited to a suppositional question, participants genuinely wished to engage in certain anti-racist courses of action at work, as governed by power relations and workplace politics in those particular contexts.

## Method

Twenty-five public servants in British Columbia (Canada) took part in this qualitative inquiry. Participants self-identified as being racialized and, in terms of their occupational backgrounds, they worked with human service organizations, including those directly belonging to the BC government, in a number of capacities that included social work practitioners. Using a semi-structured guide, the interviews were conducted between February and August 2018 and they lasted between one and three and a half hours. After administering an informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim before they were analysed using the hermeneutic circle, from hermeneutic phenomenology (de Sales, 2003; Finlay, 2014; Newberry, 2012). This interpretive process involved multiple naïve readings of the transcripts, coding to structurally organize the analysis and identifying analytical subthemes after locating and condensing meaning units (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004; McAuley, 2004; Wiklund, Lindholm and Lindstrom, 2002).

During interviews, the following question was posed to participants to seek their perspectives. The question and its probes revolve around a speculation: *if participants were given a magic wand to solve the problem of racial discrimination in their workplaces, what would they do?* This form of inquiry was motivated by a recognition of the significance of participants' voices and imaginations, freed from the encumbrances of racist workplace realities, in providing practical and pragmatic localized solutions. The exact wording of the question along with the probes that were used are presented as following.

Question:

*If you were given all the powers, resources and authorities needed to more effectively address the issue of racial discrimination in your workplace, what would you do?*

Probes:

1. What are some of the immediate steps you would take to address workplace discrimination?
2. What goals and expectations would you set for employers to more effectively address the issue of racially motivated workplace discrimination?
3. What additional stakeholders/player would you bring to the table?
4. What roles would the additional or different stakeholders play in that hypothetical scenario to better remedy the situation?

On demographic composition of research participants, they came from a variety of backgrounds and profiles as presented in Table 1, below. It is to be noted that due to concerns over potential employer retribution given the sensitivity of conversations involved, participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity for participating this study. Consequently, among the many measured introduced to hide participants' identities, they are assigned English pseudonyms that bear no resemblance to their real names. Although the anglicization of non-white names could be viewed as an investment in whiteness, the strategy was ultimately adopted for its disruptive potential to displace stereotypes linked with naming politics. In addition, participants' ages are aggregated into groups and their *racial* background information (e.g., names of groups, countries, subcontinents, and regions) is scaled up to the level of the continent that corresponded to their answer, as yet another measure to obscure their identities and ensure their anonymity.

Table 1: Summary of participants anonymized demographic information

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age Group	Racial Heritage (continent)
Alexa	Female	Late 30s	South Asia
Bob	Male	Early 40s	Africa
Charlie	Male	Early 30s	Africa
David	Male	Early 50s	Indigenous
Emily	Female	Late 30s	East Asia
Fiona	Female	Early 40s	East Asia
George	Male	Early 30s	East Asia
Henry	Male	Early 50s	South Asia
Isabelle	Female	Late 30s	Southeast Asia
John	Male	Late 40s	Middle East
Kyle	Male	Late 50s	South Asia
Lincoln	Male	Early 70s	South Asia
Michelle	Female	Early 20s	Africa
Noah	Male	Late 40s	West Asia
Oliver	Male	Late 50s	Africa & America
Paul	Male	Early 60s	South Asia & Africa
Quinn	Male	Late 40s	Middle East
Roxanne	Female	Late 40s	Africa
Stacey	Female	Late 40s	South Asia & Europe
Thomas	Male	Late 30s	South Asia
Ursula	Female	Early 60s	West Asia
Vance	Male	Early 50s	Middle East
Wendy	Female	Early 40s	South Asia
Xavier	Male	Early 50s	South Asia
York	Male	Early 50s	Africa

## Results

Using hermeneutic phenomenology's interpretive analytical techniques, participants' transcribed interviews/testimonies were analyzed. The following three subthemes emerged from that analysis which are outlined below.

### Subtheme 1: Demanding accountability

One of the first measures that participants wished to introduce was addressing the aberration in accountability and openness in their respective work environments. Most believed that much in regard to internal processes was shrouded in secrecy. Thus, creating "systems of accountability" would send a strong signal to publicly funded bureaucracies that human rights violators would not be able to "get away with being racist" (Bob). Against this backdrop, and as a way holding senior bureaucrats accountable, participants also expressed a desire to open up spaces where victims of racism could safely talk about their observations and lived experiences with workplace racism.

People should have the ability to speak about their problems and the more people express their thoughts and feelings, the more it would give us the tools and resources needed to address these issues. Like the way you are listening to me, it helps me express all of my experiences. If we had this [conversation] at work, then you could see all the problems that I am facing there, and you could then address them. (Charlie)

Another participant, Quinn, expressed his wish to introduce measures that increased transparency in hiring processes. From Quinn's personal experience, recruitment in the BC public sector was murky at best and he believed the entire system was "rigged in favour of White individuals." To Quinn, introducing transparency and sharing information could improve accountability and address a great deal of "institutional corruption" that he believed prevailed in the BC public sector.

In this vein, Wendy would place all executive appointments under a microscope, paying particular attention to "Directorial appointments" that were made without due process. Similar to Quinn, Wendy believed this would uncover and unravel "institutional corruption that [was] behind hiring." The second measure that Wendy would introduce was instituting on affirmative action in hiring and "promoting from within." Noting that currently the systems were designed such whereby anyone in position of authority could hire whomever they wanted, Wendy believed affirmative action was one of the many ways to deal with systemic issues that privileged whiteness in hiring decisions.

Similarly, Emily also expressed her wish to regularly audit hiring decisions to empirically find out how fairly all applicants were treated and whether or not people from racialized backgrounds were given a fair chance at competing. She noted that currently the "rhetoric" was there, but "evidence contradicted the rhetoric" with respect to equal opportunities (Emily). Another measure that Emily would introduce was to "promote diversity in opinions." She lamented the "sycophantic culture" in the public sector where dissenting opinions were often censored and discouraged from being aired. Thus, to bring more accountability, she would encourage disagreements with senior managers and executives as a way of addressing echo chambers in the public sector (Emily).

On a slightly different note, to expedite the process of making systems more transparent and accountable, Michelle highlighted the importance of promoting litigious process, i.e., bringing

litigious action against the perpetrators of racial discrimination at work. To Michelle, if litigation is not involved, complaints of racial discrimination at work would get systematically ignored, resulting in victims getting harassed in the end “as a way of making them pay for complaining” (Michelle). Thus, she would put in place funding to assist litigation against perpetrators of workplace racisms with a view to statutorily binding parties involved into paying attention to racial justice issues at work.

John appeared to concur with Michelle’s view. He too wanted to establish a funding source to help people who were subjected to racial discrimination at work “seek justice through the courts” (John). I asked what the funds would be used for specifically and his response was: “Lawyers, lawyers, lawyers... to hire lawyers because without lawyers you can’t seek justice from the current system” (John). According to this participant, Human Rights Laws were far too complex for laypeople to understand and the BC Human Rights Tribunal was “utterly useless” (John) in its mandate of protecting worker’s human rights. Thus, only hiring and paying for a lawyer would ensure that one’s complaint gets properly addressed, according to John.

However, John did acknowledge that maintaining continued and sufficient funding would be an issue in the current environment of public sector expenditure restraint. To this end, his second recommendation was to reform pertinent legislations in such a way that would require all lawyers, private and public, to perform a set number of pro bono hours in the service of human rights in BC. He noted that this already happens in certain jurisdictions in the US, where lawyers are required to put in a set number of hours in pro bono service every year as a condition of their continued licensing to practice law in that jurisdiction. Therefore, replicating this practice in Canada would be sensible as it would not only increase access to justice to victims of racial discrimination but it would also give lawyers the exposures they need to become better defenders of human rights in their respective jurisdictions, whether that is a province or a territory (John).

Literature on the salience of racisms in society establishes that harbouring overtly racist attitudes, beliefs and behaviours is no longer socially and normatively acceptable (Anthias, 1999; Van Dijk, 1992). Subsequently, perpetrators of racist acts, thoughts and intentions endeavour to cloak their discriminatory intent through different forms of proactive denials e.g., act-denial, control-denial, intention-denial and goal-denial (Van Dijk, 1992). Participants appeared keenly aware of these tactical denials and, in recognition and response to them, they wished to enhance systems of accountability for perpetrators of racial discrimination at work as the counteragent to subvert the strategic and preemptive denials.

In this regard, the fact that accountability suppresses racisms is well-established (Augoustinos and Every, 2010; Chiang, 2010; Hagey et al., 2005; Skrla et al., 2001; Van Dijk, 1992). Accountability is conceptualized as “both a privilege and a responsibility that is fundamental in relationships at all levels” (Hagey et al., 2005, p. xxi). As Anthias (1999) notes in the context of deconstructing power dynamics within institutions, accountability offers a reasonable check against the institutional power that White individuals pervasively and perversely enjoy. This realization likely motivated participants to demand accountability in their offices as a way of countering the power of White individuals who often had the privilege of shirking responsibility for racial domination at work despite policies, regulations and legislations that prohibit discrimination on the basis of protected human rights grounds including one’s race (Hagey et al., 2005; Henry and Tator, 2010; Lopes and Thomas, 2006).

## Subtheme 2: Reforming systems

As I listened to participants, it was becoming apparent that reforming existing systems to address structural issues was an important priority for participants. Fiona noted that if she had all the powers needed, she would first tackle “discrimination in systems” through reforming British Columbia’s education system. She then shared that her son has been experiencing racial discrimination at school, something that had deeply disturbed her. Although she had personally experienced racism at work herself, she felt strongly that workplace bigotry started with adults learning racism as children in schools: “As a kid, if you don’t see discrimination, later on there would be no discrimination... So, if there is no discrimination at school for kids, there would be no discrimination for adults at work” (Fiona).

She then elaborated that her son’s experiences at school had fueled her resentment of the education system in BC. When I asked if she wished to expand on that, she shared that on a recent trip to China, her son had refused to go to restaurants there because he had been told at a school in BC that “the Chinese eat dogs” (Fiona). Gravely concerned over the prospects of being fed dog meat, Fiona’s son had refused to go out to restaurants. Ultimately, it had taken a great deal of effort on Fiona’s part to convince her son that what he had heard (and subsequently internalized) at a school in BC was not true. She shared that it had been quite a struggle to later on instill in her son a sense of pride about their Chinese heritage.

A different participant, John, wished to abolish the BC Human Rights Tribunal (BCHRT) if he had the power to do so. From his perspective, the BCHRT was an “utterly useless” institution that did “the dirty work of the government in the name of protecting human rights” in the province (John). When I asked for specifics, he noted that he had personal experiences with the Tribunal and had found them not only ineffective but also showing “bold disregard to the law itself” (John). Additionally, he remarked that “people who are hired in the tribunal are most likely hired with the goal of keep[ing] complainants quiet; that is their job” as opposed to getting to the “bottom of racist issues” in workplaces across the province (John).

Similarly, but at a more macro level, another participant, Alexa, wished to reform systems in BC by “giv[ing] all traditional territories back to indigenous communities” if she had the power to do so. She continued that dismantling colonialism as an ongoing project that perpetuated oppression against racialized Canadians was fundamental to addressing societal inequities and workplace injustices. Maintaining that anti-Indigenous colonialism was the root cause of modern-day racism in Canada, she then described the need for “thinking outside the existing colonial framework” for solutions to uprooting racism in Canada (Alexa).

I think we would have to recognize that because we are embedded in a colonial structure that is based on the possession of land and resources from indigenous communities and if we were to rip out that system, first and foremost, I wonder what other systems would fall astray as a result... What if we used other tools that we have been perhaps colonized with and believe they won’t work to free ourselves? What could our systems look like then? (Alexa)

For a different perspective, another participant, Oliver, detailed the need to address white supremacy in employment institutions and described how “white domination” continues to plague all spheres of work in the public sector. Noting that his employer had a historically fraught relationship with racialized communities, he stated that the first measure he would

introduce would be to hire additional racialized people so that White people could see that, despite our differences, “we are all equally productive and likeable individuals” (Oliver).

Acknowledging that there was no simple solution, Michelle shared that she would start with diversifying the top management in her place of employment. She acknowledged that change had already started happening but that it was primarily a “shift from White men to White women, designed to give us all this whole fluffy feeling that things are changing” (Michelle). This participant did not think that this shift was “doing anything to address whiteness” and added that she would put more racialized people in positions of power if she could. Additionally, her assessment of the current approach in the public sector was that the managers were tokenizing diversity in order to “check off boxes” (Michelle). Thus, the complexities of engaging with diversity at work and the resulting racial animus were left unattended.

As part of bringing reforms to change minds at the “systemic level,” Paul shared that the first thing he would do is to change the composition of senior management by bringing in more racialized executives to the public sector. As a way of facilitating this, he said he would shed additional light on minority-run successful employers. “I will ask everyone a question: Do you know how many Indians are the CEOs and CIOs and CFOs of major Fortune 500 companies in the US? It is amazingly high” (Paul). He believed that sharing statistics on successful racialized executives would “open [White] people’s minds” towards racialized workers’ potentials for excellence (Paul). He then reiterated that racialized executives and leaders did exist, were more capable and highly trained; however, they were held back by systems that preferred Whites be in charge of important corporate decision-making matters.

Participants’ belief that the existing systems and structures were culpable in perpetuating racial injustices and impeding equal access to opportunities is rooted in the literature (Block and Galabuzi, 2011; Block, Galabuzi and Tranjan, 2019; Galabuzi, 2006, 2008; Gupta, 1996, 2008; Hagey et al., 2005; Henry and Tator, 2010; Teelucksingh and Galabuzi, 2007). Additionally, the socio-political events of the last two years, culminated by the tragic murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor’s murders in the US, have shed a persistent light on the unfair, inequitable and unjust treatment of racialized people, particularly at work. Calls for institutional reform, particularly in the area of policing and “defunding the police” have grown louder (Helmer, 2020; Lozano and Silva, 2020; McGregor, 2020). Thus, reform in this context is an important anti-racist demand since it calls for tangible action – the kind that would transcend “performative anti-racism” on the part of institutions and individuals working for them (al-Gharbi, 2019).

Moreover, and against the backdrop of neoliberal forces that often (re)frame these issues as apolitical institutional policy failings (Nelson and Dunn, 2017), participants appeared to be calling for not only reforms but also meaningful engagement and genuine investment in anti-racist efforts from White community, corporate and institutional actors (Thompson, 2003). In fact, engagement with White stakeholders was seen as an important ingredient of the anti-racist solution considering that in the absence of their participation, nothing would or could change.

Systemic racism is not a product (outcome) of people holding the “wrong” beliefs or feelings. It is a function of behavioral patterns—and (unjust) allocations of resources and opportunities—that systematically advantage some and disadvantage others within particular contexts. It persists because it is enacted moment to moment, situation to



situation. It could be ended if those who currently perpetuate it committed themselves to playing a different role instead—not merely through their words or feelings but with action. (al-Gharbi, 2019, p. 1198)

### **Subtheme 3: Enhancing dialogue**

Maintaining that dialogues would enhance their White colleagues' level of knowledge, a number of participants believed that holding interracial dialogues was key for addressing racial discrimination at work. George, for instance, wanted to implement regular racial awareness sessions for all public servants, making participation in these trainings mandatory “as a condition of all public servants' continued employment” in the public sector. He attributed challenges he had personally faced at work to the fundamental ignorance of his White colleagues and detailed how these trainings would entail formal and in-depth dive into matters of racial justice.

Charlie, on the other hand, would aim to change minds and attitudes at the grassroots level, and through dialogue. “People should have the mechanisms to address these [workplace challenges] by talking about them. You can't just tell them don't do this. You have to show them that this is wrong” (Charlie). He then discussed how dialogue was the missing link under the existing anti-racism arrangement at his work. To him, the existing anti-racism regime was not working as White people in power were not sufficiently convinced that mistreating racialized employees was morally and ethically unjust.

Michelle noted that she would create a public forum whereby racialized workers could speak out, without fears of reprisal or retribution from anyone, about workplace racism. She felt that under the current policy framework racialized workers were muzzled and were made fearful of breaking their silence. She also shared wanting to amend the existing collective agreements so that it would make it a breach of contract to get in the way of racialized workers “speaking their truths” (Michelle).

A different participant, Paul, believed that the lack of exposure to other cultures was severely hampering racial dialogue in his office. To this end, the first measure that Paul would introduce was to require White colleagues to engage in mandatory conversations with racialized employees so that Whites in his workplace could develop a deeper appreciation of their non-white co-workers' plight, at work and outside work. He believed that meaningful engagement through dialogue could increase White workers' level of respect and awareness for the racially marginalized, ultimately helping them see their racialized colleagues as worthy individuals.

Once they start paying attention to you, they'll start seeing you from a totally different perspective. That is going to start changing things. If nothing else, they would start seeing your education and achievements... Having that exposure, pretty soon they'll start looking at us as not 'the immigrant' but as the educated somebody. In my opinion, that is the one thing that is so heavily missing. Nobody is telling these guys that we are not different than them. We went to your school and, you know, just because I don't see your hockey, doesn't mean that I'm stupid. Right? (Paul)

On the other hand, Emily expressed her wish to institute “lunch and learn exchange circles” as a way of raising awareness about others and the otherized. For example, she would require employees to share stories of their backgrounds as well as experiences with non-white people, cultures and countries. In this vein, to Xavier it was *the fear of the other* that was motivating

racial hatred at work. To address these fears, he would create opportunities where the “host culture” would learn more about the way racialized people lived, ate and dressed. Ultimately, an inclusive society to Xavier was one that welcomed and accepted New Canadians of all backgrounds as being different – and for being different.

John, on the other hand, believed that public awareness campaigns and racial sensitivity trainings were insufficient in addressing racial justice issues in BC. He acknowledged that these programs were “better than nothing” but his assessment was that they were severely deficient if not coupled with legal muscle and enforcement.

There is a proverb in another country that says throwing dust in the eyes of people... you pretend like you are doing something when in reality you are not doing much. You are making people blind to the fact ... you're camouflaging serious stuff by small steps. If you propose something like raising public awareness ... everyone would be pretending that we are doing something useful when in reality we are not. Deterrence is the only and the best method to enforce the law. If violators are not punished, if they do not feel the full weight and force of the law, they will violate the law again and again and again. The law must have a sword and a shield, shield to protect the weak. (John)

Similarly, if Roxanne was given the ability to introduce changes, she would completely rewrite the “multicultural narrative.” Elaborating how she would start with teaching diversity at day cares and schools, she noted she would first diversify their staff. Roxanne believed that it was important for White children to grow up with educators and caregivers who were non-white. Early exposure to diverse faces and names is very important for children's development according to Roxanne. She also believed this exposure would enable children to reject and counter racism later in life. Lastly, and in contrast to what another participant had suggested, Roxanne noted her wish to actually eliminate cultural sensitivity courses that purported to raise awareness about racisms. According to her, these sessions were doing more harm than good and had gotten in the way of meaningful dialogue with White employees by virtue of perpetuating harmful stereotypes. She further added that because these sessions were designed and delivered by primarily White facilitators, they made her White colleagues “feel good about themselves” and were diverting real attention from the root causes of racisms in BC (Roxanne).

If there needs to be courses, they should be designed by our people. Not by White people. They should be taught by us. We shouldn't be learning from them, you know. You cannot tell my story. Let me tell my own story. (Roxanne)

Participants' insights offered nuanced perspectives that exposed contradictions and conflicts within this subtheme: enhancing dialogue. Specifically, George and Emily wanted more cultural awareness and sensitivity training while John and Roxanne's contentions were that these trainings were serving no meaningful purpose, particularly if designed and delivered by White facilitators. While this contradiction could be seen as emanating from anticipated heterogeneity of perspectives, engaging in dialogues could mitigate “positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation” (Van Dijk, 1992, p. 88). Thus, participants exhibited an acute awareness of the imperative that dialogues, if convened thoughtfully and carefully, played a significant role in enhancing the level of awareness and consciousness of mainstream Whites on barriers that racialized workers faced at work.

However, calling for dialogues is no easy feat since the proposition leaps into assuming that workplace racisms transpire due to a dearth of knowledge. In other words, it ignores the

intentionality of racial discrimination, disregarding the fact that power and domination – not an absence of knowledge and awareness – are the driving force behind structural domination and institutional discrimination (Henry and Tator, 2010; Lopes and Thomas, 2006). In this connection, it is helpful to point out that racisms are manifestations of white supremacy predicated by Eurocentric and often Protestant value systems of hegemony and domination (Gillborn, 2000; Goldberg, 2015; Sefa Dei, 2007). Thus, acknowledging the role of power within racist structures is important since, as Fleras (1996) notes, “[f]or [W]hites, racism consists of discriminatory incidents by misguided persons; for minorities, racism is about power within institutions” (Fleras, 1996, p. 66-67). In light of this, a conception of workplace as the site of domination, control and conflict offers not only a more pragmatic explanation for the continued prevalence of racial discrimination but also a more practical approach for unearthing possibilities to contest subjectivities and negotiate positionalities within racially hierarchical workplaces.

### **Discussion**

This study presents empirically-derived knowledge from a speculative question posed to participants on how they would stomp out the specter of racism in their workplaces, if they had the power and resources necessary. The approach offers discursive and political power to participants in ways that disrupt the practice of experts and academic knowledge-producers providing descriptive and prescriptive analyses of racisms at work. It effectively reverses roles for the participants: “from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; the serving to the served” (Morrison, 1992, p. 90 as cited in Solomos and Back, 2009, p. 22).

Although what participants described is largely consistent with the existing corpus of literature on anti-racism, a reformulation of anti-racism in the public sector grounded on their testimonies could better assist policy makers and practitioners respond to workplace racism. For instance, while participants demanded accountability, reforms and dialogue, they pushed back against diversity training which has been ideologically entrenched as the panacea solution to all of Canada’s *race relations* problems (Henry and Tator, 2010). In other words, some participants were not convinced that diversity training, as a multicultural project, was the counteragent to workplace racisms.

I now turn to a discussion of racisms using BC public sector language and highlight the ways in which it marks a significant departure from ideals of inclusion. The BC government defines racism as “a set of mistaken assumptions, opinions and actions resulting from the belief that one group of people categorized by colour or ancestry is inherently superior to another” (BC Government, 2020). However, there are tensions between the government definition and academic critical perspectives on what constitutes racial discrimination.

Firstly, while acknowledging the falsity of racial superiority of one group over others, the government’s definition of racism does not appear to view it as an ideological stance, consisting of beliefs and attitudes that deliberately inspire domination. This is important since it links racisms to unambiguously oppressive outcomes. Secondly, the government’s definition does not, for reasons that are perhaps understandable, account for its own complicity by alluding to government’s role in the creation, perpetuation and propagation of racist systems and structures in society. Thirdly, government’s view of racism does not appear to encompass “everyday racism” (Essed, 2007), colour-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and other forms of subtle and sophisticated racial oppressions that are harder to pinpoint. While there are structural forces that support racisms in BC (and Canada), the government’s definition and tentative language not only avoids a reference to these structures but it also

remains vague on how racisms continue to prevail in the face of laws and policies that purport to prevent racial aggressions against marginalized workers and communities.

In this regard, as Ahmed (2020) notes, BC government's anti-racism commitment is all but "institutional speech acts" that are "non-performatives" (Ahmed, 2020, p. 196-7). These speech acts work "precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name" (Ahmed, 2020, p. 197). With respect to commitment to diversity and anti-racism, the "non-performative" speech act "do not act because the conditions are not in place that are required for the action to succeed" (Ahmed, 2020, p. 197). Furthermore, the failure of speech acts is

... not a failure of intent or even circumstance, but it is actually what the speech act is doing. In other words, the nonperformative does not 'fail to act' because of conditions that are external to the speech act: rather, it 'works' because it fails to bring about what it names. (Ahmed, 2020, p. 197)

In following Ahmed's (2020) reasoning, the accountability that participants would demand is due, in part, to the non-performativity of BC government's hollow speech acts. Similarly, the reforms that participants speculated introducing could be attributed to a fundamental lack of confidence that existing systems could produce fair outcomes for them. Lastly, dialogues were stipulated to shed light on the paradoxical irony that Whites were stating one thing and doing another – a condition that often operated by making White neutral, imbuing whiteness with superior qualities and meanings that made it the norm.

On the one hand, the existing structures perpetuated oppressive conditions that maintained domination and, on the other hand, they subtly masked themselves invisible – making oppression seem inevitable and almost natural. Participants saw right through these speech acts as empty monikers that strategically disarmed and silenced the victims from claiming differential treatment. As such, testimonies presented and discussed above are indispensable to an understanding of the interplay between accountability, reforms and racial dialogue in the context of localized responses to "local inflexions of racism" (Nelson and Dunn, 2017, p. 26). Given the ever-changing nature of racisms and racist practices, these insights will add to the existing body of knowledge and keep it up-to-date considering the shifting nature of anti-racism to adapt to racisms' fluctuations (Nelson and Dunn, 2017).

### **Significance to Social Work Practice**

Social work, as a helping profession, has a strong anti-oppressive practice and social justice orientation which lends itself well to studies of racisms in societal structures (Newberry, 2012). Considering that the primary objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of one antidote to workplace racisms e.g., anti-racism from the speculative perspective of racialized workers, this paper's significance comes in furthering the transformative, justice-seeking and liberatory goals of social work as a caring discipline. Additionally, in view of the fact that a number of participants interviewed for this study were practicing social workers, under contract with the provincial government in BC, and given that knowledge from this research would ultimately be disseminated among the employers of those participants, this study has the potential to make working lives for those social workers, and others like them, a bit easier by advocating for their full and meaningful participation in workplace anti-racist endeavours.

### **Study's Limitations**

A limitation of this study is the narrow scope of the speculative question posed to participants, pinpointing racisms as the singularly identifiable source of oppression. This limited focus is also the reason for why an integrative anti-racism framework, one that would take into consideration other axes of oppression as well, could not be adopted in analyzing insights collected for this study. Moreover, the exclusive focus on race and racisms explain why an intersectional analysis is missing in this article. Thus, heterogeneity of oppressions and how they were experienced within different matrices of oppression account for a limitation of anti-racist solutions that participants have speculatively put forward. However, to the extent that unravelling racial powers at work and in institutions are concerned, this study offers an important exploration of racialized perspectives on how to effectively respond to demands for equity, fairness and reform at work, despite noted limitations.

### **Conclusion**

Perspectives gathered consider the story of hypothetical resistance, of agencies exercised if conditions were conducive, against real life manifestations of racisms. Although to study a speculative scenario is to consider only part of a larger whole, the approach employed in this study takes into account limitations of participants as encumbered bureaucrats who still had to operate within spheres of White dominance. In other words, it is helpful to be reminded that participants were also government bureaucrats and not avowed anti-racist activists. In fact, a number of participants shared that they initially felt uncomfortable talking about their experiences since they ordinarily do not speak out against oppressive conditions at work due to their fears of repercussions from their employers.

However, in spite of this, I got the sense that they were eager to put up a resistance against racial domination in their workplaces, irrespective of the fluidity and covertness of this resistance. Specifically, they appeared to comply with the demands of power at work while also working to counter racial domination there by speaking with researchers like myself. Ultimately, from my perspective as the researcher, the secret and hidden nature of their resistance proved effective as it allowed them to navigate and negotiate the perilous spaces they occupied while also working to counter oppressive conditions in those spheres. This is while the vanguard, masculinist and virile model of anti-racist protest at work would have certainly backfired, with them potentially ending up losing their jobs.

On a different matter, as I analyzed transcripts and sought coherence in testimonies that were before me, it was becoming increasingly clear that what participants ultimately also wanted to convey, from their periphrastic space (Goldberg, 1993), was a sense that they were seen as temporary. It is reasonable to deduce that this precarity also lent to their overall sense of uneasiness about work and discussing matters related to work. Ultimately, participants laid bare that they had a complex relationship with their employers, the very institution that not only (re)produced institutional racism, as a “corrosive disease” (Gordon-Carter, 2003), through structures of White privilege that legitimized continued aggression and transgression against non-whites.

Attention to the complexity of anti-racism is warranted since while racial discrimination is “a stain on the social fabric, to be washed away as quickly as possible” (Goldberg 2015, p. 65), the problem of racism in Canada is far more intricate and than to be addressed with official policies or non-performative institutional speech acts (Ahmed, 2020). Addressing workplace racism in any meaningful fashion requires dismantling certain structures that are deeply entrenched into almost all aspect of the social fabric that maintain and perpetuate racisms in

society. Thus, institutional anti-racisms require an open recognition, bold leadership and transformative action on the part of institutions (Gordon-Carter, 2003). An example of this form of bold and transformative action is bringing racialized stakeholders who have lived experience with racisms and soliciting and incorporating their proposed solutions through a speculative everyday anti-racism framework.

What gives attention to speculative everyday anti-racism a sense of urgency is that Canada's workforce is becoming increasingly diverse (Al-Waqfi and Jain, 2007; Block, Galabuzi and Tranjan, 2019). Given this reality, it is plausible to argue that tensions on account of racial differences at work would get amplified. In the meantime, research after research has established that racisms are on the rise in Canada despite the multitude of programs, policies and initiatives introduced to stem the tide of this vile phenomenon. In an era of racial reckoning, spurred by the murders of Black, Indigenous and other racialized individuals across the country, if workplaces wish to seriously tackle the issue of racisms, they must listen to the voices of their racialized stakeholders. To this end, data collected, presented and analyzed in this article can set an example for ways to operationalize racialized minority workers' voices, recognizing them as an important part of the solution to the menace of workplace racisms. Thus, speculative everyday anti-racism framework could serve as a helpful tool to assist employers towards the goal of improving working conditions by collective feedback from pertinent stakeholders and putting in place measures that could ameliorate safety and comfort for all workers on the basis of knowledge provided by racialized workers.

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**Author's Address:**

Farid Asey, PhD  
School of Social Work, Carleton University  
509 Dunton Tower  
Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6  
[farid.asey@cunet.carleton.ca](mailto:farid.asey@cunet.carleton.ca)