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# Moving towards collective liberation: Municipal government, BLM, and the racial contract

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*Abstract*
The call for Municipalities to address systemic racism has been amplified by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement since 2020. Municipalities have taken up this call albeit the impact of their actions has not been given robust academic attention. This article examines municipal response to the BLM movement and what role municipal governments have played. Located in Alberta, Canada this research includes a document analysis, participant-observation, and interviews conducted through the lens of a racially liberatory pedagogy framework. The findings suggest that while the Municipal government may recognize their role in anti-racism, the response to BLM upholds the racial contract, does little to raise critical consciousness. A number of recommendations are outlined for municipalities who are committed to responding to BLM and to addressing racism including examining the ways in which their institution and systems perpetuate racism and begin to work towards collective liberation.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; racism; local government; pedagogy; critical consciousness

*Résumé*
L'appel lancé aux municipalités pour lutter contre le racisme systémique a été amplifié par le mouvement Black Lives Matter (BLM) depuis 2020. Les municipalités ont répondu à cet appel, même si l'impact de leurs actions n'a pas fait l'objet d'une attention académique soutenue. Cet article examine la réponse des municipalités au mouvement Black Lives Matter et le rôle qu'elles y ont joué. Réalisée en Alberta, au Canada, cette recherche comprend une analyse documentaire, une observation participante et des entretiens menés à travers un cadre pédagogique de libération raciale. Les résultats suggèrent que, si les municipalités reconnaissent leur rôle dans la lutte contre le racisme, la réponse à Black Lives Matter respecte le contrat racial et ne contribue guère à susciter une conscience critique. Plusieurs recommandations sont formulées à l'intention des municipalités engagées dans la lutte contre Black Lives Matter et le racisme, notamment l'examen des façons dont leurs institutions et leurs systèmes perpétuent le racisme et s'engagent dans une démarche de libération collective.

Mots-clés : Black Lives Matter ; racisme ; administration locale ; pédagogie ; conscience critique

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## Introduction

A June 2020 letter from the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) to its Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities (CIM) members called for action on anti-racism movements. It read in part,

> Anti-black racism is an epidemic that has spread uncontrolled in communities across this continent. The recent spark in social movements in cities across North America has demonstrated that the status quo in which our institutions and communities have operated and existed is not acceptable and cannot continue.

The particular social movement that is implied (and specifically mentioned later in the letter) is that of Black Lives Matter (BLM) whose call to address systemic racism and police violence against the Black community was taken up internationally. The CCUNESCO letter notes "Black communities and anti-racism advocates are calling for an end to systemic racism and profiling through actions at all levels. As Canadian municipalities, this can seem overwhelming, but it is important to respond in tangible ways" (personal communication, June 26, 2020). The letter concludes by providing a list of suggested actions and resources for municipalities to respond to the BLM movement.

As I sat around the virtual roundtable of the CIM advisory committee drafting the above-mentioned letter, I remember feeling encouraged that these long-standing issues were being taken up by previously unengaged portions of society. Our daily news showed various levels of government were publicly acknowledging the BLM movement and the issues raised by its supporters. This is not to say that all governments were addressing these issues in the ways that the BLM movement were calling for (see Sinanan 2020), but rather that governments and organizations clearly felt amplified pressure to respond in some way (see Green and Porter 2020), whether that was a simple statement or profound action was yet to be seen. Almost a year after CCUNESCO's call to action, to what extend have municipal governments indeed responded to BLM and the issues raised by the movement?

This paper addresses this question, examining municipal response to BLM and what role municipal governments have played in the movement. Further, I consider municipal response through the lens of Castillo-Montoya et al.'s (2019) racially liberatory pedagogy. For the purposes of this paper, I focus the study on the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo while providing glimpses into broader context through Wood Buffalo's participation in CCUNESCO's Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities.

## BLM as social movement

Black Lives Matter began in 2013 as a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) which was created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman and the latter's subsequent acquittal (Black Lives Matter n.d.). An initial series of social media posts called out the supposed surprise surrounding the not guilty verdict and the systemic undervaluing of Black life (Brown 2015). Subsequent posts used the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, called for direct action, and expressed love and hope for Black people (Brown 2015). Chase (2018) argues that "the acquittal…inspired action and activism outside of the courtroom, in much the same way that the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education inspired the direct-action campaign of the early 1960s" (1096). Chase goes on to note that,

> In 2013, the Zimmerman verdict drummed up feelings in the civil rights movement that had lain relatively dormant in previous years, but in no way, had entirely subsided. Not since the early 1990s had there been such open, nationwide discussion of the prevalence of racism in America.

In fact, #BlackLivesMatter was not a new call for action but rather emerged out of a long struggle led by Black individuals, communities, and organizations against systemic racism. The Black Lives Matter movement was rooted in historical calls for an end to anti-Black racism and police violence, as well as to bring attention to the resilience, resistance, and contributions of Black peoples. While the hashtag originated out of the United States, the issues it spoke to resonated beyond borders and were taken up and localised in ways that spoke to the particularities of historical struggles through time and space. In Canada, Black Lives Matter chapters including Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal organized in 2016 and 2017 protesting at Pride and Jazz festivals, calling for an end to anti-Black

policing and demanding bans on uniformed police at Pride events. Black Lives Matter—Canada was formed in 2017 with a focus on calls to defund the police, mutual aid, and anti-colonialism. These groups built on existing work of activists across the country such as Desmond Cole (see *The Skin We're In* 2020) and El Jones (see *Live from the Afrikan Resistance!* 2014). Robyn Maynard's work (see *Policing Black Lives* 2017) received renewed interest and spoke directly to the movement's outcry in a way that grounded the issues as Canadian rather than the often-distanced nature in which racism is spoken about in Canada as mainly a United States issue. She argues that Canada has a historical and ongoing legacy of slavery and racism that is deeply entrenched in today's institutions (Maynard 2017). The outcome, she argues is overrepresentation of Black people in poverty, unemployment, police violence, school-to-prison pipeline, and labour exploitation (Maynard 2017).

Numni et al. (2019) also point to these linkages to historical Black struggle noting that BLM builds upon previous movements while being innovative in their approach. These innovative aspects lay, "(1) in their constant emphasis on supporting *all* black lives and (2) in amplifying their message through new social media networks and platforms" (Numni et al. 2019, 1046). BLM used social media as a tool but was framed through digital technologies which invited engagement and co-production by marginalized communities and others. Gerbaudo (2012) notes that movements "…choreograph collective action" (p.4) through social media in ways that link disparate people. Digital social movements provide opportunities for social media users to produce the movement alongside movement founders (Gerbaudo 2012; Yang 2016; Polletta 2006). Social media platforms also made it possible for increased reach of and access to the BLM movement (Stache 2015; Shirky 2011). As the hashtag gained prominence, people began to organize in support of, and called for action on, the issues raised by BLM co-creators.

By the end of 2014, Black Lives Matter had developed into a social movement. Despite the criticism of BLM as lacking organization, leadership, and a coherent voice (Cobb 2016), BLM has raised awareness of systemic racism and sustained a conversation about institutional changes to address these identified social issues. As evidenced by the numerous protests on and offline, it is clear that the movement involves the organization of groups of people in dissent. While some called for DEI initiatives, others focused on anti-capitalism and still others urged abolitionism. Further, while the movement may not have a hierarchical structure, it does have a structure. Numni et al. (2019) describe BLM's organizational structure as having three key components, "(1) local chapter-based, member-led organizations, (2) a distinctive #BLM hashtag and impactful online social movement, and (3) a larger black movement with national organizing and training programs (Freelon, Mcilwain, and Clark 2016)" (1045). The hashtag became a 'Black Lives Matter Global Network' with chapters around the world strongly connected to the historical and ongoing Black struggle. As the BLM official website describes, the Global Network is "adaptive and decentralized, with a set of guiding principles" (Black Lives Matter n.d.). In this way, chapters localize the issues raised by BLM while maintaining connection to the broader network. As Numni et al. (2019) describe, "local chapters are working to address community needs and histories. These chapters and structure make the movement "leaderful", which is a strategic choice of #BLM founders" (1046). Collins and Bilge (2016) further argue that contemporary social movements like BLM form a 'transnational political imaginary' which creates a far-reaching community of resistance to address social issues like police brutality and systemic racism.

The success BLM has had in creating a transnational political imaginary and in bringing disparate groups of people together in a sustained resistance to systemic racism brought this social movement into an arena that was impossible for governments and major companies to ignore. Companies and governments alike took public stances within the movement and were called to address social issues that had long been ignored or at the very least shrouded in non-racial terms. In the following section, I explore the role of Municipal government in anti-racism broadly and provide context from which Municipal governments were situated when responding to BLM.

## Systemic racism and municipalities

Canadian Municipalities (often referred to as City or Local government) are the smallest level of political structuring and the closest to the daily lives of most people. In general (each Municipality is guided by provincial/territorial authority), Municipal governments provide local services and facilities. Municipal governments have specific roles in many services that affect the daily lives of peoples in their communities such as planning and development, bylaw, police and emergency services, public transit, water and sewer serves, parks and recreation, economic development, and family and community support among others (AUMA 2021). While not explicitly stated, Municipal governments

have an important role in anti-racism through the development and delivery of these key services and in the safety and wellbeing of peoples in their communities.

CCUNESCO recognizes and promotes a more overt role for Municipalities in anti-racism. In 2004, CCUNESCO jointly launched the International Coalition of Cities Against Racism[1] (ICAAR) which supports cities to address racism and discrimination through policy improvements (CCUNESCO 2020). CCUNESCO recognizes "…the key role that local governments play as policy makers and guarantors of human rights" (2020, 5). This is underlined by CCUNESCO's formation of the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities (formerly named the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination). Municipalities joining CIM are asked to pledge to ten common commitments which outline clear and key responsibilities of municipalities in identifying, monitoring, and addressing racism and discrimination. The commitments include promoting equitable opportunities in services, employment, education, and housing. Lastly, municipalities are urged to promote equity and provide opportunities for civic participation including to address racism.

There has long been an understanding of the role that public administration plays in upholding inequities or realizing more just cities (Fainstein 2014). There is significant literature examining racism in various systems of municipalities including immigration (see Fourot 2015; Tossutti 2012; Papillon 2002), multiculturalism (see Good, 2009; Garcea 2006), urban planning (see Mele 2019; Rutland 2024), and housing (see Dorries et al. 2019). Yet literature that examines municipal equity policy remains largely focused on an economic framework. Florida (2000) argues the push for economic competitiveness leads local governments to improve inclusion and liveability. Similarly, Fainstein (2014) points to the importance of diversity for economic productivity while Feeney and Camarena (2021) emphasize the 'good' that diversity does for an organization and frames diversity in terms of economic value. Erskine and Bilimoria (2019) argue that "the continued increase in organizational leaders popularizing DEI initiatives has been attributed to their interests in reducing discrimination, maximizing organizational performance, and avoiding legal problems" (p.324). As Andrew and Doloreux (2012) argue, these approaches ignore the role of municipalities in removing barriers to existing residents and instead focuses on appealing to new residents. Further, this primary focus on residents as valuable in economic terms is limiting as it does not consider the municipal role in ensuring the well-being of residents regardless of their economic potential. Joseph et al. (2020) credit neoliberalism with the limited framing of diversity as a commodity whereby racialized peoples are considered for their economic value. Indeed, many organizations (municipalities included) frame their case for undertaking equity and inclusion work in business models. As hooks (1992) describes "…racial Otherness becomes a commodity that is desired only in quantities that do not undermine or threaten white dominance in any way" (p.179). This framing of equity and inclusion in terms of economic benefit also sanitizes equity and inclusion by glossing over racial inequities within institutions.

Despite the role that CCUNESCO and BLM outlines for Municipal governments in anti-racism, this has not necessarily translated to robust anti-racism strategies, policies, or practices (Cross and Keith 1993; Mele 2019). Saloojee (2003) argues that municipalities must go beyond recognition of diversity to recognition of racialized communities as having equitable and valued participation. Saloojee (2003) calls for municipal governments to play a more proactive role in equity policies and eliminating systemic barriers that negatively affect racialized communities. Almeida (2016), in her study of the City of Toronto's diversity policies and practices argues that despite the City's embracing of diversity as a motto, the municipality reproduces racialization, obscures racism, and ultimately does little to address racism. Almeida (2016) further notes, "…any references to race or racism…are reframed and folded into a pre-existing "diversity" agenda which occludes and/or erases experiences of racism via reifying and organizing the space and bodies of the City in colonial and racial terms" (103). As Saloojee (2003) contends, this reframing into the existing municipal agenda works to confirm power imbalances that are pre-existing structural constraints that disadvantage racialized peoples. In other words, racism is embedded into the political structure of municipalities. I explore the political system of racism in the following section and in particular Mills' *Racial Contract* as a way to frame my understanding of racism and how municipal governments responded to BLM and addressed systemic racism.

## The domination contract

As I've argued above, Municipal governments play key roles in the daily lives of people in communities, in raising awareness about racism, and in addressing (or upholding) racism within its political structure. Mills (1997) argues that racism "…is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, a socioeconomic pri-

vilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties" (3). Mills (2015), like other critical race theorists (see Ladson-Billings 2009; Delgado and Stegancic 2017; Gillborn 2005), views racism and white supremacy as the norm rather than the anomaly. In his words, race is "…a key constituent of the architecture of the polity…" (Mills 2015, 543). Mills (1997) frames racism as a racial contract and more generally a domination contract (Mills 2015) which creates and maintains institutions in ways that preference White people and men through an unspoken agreement to ignore the racialized and gendered nature of these institutions. Under this contract, the polity in existence is informed by a white supremacist and patriarchal narrative that in the mainstream is obscured (Pateman and Mills 2007). Jagmohan (2015) further describes this contract as keeping white supremacy entrenched through the assumption of public policies as colour-evasive. For Gale de Saxe (2021), "White ignorance functions to mystify the consequences of unjust systems that systemically marginalised groups endure so that those who benefit from the system do not need to consider their complicity in perpetuating them" (5). As Leonardo (2013) explains, Mills' racial contract has an 'epistemology of ignorance' where White people are 'knowers' and people of colour are 'subknowers' while simultaneously White people remain ignorant of race knowledge despite experiencing racialization daily. In my examination of municipal government response to the BLM movement, I align with the above scholars in assuming an understanding of racism as the norm and as integrated within institutions as a political system. Further, that municipalities, as with other institutions, see themselves as colour-blind despite their racialized nature and therefore do not often consider their complicity in racism. I will return to this in my analysis as I explore the municipal response and to what extent municipalities tackle racism within their systems. I will also return to the consideration of who is the "knower" when municipalities consider experiences of racism, the extent of the issue, and strategies to tackle it.

For Mills, individuals, and for that matter governments, matter little to the continuance of the racist system. It is important to point out here that Mills' (2015) domination contract recognizes that manipulation and oppression are central to the contract which undermines the ideal social contract which assumes consent. In this sense, Mills employs the concept of the domination contract as a 'nonideal reality' that must be rectified (Mills 2015). Thomas (2007) notes that Mills' racial contract offers a liberatory path that suggests White people, alongside people of colour, must recognize the structures that uphold the racial contract. Yet, it is difficult to imagine how one can see beyond the pervasive domination contract and, as Lindsay (2015) puts it 'escape the false consciousness' born out of the domination contract. To begin this process of breaking the contract, there must be a sustained commitment to developing critical consciousness and praxis (Gale de Saxe 2021). Drawing on Freire (2005), Gale de Saxe (2019) advocates for a transformation of our social reality and to break the racial contract through the interweaving of theory and resistance action. The path to liberation from white supremacy and the racial contract is paved not by individual effort nor by simple policy changes. Yancy's (2018) call to White people highlights the humanity that must be acknowledged and deeply part of a collective liberation of all peoples. As a white supremacist system, municipalities must find spaces to explore a new direction outside of the racial contract whereby collective liberation can be glimpsed. As outlined above, there is hope for municipalities to emphasize development of critical consciousness and praxis whereby systemic changes can take place. The emphasis of the liberatory path outlined here is on love and respect which aligns with the racially liberatory pedagogy laid out Castillo-Montoya et. al. (2019). I will turn to a discussion of this framework and outline this lens through which I will analyze municipal responses to BLM.

## A racially liberatory pedagogy

To escape from the racial contract, as we saw in the previous section, a sustained effort must be made to develop critical consciousness and praxis (see Gale de Saxe 2021 and Freire 2005) that moves all peoples towards a collective liberation. The BLM movement very specifically notes that they are concerned with liberation in an expansive way, "We are a collective of liberators who believe in an inclusive and spacious movement…. We must ensure we are building a movement that brings all of us to the front." (Black Lives Matter n.d.). The movement calls for attention to be paid to the ongoing systemic racism entrenched in our daily lives so that we might work collectively towards liberation and end the systemic targeting of Black peoples (Black Lives Matter n.d.). As we have seen, Mills (1997) similarly argues that we must turn our attention to racial underpinning of our institutions for only then can we begin to break the racial contract.

Castillo-Montoya et al. (2019) frame the BLM approach as a racially liberatory pedagogy which develops critical consciousness and praxis as well as centering liberation from racial oppression. This racially liberatory peda-

gogy is outlined in four key components: (1) affirming and sustaining culture, (2) raising critical consciousness, (3) centering relationships and emotions, and (4) emphasizing intersectionality (Castillo-Montoya et al. 2019). These components align closely with Langford and Speight's (2015) notes on BLM epistemology including celebrating Black worth, raising awareness of and resistance to Black oppression, unveiling the damage of white supremacy, and raising race-consciousness. Further, as I noted earlier, Yancy (2018) similarly emphasizes the key problem of systemic racism (referred to as structural whiteness), respect and love of Black peoples and cultures, and examining one's own whiteness with a commitment to transforming systems. What these all have in common is an abiding connection to the humanity of this work and a focus on raising race consciousness as central in the struggle for collective liberation. For Castillo-Montoya et al. (2019) raising critical consciousness refers to "…understanding of sociopolitical structure and issues shaping the experiences of Black people" (1128). I would add that it is also about awareness of the ways in which the racial contract underpins sociopolitical structure which impact all peoples.

Castillo-Montoya et al. (2019) use the racially liberatory pedagogy framework to inform educators' approach to raising critical consciousness. In this paper, I use this frame has for wider usage outside the classroom in a broader sense of education and public awareness in the context of municipal government. As I argued earlier, municipal governments have an important role to play in the safety and well-being of residents including addressing inequitable structures, impacts, and access to services. Acknowledging racial oppression, raising critical consciousness, and working towards collective liberation are all critical to the safety, wellbeing, and equity of residents within municipalities. Therefore, municipal governments have a key responsibility in removing the blindfold to see the racial contract and work to breaking it so a collective liberation can be achieved. In my examination of municipal government response to the BLM movement, I use Castillo-Montoya et al.'s (2019) racially liberatory pedagogy as a framework for analysis. I consider the municipal responses through the lens of the components laid out within the racially liberatory pedagogy framework by asking the following questions:

(1) How does the municipal response recognize and honour the valuable assets and knowledge of the Black experience?
(2) To what extent does the municipal response raise critical consciousness including understanding of the racism inherent in socio-political structures?
(3) How does the municipal response center relationships and emotions?
(4) In what ways does the municipal response emphasize intersectionality and acknowledge the multifaceted and compounding structural power relations at play?

## The RMWB: An analysis

In my examination of municipal response to BLM, I focus in this study specifically on the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB). The RMWB is a northern municipality of Alberta centered in the urban city of Fort McMurray and consisting of an additional nine surrounding rural communities. The RMWB has been a member of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO's Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities (CIM) since 2006. Upon becoming a signatory, the municipality formed the Regional Advisory Committee on Inclusion Diversity, and Equity (RACIDE) with the mandate to provide advisement to Council on related issues and to work closely with administration in supporting related initiatives. In my analysis of RMWB's response to BLM, I used a triangulation of methods including a document analysis, participant-observation, and interviews with municipal and grassroots organizations.

A document analysis was conducted of RMWB texts including Committee and Council documents and submissions to Committees or Council from residents, community organizations, or community groups. I conducted a search of the RMWB website for documents uploaded from January to December 2020 that included any of the following key terms: race, racism, Black Lives Matter, or diversity. The search yielded 10 documents including agenda packages and minutes of Council meetings in June 2020 and December 2020. The public recordings of these meetings were then transcribed and the transcriptions were included in the analysis for this study. In addition, the search results included agenda packages and minutes of the Regional Advisory Committee on Inclusion, Diversity, and Equality (RACIDE) from June-December 2020. Importantly, the agenda packages included reports from RACIDE's public survey and community conversations with residents on racism. A report from the Multicultural Association of Wood Buffalo (MCA) on discrimination was included. Finally, a report was included from Rehoboth

Alliance and the Afro-Canadian Community Association based on a series of meetings with members from the Black community on racism.

Participant-observation was also conducted between January 2022 and January 2023, leveraging my role as a participant in municipal DEI work in Fort McMurray. Throughout the data collection for this study, I worked as a municipal staff member in the RMWB supporting the implementation of a municipal DEI plan. The site of participant-observation was my daily work as a staff member and my interactions in this role with other municipalities and grassroots organizers. Throughout the participant-observation I drew on my personal experience in my daily job, my advocacy work, and reflections on previous experiences which provided additional research insights. The latter reflections were prompted as I took daily fieldnotes and weekly review and reflection of these fieldnotes.

Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal administrators involved in developing and/or implementing DEI plans as well as individuals who work with grassroots organizers involved in and impacted by DEI plans. Participants were recruited through participant-observations with an offer for a follow up interview. The sample was intentionally chosen for best representation of municipal staff and grassroots organizers. A total of five interviews were conducted between August 2022 and January 2023 and varied in duration from 50 to 90 minutes. The three methods interweave and inform each other as I uncovered new information, explored emerging questions or themes, and developed and tested out new insights across the various methods employed. I took several measures to ensure participant confidentiality, safeguard against potential retaliation (politically, professionally, or personally), and supported participants in feeling comfortable to disclose and share their living experiences. I use pseudonyms and avoid including any identifying information unless explicitly asked to by participants and provided with written consent to do so. In this study, I took an active participatory approach (Costello et al. 2017) which acknowledges one's role in the research and balances identity and responsibilities as a group member and as a researcher. As Davies (1999) suggests, I overtly state and reflect on the interaction between the self and the study acknowledging that there is no clear boundary between these spheres. In the next section, I explore the emerging themes from the analysis organized into four sections corresponding to the four key components of a racially liberatory pedagogy as outlined by Castillo-Montoya et al. (2019).

## Municipal BLM response

> A small group of councillors huddle together amongst the crowd of residents holding signs and passionately bellowing in response to the call from the megaphone "I can't breathe". A young Black woman eloquently describes the realities of being Black in Wood Buffalo. She is one of a long line of speakers that have taken to the megaphone to put to words the pain of systemic racism in the region, the strength of the Black community, demand action and an end to willful ignorance, and the complex and multifaceted experiences of being Black and Muslim, being Black and Woman, being Black and Queer, or being Indigenous. A group of Municipal Councillors huddle uncertainly at the outskirts of the crowd. The young Black woman wraps up her speech and hands the megaphone to one of the Council members who takes a deep breath. The Councillor begins timidly, turning her comments to the diversity of the region and the need to support all lives. The groan from the crowd is audible. The Councillor continues, stating the regional Government's commitment to diversity and inclusion. A voice from the crowd speaks up asking what they have done and what action has been taken. Voices surge out of the crowd refusing to stay silent in the face of Council's comments. Acknowledging their statements would not find purchase, the Councillors drift back out of stage centre. (Personal Journal, June 2020).

On June 23, 2020, just over a week after the above described local Black Lives Matter march, Council served a motion to address the movement's calls for action. The motion directed administration to work with RACIDE and provide recommendations related to anti-racism, provide a report on the progress of the existing 2017–2022 Diversity and Inclusion Community Plan, and build an administrative framework for anti-racism. Administration was given until December 2020 to report back to Council on progress related to the motion. Following the motion in June 2020, RACIDE met monthly with administration to discuss and prepare recommendations to Council. Both RACIDE and administration agreed upon an approach of community conversations and engaging with existing community groups to collaboratively develop recommendations. While the nature of the recommendations came directly from Black community members through these community engagements, administration and RACIDE focused primarily

on recommendations that were seen as within municipal jurisdiction (i.e. issues such as housing, public schooling, and policing[2] were only touched on as an advocacy role for the municipality). Administration largely accepted and supported the recommendations from RACIDE and the two groups co-developed the recommendations that were presented back to Council. On December 8, 2020, a presentation from Administration was made to Council with recommendations from RACIDE as well as reports from community engagement and non-governmental organizations (including from the Multicultural Association of Wood Buffalo and the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association).

In the following sections I examine the response from the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo to the Black Lives Matter movement. I first consider to what extent the Black experience, culture, and community is valued for their assets and knowledge. I then explore whether the response raised critical consciousness and the understanding of racism inherent in socio-political structures. Thirdly, I study the attention provided to the importance of relationships and emotions as central to action on antiracism. Lastly, I discuss the response from the municipal government through a lens of intersectionality; acknowledging the multifaceted structural power relations at play that leads to compounding oppression.

## Affirming and sustaining culture

From the outset of the RACIDE's approach to responding to Council's motion, the committee underlined the importance of ensuring their advisement came from the expertise of the Black community. RACIDE requested further time from Council to center Black voices and prepare a report and recommendations based on those from the Black community. Further, they repeatedly acknowledged the dearth of Black representation on the committee and linked this directly to a severe gap in knowledge and expertise. In fact, one of their recommendations was to expand membership and to specifically seek out Black candidates for the committee. Black expertise was seen as critical to having the kinds of skills and knowledge required for RACIDE to conduct their work and meet their mandate. Similarly, throughout the report submitted to Council from the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association, there was a distinct emphasis on the lack of representation on Council and on RACIDE. The report noted Black representation was important in bringing "Black issues" forward and the lack of experience around these tables limited the knowledge and know-how to address these issues. The report argues for a need of "Black people speaking on the Black experience" and goes on to underline the knowledge embedded within the community, "We know our community and so it should come from us…. We can tell our stories better. Let us tell you what is happening to us". In my conversation with Naomi, a Black community activist, she reflected on the process used for developing recommendations for Council,

> Yeah, so the process itself was brilliant. I found it to be quite good. People were charged, obviously, understanding the context of the time we were in. Everyone was kind of ready to do the work, and it was good to see kind of mobilization around that and openness from the municipality and understanding the shortcomings. And I felt really proud to be a part of that…I thought that community was very happy to be part of that process, and I feel like a lot of the groups that we spoke to, like immigrants and different marginalized groups, they were happy to finally kind of have legitimacy shown on what they've been saying.

Both RACIDE and the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association recognized and affirmed the valuable assets and knowledge of lived experience and cultural expertise of the Black community. This approach aligns with Yosso's (2005) assertions that cultural knowledge provides valuable strengths and assets for racialized individuals. Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg's (1992) concept of funds of knowledge similarly affirms the value of lived experiences and cultural knowledge in learning. Castillo-Montoya et al. (2019) draws on these understandings of cultural knowledge and lived experience as valuable in supporting a racially liberatory pedagogy.

While RACIDE and the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association honoured Black culture and experience as invaluable knowledge, Council was not convinced of the sufficient evidence to support the recommendations. Council's discussion of the presentation and report included at best a hesitancy to accept the input from the Black community as adequate and at worst a refusal to view Black lived experience as valued knowledge

and expertise. Several Council members repeatedly called for further evidence, research, and benchmarking of what other Municipal governments had done to address the BLM movement. These calls, while in themselves are not alarming, indicate that they viewed the information before them (provided by the Black community through their own experiences) as not sufficient and as lacking. This points to a problematic understanding of who holds knowledge and what is considered evidence—namely not the Black community and Black experience/expertise. As Leonardo (2013) has argued, there is a 'epistemology of ignorance' within Mills' (1997) racial contract whereby knowledge is held by White people while people of colour are viewed as 'subknowers' and lacking knowledge. Council's response to BLM as discussed above, follows this framework by devaluing Black knowledge and instead seeking knowledge from existing socio-political structures that are, as Mills (1997) and others outline, rooted in white supremacy and the oppression of Black peoples and people of colour. These findings suggest that while community advocates and organizations prioritize the knowledge and experiences of Black peoples, the municipal response does not adequately recognize and honour the valuable assets and knowledge of the Black experience.

## Raising critical consciousness

As I've noted elsewhere in this paper, the BLM social movement has called for local governments to address racism (Numni et al. 2019) and this was no less true for Wood Buffalo's BLM march and call to action. The rising cries from the crowd of "what have you done" and "where is the action" at the local march made towards Councilors are indications of that pressure on local government to address BLM. While the role of Municipal government in antiracism as laid out by Municipal Government Acts is less than explicit, what is clear is that the RMWB understood themselves as having a role in not only anti-racism generally but specifically in raising awareness, education, and knowledge. This is evidenced first by the RMWB's commitment to CCUNESCO's CIM and the government's corresponding action plan, the 2017–2022 Diversity and Inclusion Community Plan and Workbook which highlights as one of its priorities to "increase understanding through education". This priority, as outlined in the Plan document, includes training of employees, knowledge of human rights and individual responsibilities, and public education and awareness. Secondly, the June 23, 2020 council motion directs administration to "build an administrative framework to support the following initiatives on anti-racism and equality within the RMWB…". The specific initiatives listed include to "encourage staff to expand their knowledge on anti-racism and inclusivity", conducting an employee demographic survey and corporate climate survey related to anti-racism and inclusivity, and the creation and roll out of anti-racism training. While the Municipal government thus recognized their role in advancing awareness and understanding of racism, the scope of the issue and the extent to which Council viewed it as their role was limited. Initially, the June 23, 2020 motion included 'mandatory' training for staff and Council members however, this was struck from the resolution that was ultimately passed. This move suggests that, although Council viewed training as desirable, they did not view it as a critical component to their job nor to their employees'. This was further underlined when, presented with the budget for the development of such training, Council defeated the motion which would have provided the necessary funding for the initiative. Debate included questions around why this training was needed and arguments that cultural awareness training should be sufficient. Further statements from Council members were made such as "we live in a very inclusive community…around the world we may have instances of infractions…". These statements and debate points are evidence that some members of Council may lack a depth of understanding of racism and the realities of the experiences of the Black community which is outlined in the reports provided to Council.

In fact, the RACIDE report points to a "real, significant impact to [the] region due to racism" and a "lack of understanding of depth or scope of the problem". The report goes on to conclude that racism exists in local government, policing, health, and education. Further, the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association report notes "We are faced with two pandemics: the COVID-19 and racism. The municipality can't downplay this; racism exists in the RMWB; it's real and ugly". Replying to initial drafts from the reports, an RMWB Administrator indicated that the RMWB has policies, practices and collective agreements that speak to discrimination and racism in the workplace and that "harassment and discrimination complaints are taken very seriously". Yet it was not acknowledged that these frameworks are, by nature of their development within white supremacist socio-political environment, problematic. The RACIDE report quotes Black community members who note "there is no safe way to report it [discrimination and racism]" and "people who take reports of discrimination are generally biased, not trained in unconscious bias training, unskilled or uneducated in anti-racism education and are not effective when taking a report of racism even if there is a way to report it".

As noted earlier, the RMWB embraced a role in diversity, inclusion, and addressing racism and discrimination. As noted by one grassroots organizer, "…it just has to be consistent. It has to be meaningful. You have to commit to it every day and put it into practice". Yet, the response to BLM from Council and Administrators suggests that the municipality did little to raise critical consciousness. Further, it suggests that there was little understanding of the ways in which race and racism are entrenched in socio-political structures like complaint processes. Jagmohan (2015) relatedly argues that public policies are presumed to be colour-blind in ways that, as Gale de Saxe (2021) points out, foster continued White ignorance of the ways that systems oppress racialized peoples. While the epistemology of BLM aims to reveal white supremacy within systems and ways in which this perpetuates Black oppression (Castillo-Montoya et al. 2019), the RMWB response lacked an examination of their own systems and their role in the continuance of racial oppression. Further, the denial of funding for anti-racism training and the equivalencies drawn between cultural awareness and anti-racism reiterated the existing power structures that disadvantages and demotes the experiences of racism by the Black community. These approaches also worked to safely place anti-racism back into the diversity and cultural awareness box. A municipal worker I spoke with, Natalie, argued that the specific language used by the Municipality indicates where the municipality is in terms of doing the work. The language used provides the boundaries for which progress can be made. In other words, by limiting the conversation to diversity there cannot be a targeted effort to address racism. As Almeida (2016) and Saloojee (2003) similarly argue, the municipal response re-organizes anti-racism into existing "diversity" agendas that do little to address racism.

Council's only action out of the recommendations provided by RACIDE and the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association was to write a letter to the provincial government to request additions to school curriculum on topics of racism and colonialism. This action allows the Municipal government to outwardly show that they have responded thereby upholding the image of themselves as committed to addressing racism. At the same time, it places the onus at the feet of another political body rather than addressing their own structures. In this way, the Municipal government is free to continue to ignore the nature of their own racialized systems, the ways in which they are complicit in perpetuating white supremacy, and the racial contract is maintained. Ijeoma, a community worker noted that this outcome reinforced the hesitancy and distrust of community to participate in the process with the Municipality and RACIDE. She recounts, "…considering the initial feeling of "why do it, it won't happen", yeah. It still kind of vindicated that initial hesitancy. Because then very little came out of it". When I asked Naomi what happened she describes,

> I think a few things happen. One of them is it's not important anymore because it's not as visceral. Eyes were on them at that time to do something, to stand and be like, «Our municipality's progressive". But later, that was no longer the case.

Without the public pressure, Council backed away from the movement and the recommended actions to address the issue. This seems to confirm Bell's (1980) theory that progress will only by sustained so far as there remains an interest-convergence. Once municipalities no longer saw the benefit to them as organizations (i.e. no longer widespread public pressure/support), there was no longer interest-convergence and progress waned.

The municipal response, as evidenced above, outwardly contends to raise critical consciousness through numerous commitments to employee training and public education. However, beyond stating a commitment to raising critical consciousness, little action was taken and anti-racism education was reduced to acknowledging diversity. Similarly, the municipality lacked a critical awareness of racism as embedded within the institution and instead, the response both focused on surface level issues (i.e. celebration of diversity as opposed to structural racism) and on external bodies as needing to take action.

## Centering relationships and emotions

One important component in the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association report was a highlighting of emotions felt by the Black community and the trauma of racism experienced. One resident quoted in the report notes, "Growing up [I was] made to feel not good enough". The RACIDE report similarly centres the feelings of the Black community. One person is quoted stating, "[I'm] tired of being tired" while others describe in detail disturbing and painful instances of racism. People shared their stories of being left out at the playground growing

up, being the target of stereotyping comments equating Black people to animals, and being harassed to the point of suicide attempts. The RACIDE report requests for the Municipality to provide safer spaces for truth, healing, and reconciliation. The idea of reconciliation here implies a reciprocal relationship whereby the parties learn and heal together.

While this sharing of the realities of racism in Wood Buffalo is certainly a key component of the reports, the Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community Association report also focuses on celebrating Black joy and brilliance. As one young woman put it, "Black people are everything that we were told we couldn't be, [we] need to embrace ourselves and love ourselves". The report further calls on the Municipality to support spaces for the Black community to "socialize, meet, and hold events to commemorate blackness". It is clear then that the Black community emphasizes the need to connect, be in community and to find joy together.

While the reports submitted to Council undoubtedly centered relationships, emotions, and humanity of Black peoples, Council's response largely dismissed the extensive input and trauma shared by the Black community for the purposes of providing evidence to Council. Several Council members instead focuses on a desire to see the data from a forthcoming employee census as well as further research and benchmarking prior to taking any action. One grassroots organizer notes that the emphasis on benchmarking assumes best practices are used by other municipalities with little evidence this is the case. While another community member argues that requesting research and benchmarking lacks an acknowledgement of the expertise of those in community who provided their input and recommendations. The reliance on specific kinds of data (namely not living experience) decentered the emotions and relationships of the Black community and instead centered existing institutional frameworks. As Castillo-Montoya et al. (2019) note, "Historically, Black people have been deprived of humanized connections and the opportunity to center their emotions in the public sphere". The response from the RMWB does little to center these emotions nor value them as essential to the learning process which is deemed as essential for healing by scholars such as hooks (1994). Several members of Council also requested further engagement of the community and questioned why residents were not present at Council to speak to their experiences. While on the surface this may seem to be evidence that Council is attempting to center Black experience, this approach ultimately devalues the extensive sharing of experiences by Black peoples within the reports. Further, it deprives Black peoples of the choice of how to share their experiences including in what forum. The call by Council for Black people to present at a formal Council meeting and share their trauma (again) publicly does little to support the Black community while maintaining the status quo by demanding Black people to adhere to existing systems and structures that oppress them. Lastly, this approach ignores the emotions felt by many within the Black community which is laid out in the community reports including lack of trust of Council and its structures and deep-seated exhaustion. Instead, Council relies on this narrative of a lack of delegates as evidence of insufficient community buy-in which ultimately allows Council to not act. This suggests that the municipal government fails to center relationships and emotions in their response to BLM.

## Emphasizing intersectionality

The BLM movement has consistently emphasized the heterogenous nature of the Black community by taking an intersectional approach (Black Lives Matter n.d.) that recognizes the compounding oppressions experienced by peoples with multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw 1991). The various reports provided to Council, while not outright naming intersectionality, certainly recognize the diversity of the Black community and incorporate recommendations which acknowledge intersecting identities. The Rehoboth Alliance/Afro-Canadian Community report quotes one resident, "…we are so different, from different countries with different cultures and values". The RACIDE report advocates for curriculum changes that not only address racism but simultaneously address colonialism, genocide, ableism, and homophobia and transphobia. For RACIDE then, their recommendations to the Municipality on responding to BLM is expansive in their incorporation of intersecting identities and an understanding of the complexity of racism as not just about race but about oppression of marginalized peoples. In this way, RACIDE is requesting a shift in curriculum that aims to improve understanding of the systems of power and oppression. Rios et al. (2017) similarly argue that intersectionality, when used in the classroom, can address students' understanding of the ways in which structural power operates.

Additionally, the RACIDE report calls for the Municipality to incorporate intersectionality into their response to BLM by adopting Gender Based Analysis (GBA+) into the development, analysis, and review of Municipal policies and procedures. GBA+ is a tool for analyzing and assessing how different peoples may experience or be

impacted by policies, programs, and initiatives (Women and Gender Equality Canada 2021). RACIDE requested funding to develop and implement training within the Municipality to roll out GBA+ to staff and integrate the tool within employees' work. This approach underlines RACIDE's acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of racism and the need to address systems, policies, and procedures from an intersectional lens. Further, the recommendation for training highlighted RACIDE's understanding of the need for Municipal staff and Council to learn about the ways in which peoples may experience and be impacted by systems in disparate ways. RACIDE viewed it as critical for the Municipality to understand the oppression within its systems to respond effectively to the BLM movement and address racism. This aligns closely with Castillo-Montoya et al. (2019) who contend that an intersectional approach sheds light on the complexity of oppression and can uncover white supremacy within systems to move us towards collective liberation. However, Council's denial of the funding requested for GBA+ and questions such as "I thought we were talking about race not gender?" indicate the lack of understanding of the complexities of oppressive systems at play within Municipal structures. In this way, the municipal response does not adequately consider the intersectional ways that race compounds with other power inequities. Based on the analysis conducted in this study, the Municipal government's response to BLM in Wood Buffalo must begin to recognize the structures which uphold Mills' (1997) racial contract and, as noted by Gale de Saxe (2021) must commit to a sustained development of critical consciousness and praxis to work towards collective liberation.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the role of Municipal government in responding to BLM and the response of the RMWB through the lens of Castillo-Montoya et al.'s (2019) racially liberatory pedagogy. This study suggests that while the Municipal government may recognize their role in anti-racism, the response to BLM upholds the racial contract, does little to raise critical consciousness, and perpetuates oppression. I found that the RMWB embraced a role in addressing racism as a committed member of the CCUNESCO's CIM and through the advisement provided by RACIDE. Yet, while Council requested RACIDE's advisement and the recommendations developed were supported by administration, most of these recommendations were not approved by Council. I suggest that advisory bodies like RACIDE may provide a convenient symbol for Councils with little risk to the status quo. Ultimately, these bodies lack authority to compel Municipal governments to act unless it coincides with interest-convergence (Bell 1980). As in this case, while public pressure was heightened in June 2020 and Council was keen to put forward a motion to support anti-racism initiative development, by the time recommendations were presented to Council in December 2020 public pressure had dramatically reduced and Council quietly deflected most of the recommendations.

The Municipal response to BLM suggested there was a lack of understanding of the ways that the Municipal structure was racialized. Further, the response enfolded anti-racism responses into existing power structures with little examination of their complicity in upholding racial oppression. In these ways, the Municipal role in BLM was reduced to a surface engagement with the issues the movement addresses. The role of government was limited to an adherence to existing structures and an inadequate reflection on the institution's complicity in racism. The Municipal response ultimately upheld the racial contract by keeping the blindfold in place of a colour-blind system which continues to oppress racialized communities.

In light of the findings of this research, I offer a number of recommendations for municipalities who are committed to responding to BLM and to addressing racism. Municipal governments must turn their attention to their own complicity, examine the ways in which their institution and systems perpetuate racism and begin to work towards collective liberation. Specifically, municipal governments need to decenter White people as the 'knowers' and instead value intersectional Black experiences and expertise, recognize and provide space for Black relationships and emotions, and collaboratively search for new innovative systems that are not built on the premise of white supremacy. Municipalities must recognize and appropriately resource advisors and experts who undertake a great deal of labour to support Municipal policy development and implementation. Integrating co-creation mechanisms whereby Municipalities are led by communities in developing initiatives and strategies are recommended. Further, implementing actions throughout the process is critical rather than waiting for a 'fully developed and approved' municipal policy. Lastly, Municipal administrators and Councils must bravely prioritize what is best for communities regardless of public backlash and future elections.

This research utilized Castillo-Montoya et al.'s (2019) racially liberatory pedagogy as a framework through which to examine municipal response to BLM. This approach brought to light various ways in which municipal

governments can demarcate a path to raise critical consciousness, commit to praxis, and move towards collective liberation. Encouragingly, the reports submitted to the Municipal government indicate a strong aligning with the BLM movement and to Castillo-Montoya et al.'s (2019) racially liberatory pedagogy. Additional examination is needed on the role and impact that such committees and reports may have in shifting and influencing Municipal government response to BLM and anti-racism action. It is evident that Municipal governments have a key role in the daily lives of peoples in their communities. This is recognized by the BLM movement which has specifically called on local governments to address systemic racism. It is paramount that such work is conducted to shift "our minds, bodies, and senses of being" (Gale de Saxe 2019, 11) to begin the process of breaking the racial contract and realizing collective liberation.

## End notes

[1] Now known as the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities

[2] The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo does not have regional police but rather rely on RCMP for policing services.

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