

# Skookum Lab

Seeing Racism Through an  
Indigenous Social Innovation Lens:  
Learning and Reflections from Skookum  
Lab Anti-Racism Symposium 2020

A social innovation project of the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee



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# Acknowledgements

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“Skookum” means strong, powerful, and brave. We raise our hands to the skookum individuals, organizations, and Semiahmoo First Nation who made this event possible. Thank you!

**Semiahmoo First Nation:** This event took place at “Crescent Beach”: the unceded traditional territories of the Semiahmoo people. We recognize that we are on their territory and endeavour to be in a good relationship with Semiahmoo First Nation. We offer a special “thank you!” to Chief Chappell, and 6 children and youth, who grounded the Symposium in land-based protocol and ceremony.

**Facilitators & Graphic Recorder:** These skookum leaders fostered a culturally safe space for courageous conversations to occur. We are grateful for the knowledge, wisdom, and gifts that they shared during their time with us.

**Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse, Facilitator.** Jodi is of Cree and Mohawk descent from the Michel First Nation. Through her work with the Edmonton Shift Lab, the Wahkohtowin Law and Governance Lodge at the University of Alberta and many other projects, she brings Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing to questions of institutional change and social transformation.

**Kim Haxton, Facilitator.** Kim is a multifaceted, multidimensional educator, rooted in knowledge and steeped in community. She is Potawatami from Wasauksing. In her work with Indigeneyez, a creative arts-based organization she co-founded, Kim works with Indigenous communities toward decolonization and lateral liberation.

**Jeska Slater, Facilitator.** Jeska’s mother is from Fisher River Cree Nation in Manitoba. Jeska has been working in the Indigenous Leadership sector for ten years, and in Indigenous Social Innovation for three years. Jeska is Skookum Lab’s Indigenous Social Innovation Coordinator.

**Tiaré Jung, Graphic Recorder.** Tiaré is of Hawaiian, Tahitian, Irish, and Chinese descent (other ancestry still being uncovered) and raised in Lheidli T’enneh territory. Graphic recording since 2016, Tiaré draws upon a skill set of facilitation, illustration, and design.



**Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre (FRAFCA)** who applied for the Government of Canada funding and worked in partnership with SUILC’s Skookum Lab to host the event.

**The City of Surrey** who provided in-kind support for the event.

**SUILC members** and community partners who participated in the Symposium and invited their staff from Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations.

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# Introduction

In February 2020, 43 Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders met over two days to discuss Indigenous lived experiences with racism, its impacts, and how to combat it in Surrey, BC.

The two days were grounded in Indigenous protocol and culturally safe ways of being and learning together. Although, the topic was difficult and painful, participants were courageous and found strength in the solidarity expressed amidst Symposium participants. The event was one of the first Indigenous-specific symposiums ever held in Surrey. It was an important jumping off point to combat racism towards Indigenous residents.

This report was written by the Skookum Lab Team. Our analysis of findings is informed by an Indigenous social innovation lens to holistically look at the systemic issue of racism. We have summarized key aspects of the event, the Skookum Lab context, the approach, the participants, the learning, and the way forward.

The learnings that we have highlighted from the Symposium are also part of the ongoing writing, teachings, conversations, and art created and led by Indigenous peoples across Canada on anti-Indigenous racism. Our learnings are connected to this broader conversation, but also inform the conversation through the particular exploration of perspectives of anti-Indigenous racism in Surrey.



## About Skookum

Working on the unceded traditional territories of the Kwantlen, Katzie, Semiahmoo, Tsawwassen, Qayqayt and Kwikwetlem peoples, Skookum Lab is one of the first Indigenous social innovation labs on Turtle Island (North America).

Convened by the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC), Skookum Lab applies a social innovation approach to tackle the issue of Indigenous child and youth poverty in BC's largest urban Indigenous community.

The rate of Indigenous child and youth poverty in Surrey is among the highest in Western Canada. Indigenous child and youth poverty is a persistent issue and systemic problem. There are many systems in place that allow inequities to flourish and keep Indigenous children and youth at a socio-economic disadvantage from their non-Indigenous peers.



## Our Process

Skookum Lab honours the wisdom of Surrey's Indigenous community who have resolutely said "nothing about us, without us". Therefore, the Lab addresses systemic issues in mutual partnership with the Indigenous community in Surrey.

In 2018, we began our process by asking a strength-based question:

**What would make Surrey a great place to raise an Indigenous child?**

We had an overwhelming response! Thousands of answers were gathered, and key themes were identified.

One theme in particular stood out. Indigenous Surrey residents said that *"interpersonal, institutional and structural racism"* towards Indigenous peoples in Surrey is a pervasive and very real issue. Many people described how racism is connected to the root causes of urban Indigenous poverty. In 2020, Indigenous residents continue to express that they often experience racism within education, child welfare, health care, and economic systems.

**The Lab's initial research revealed that the issues of systemic racism and poverty create everyday challenges to raise Indigenous children and youth in Surrey.** Importantly, racism is part of the problem that keeps Indigenous children and youth at a socio-economic disadvantage compared to non-Indigenous peers.



Given the urgent need to address systemic racism, SUILC's Skookum Lab, in partnership with FRAFCA and other community partners, created a Symposium about "Indigenous perspectives on Racism". The Lab's objectives were:

- To initiate discussion and action to end racism in Surrey;
- To learn from leading Indigenous social innovators about utilizing social innovation / systems thinking to address complex social issues;
- To learn about and practice social innovation / systems thinking techniques that can be applied in Surrey to deepen our understanding of racism; and
- To consider innovative ways to combat racism against Indigenous peoples in urban communities generally and in Surrey specifically.

# Indigenous Social Innovation: “Creating a Safe Container”

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Indigenous social innovation is not a new practice. Indigenous peoples have always been unwavering innovators. They have used their gifts to adapt to change, address complex issues, and develop community-based solutions since time of immemorial. Skookum Lab is a space to continue to do this important work.

**Through our Skookum process, we are creating “safe containers” in partnership with the diverse urban Indigenous community (Métis, First Nations, and Inuit) in Surrey. Safe containers are culturally grounded spaces where the Indigenous community is seen, heard, and fully able to share their lived experiences and perspectives on how to address racism in Surrey.**

At the same time, the Lab’s changemaking processes do not solely involve people who identify as Indigenous to Turtle Island. Our process also invites people from diverse settler backgrounds who work for Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations that aim to support the Indigenous community in Surrey. We want to create space for people of settler background to be able to examine their privilege and positionality in relation to systemic Indigenous racism.

Indigenous facilitators and speakers ensured that the Symposium was culturally grounded and safe for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to carry out small group work and engage in conversations about racism. This event aligned with Skookum Lab’s Guiding Principles because participants felt safe to (1) name harmful systems that perpetuate racism in Surrey and (2) identify possible ways forward.



**Skookum Guide Groups** are the Lab's four groups comprised of Elders, Caregivers, Youth and Service Providers. Guide Groups are a safe space for people with lived experiences to share their wisdom and create supportive relationships grounded in culture and indigeneity. Eighteen of the 43 Symposium participants were Skookum Guide Group members.



Tiaré Jung





## What We Learned

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Racism is grounded in beliefs of racial inequality: the socially constructed idea that one race is superior to another. It is enacted through unfair treatment and a lack of opportunities for specific racialized groups.

Anti-Indigenous racism specifically refers to the pervasive and diverse ways that racism is perpetuated towards Indigenous peoples. Symposium participants recognized that anti-Indigenous racism is woven into the fabric of Canadian society.

This section captures what we learned from Symposium participants who shared their lived experiences and perspectives on racism towards Indigenous peoples in Surrey, BC.

# 1

## Anti-Indigenous racism exists, it happens everyday, and it has serious consequences.

In their own words, Indigenous-Surrey residents reported that they are repeatedly perceived as ***“knowing nothing”, “on welfare”, “lazy”, “violent”, and “not good mothers”***. Participants shared these painful and common experiences. They conveyed how anti-Indigenous racism is rooted in societal beliefs that Indigenous peoples are inferior, impoverished, and inadequate.

Participants acknowledged that anti-Indigenous racism exists everyday and in multiple forms. They discussed the interpersonal and relational forms of racism while sharing many stories of individuals and community groups acting in discriminatory, hateful, and prejudicial ways.

Some participants, with perspectives on Indigenous health and wellness, were concerned about the “embodied forms of racism” revealed in the addiction, intergenerational trauma, homelessness, mental health concerns and diabetes that Indigenous people disproportionately suffer from in Surrey. A lack of appreciation for Indigenous knowledge and cultural wisdom (epistemic racism) was also mentioned numerous times.

These discussions were a chance to acknowledge that racism exists in multiple forms, happens everyday, and has profound and painful consequences. Repeated and frequent acts of racism are a part of the lived experience of urban Indigenous peoples in Surrey.



Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants shared how Indigenous residents are often ***“unwelcome”, “unheard”, “unnoticed”*** and ***“ignored”*** in public and private spaces such as shopping malls, restaurants, parks, public events, and Surrey’s streets. Many discussed structural racism in terms of social isolation, displacement, and invisibility in the city of Surrey.

These lived experiences are reflected in McCallum & Perry’s statement (in their book *“Structures of Indifference”*) that anti-



Indigenous racism functions as a ***“very real, persistent, and exhausting spectre of Indigenous death in Canadian cities”***.<sup>1</sup> The multiple ways that Indigenous peoples are unseen, unheard, invisible, and isolated are troubling indicators of pervasive anti-Indigenous racism which renders Indigenous lives as unworthy of recognition and value in the city.

Participants not only spoke of racism; they recognized that racism and colonialism go hand in hand. McCallum & Perry also speak of the lived consequences of racism and connect them to “histories of colonialism”:

***“Everyday Indigenous experience exists in spite of efforts to remove and destroy Indigenous peoples or more casually to ignore or singularly pathologize them. Histories of colonialism continue to revisit and frequently interrupt our ordinary lives, often in painful and jarring ways, for instance, when we are chairing a hiring committee, while we are having a cast put on a broken leg, while we innocently overhear or cannot silence the same old conversations that deny the violence of residential schools. We can register these moments as reminders that history is not over.”***<sup>2</sup>

Symposium participants engaged in conversations that acknowledged the daily, subtle, and not so subtle ways in which anti-Indigenous racism exists in the city of Surrey. However, conversations went even deeper than this.

<sup>1</sup> Perry & McCallum, 2018, p.6

<sup>2</sup> Perry & McCallum, 2018, p.7



# 2

## Racism is systemic.

Anti-Indigenous racism was not only discussed as an everyday issue in Surrey, BC. Symposium participants acknowledged that racism towards Indigenous peoples is “systemic” and “structural”. Anti-Indigenous racism is embedded at all levels of society. Interpersonal, community, institutional, provincial, national, and global systems are intentionally and unintentionally destructive towards Indigenous livelihoods. This is precisely why racism is so deeply embedded in Indigenous people’s daily lives.

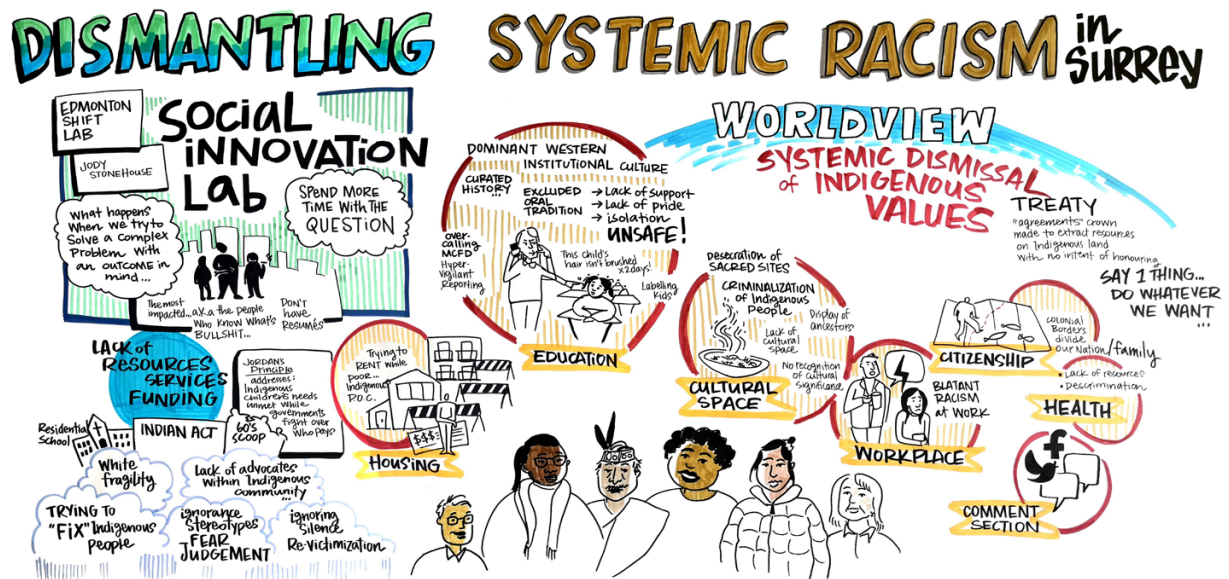
In the housing, education, employment, health, social service and legal sector, Indigenous-Surrey residents shared that **their families are “afraid” to access services** available to them, because of overt racism.

For example, one participant said:

***“I don’t let them know when I go to the hospital that I am Indigenous”***

In the employment sector, Indigenous Surrey residents shared experiences of **racial prejudice and discrimination because they “look native”**.

In the school system, many participants shared stories of Indigenous **children being “bullied” or inadequately supported** based on their specific needs. One participant asked why, in the 2016 Census, **so few (8.8%) of Surrey’s urban Indigenous population has attained a university degree** compared



**SKOOKUM LAB**

Live Graphic Recording  
February 21, 2020

Tiaré Jung



One key question raised in participants' conversations was why systemic racism sometimes looks like "silence", "neglect" and "indifference". Participants expressed that non-Indigenous individuals, even whole institutions, can be uninformed or unwilling to learn about colonization and racism in Canada. Many systems, and people within

Systemic racism also exists at the organizational level. Structural inequities exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations. Non-indigenous organizations benefit from funding structures which can impede Indigenous organizations. The decolonizing methodologies and anti-racist policy, programs, services, and procedures needed for systems change may not be recognized by existing funding structures.

Participants concluded that taking action to name “the systems” in place that perpetuate racism towards Indigenous peoples is an uncomfortable, yet necessary, process. This takes bravery from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks.



## Learning and Reflections from Skookum Lab Anti-Racism Symposium 2020

# 3

## History affects us today.

Participants agreed that Canadian settler colonialism is connected to anti-Indigenous racism. Settler colonialism is popularly understood as a point in time when Europeans settlers came to, what they called, “Canada”. However, participants more fully understood settler colonialism as not only a thing of the past. Settler colonialism historically and currently perpetuates harmful attitudes and actions towards Indigenous peoples, even in Surrey.

At the Symposium, participants acknowledged the history and ongoing impacts of colonization on Indigenous people. Western systems often pathologize Indigenous people which means that Indigenous people are often “blamed” for their experiences of poverty. We know that this is simply not true.

Facilitators and participants emphasized the importance of creating a “safe” space and building a collective awareness about how history has affected Indigenous peoples. Being aware of Canada’s history, such as the federally implemented policies of the Indian Act or the human rights violations and abuses in residential schools, is foundational to understanding racism and its present-day impacts. For example, whole Indigenous communities and families in Surrey and

Canada are engaged in processes of healing from the profound intergenerational and collective trauma caused by a legacy of systemic racism and settler colonialism.

**In an Indigenous context, being trauma informed can be defined as recognizing the attempted genocide against Indigenous peoples. We can also uplift the gifts and strengths of Indigenous communities to overcome and thrive on their own terms despite continued colonial acts such as discriminatory policy, systematic racism, and normalized individual bias.**

Operating from an Indigenous Trauma-Informed Practice is the first step in dismantling systemic racism. A Trauma-Informed Practice has both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people critically examine and witness the historic and on-going realities of Indigenous people in relation to violent and genocidal policy. It makes us define and witness our position in the systems that hold racism in place. It asks us to be bold and courageous in acknowledging our complicity and using our power and privilege to dismantle a violent system.

# 4

## Indigenous wisdom and practice is healing.

Indigenous facilitators and participants at the Symposium discussed the importance of Indigenous designed trauma informed and culturally grounded practice to integrate into forums like the Symposium. They highlighted the importance of valuing Indigenous wisdom and practice as it is part of the healing process.

Honouring land-based protocols, while recognizing the diverse ancestry of participants, was essential to creating a safe intercultural space for sharing at the Symposium. Land-based activities were central for healing, reflection, and processing information.

Participants reported that Indigenous-led activities rooted in culture made it possible for them to report their painful stories of racism in Surrey. Significantly, Indigenous Surrey residents expressed that **“Culture is medicine”**. Accessing cultural activities is the most powerful way to heal from systemic racism, rebuild kinship systems to empower their community, and advocate for change.

Grounding the Symposium in culture also allowed for culturally grounded solutions to emerge in conversations about how to

combat systemic racism in Surrey. Many groups discussed how language revitalization, respecting land-based protocols and other cultural practices are strategies to heal from, and tackle, experiences of systemic racism and poverty. For example, participants suggested revitalizing accountability systems with non-Indigenous and Indigenous organizations to (1) collectively name when racism occurs and (2) dismantle systems that keep racism in place.





# 5

## Gathering to understand racism with potential allies is powerful.

Participants expressed that addressing racism is a “collective” and “systemic responsibility” of societies, organizations, groups, and individuals. There is power in our shared work and effort to combat such a big issue. In this regard, Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse gave a message to non-Indigenous participants from diverse sectors of the system:

***“Your processes have caused my people harm for a long time. In order to do good work, we must analyze the reality of Indigenous folks and ensure that we are not coming from the place of the saviour. Indigenous people hold the wisdom to address complex issues, however, they live in systems that privilege certain groups. In order to do this work, ‘allies’ must accept that this process is uncomfortable - to be critical of and dismantle systems that serve you.”***

The Symposium emboldened Indigenous, as well as non-Indigenous participants, to create a space to talk about settler colonialism, anti-Indigenous racism, as well as settler privilege. As one Indigenous Elder shared with non-Indigenous participants at the gathering:

***“In order to go far, you must first go deep”.*** These were wise words in which many non-Indigenous participants seemed to do - dig deep.

Semiahmoo Artist and Symposium Participant, Roxanne Charles observed how non-Indigenous participants engaged in a learning and “unlearning” process. She said:

***“I had the opportunity to work with Indigenous peoples and allies who mostly work in Surrey and some amazing facilitators from all over Turtle Island decolonizing and combating racism and poverty as well... I was able to see the work it takes for others to recognize their racism and privilege. They didn’t grow up in racist homes, their family supported Indigenous culture/or did they?... But what I recognized as a common thread to their process in becoming ‘allies’ was education, discovery, empathy, a willingness to listen to other people’s experience, do their own research, seek direction on how they can help, also call out others for their racial biases and educate others from their experience... It is not an easy process to unpack your inherent racism. I just hope more people have these opportunities for learning and develop a desire for change.”***

Defensiveness, undermining, and “white fragility” are harmful ways to react when Indigenous people speak of their experiences with racism. Instead, participants with settler identities actively listened to Indigenous participants and acknowledged the systems that they work for and benefit from. Settlers willing to engage in this kind of learning was inspiring for Indigenous participants to witness. This is an initial step towards systems change.

# 6

## More action is needed.

Strategic and intentional action from diverse actors and organizations is required so that Surrey can become a great place to raise an Indigenous child and youth. Policies, programs, tools, and strategies need to be developed in the context of Surrey. To combat anti-Indigenous racism and move forward in innovative and systemic ways, the Symposium concluded that much more action is needed.









# Ways Forward from Here

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At the Symposium, participants came up with 6 key strategies to take action.

## 1

### **Recognize / identify / name / acknowledge racism in Surrey.**

One participant said:

***“We need space to heal, unpack how racism has historically and currently affects our family systems so we can move forward and build the resilience needed to dismantle racism.”***

Being able to acknowledge and “unpack” racism towards Indigenous peoples in Surrey was an important first step in Skookum Lab’s Indigenous innovation process. However, we learned that our analysis cannot stop at recognizing racism. We must look at it systemically and holistically.

## 2

### **Learn to see systemic racism.**

Racism is not just an individual or relational problem. Racism is deeply embedded in Canadian systems, at all levels of society. In particular, racism is felt by Indigenous residents when they access social and health care services and when they go to school, city hall, university and their workplace.

It is through diverse methods and a safe and trauma informed environment that Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors can “see systemic racism”. This was a key recommendation: to be able to engage in conversations about systemic causes of racism and to identify when, how, where, and with who racism occurs in diverse systems. Our collective work is to empower our communities in Surrey to do this challenging but transformative work.



### 3

## **Collectively develop more tools, policy, and structures to respond to racism.**

Indigenous participants expressed that they feel “alone” in doing the work to combat racism. Many felt that Indigenous-Surrey residents cannot do this work alone, especially when racism is so pervasive in the city. Participants acknowledged that a lot could be achieved if more collective work, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors, was carried out. There is much more work to be done to develop and implement policies, tools, procedures, and sector-specific strategies to address anti-Indigenous racism.

### 4

## **Create allyship.**

Many non-Indigenous participants expressed that the Symposium reaffirmed and strengthened their sense of responsibility to examine their own settler privilege and take actions to avoid perpetuating systems of oppression rooted in anti-Indigenous racism.

Participants identified the need for a tool discussing what “allyship” means and looks like in practice, including Surrey specific examples. Most often, non-Indigenous peoples (with settler backgrounds) rely on the emotional labour of Indigenous peoples and organizations to help them work through their own racism. Resources and tools to help guide non-Indigenous peoples in their own process of learning and “unlearning” would be helpful to create future allies and informed citizens.

# 5

## Ground the work in culture.

Incorporating cultural knowledge and practices, and decolonizing methodologies, the Lab “centres Indigenous wisdom” in the change making process. Social innovation techniques and exercises were applied through an Indigenous lens to be able to reveal the systemic nature of racism. The importance of grounding the work in culture was revealed in the way people were able to safely discuss such a painful and heavy topic and develop culturally grounded ways to combat racism.

# 6

## Embolden emerging leaders.

Indigenous participants expressed that they felt fully seen and heard through sharing their experiences and perspectives. Emboldening Surrey based Indigenous leaders and supporting them in culturally safe ways is a priority in this work so that they are able to share their diverse talents, skills, and knowledge. This is a strategy for building Indigenous social innovations and tackling the issue of racism. We need more opportunities to embolden the existing and emerging Indigenous leaders in the city of Surrey.

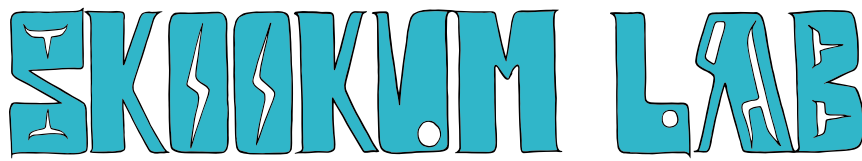




## Closing and Next Steps

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Participants recognized that racism cannot be “solved” in a two-day event. However, you can create safe spaces to embolden Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to create change for the next generation. This was one of the first Indigenous-specific symposiums ever held in Surrey to combat racism. It was an important start. We are ready to take the next steps, walking hand-in-hand with our Indigenous and non-Indigenous brothers and sisters.



**Our next steps:**

- 1. Apply for more funding to continue the discussion.**
- 2. Strengthen the relationship with Semiahmoo and other land based First Nations to ground the work in place-based cultural practice.**
- 3. Expand the circle.**



# OVERCOMING — RACISM — TOGETHER

