

## **MARCH 21<sup>st</sup> PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES -2001**

# **OPEN HEARING ON RACISM TO INVOKE MEMORY AND CONFIRM VOICES OF EXPERIENCE**

## **OPENING REMARKS**

**delivered by Esmeralda M.A. Thornhill**

### **Context and Need for Today;s Gathering**

Council of Elders, Distinguished Members of the Bench, Esteemed Observers, Special Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, today is important on several levels. A 1960 unconscionable act of racism under SA's then apartheid régime was the catalyst that resulted in today's date, March 21<sup>st</sup>, being declared and commemorated world-wide by the International Community as the *International Day to Eliminate Racial Discrimination*. But, in addition, March 21<sup>st</sup> 2001 is significant because this year 2001 marks the start of the Third Millennium, and we are well into the *3<sup>rd</sup> United Nations Decade to Combat Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*. And lastly, the forthcoming *3<sup>rd</sup> United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR)*, scheduled for August-September in Durban SA, is mobilizing and

mustering the world's resources for the purpose of eradicating the scourge of racism.

For all these reasons and because of its mandate *to bring Black culture, reality, perspectives, experiences and concerns into the Academy*, the **James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies** is very proud to co-sponsor, within the context of its Eminent Speakers' Series this afternoon's *Open Hearing To Invoke Memory and Confirm Voices of Experience*. And this is appropriate.

For today's gathering has the legal, political and spiritual *imprimatur* or stamp of legitimacy of the United Nations, of the International Community, of our Nation State, Canada, of our provincial and municipal authorities and of our spiritual leadership .... On this very day right now, Nation States the world over are re-affirming the commitment they have made to eradicate racism; this is a time when our own federal government is criss-crossing the country in national consultations on racism; it is also a moment when provincial, municipal and public authorities and agencies are also inscribing Racism as a priority on their own particular agendas, and publicly re-viewing and re-newing their commitment to eliminate Racism. Ladies and Gentlemen, it then becomes more than fitting and timely for us to gather here today, in this place, in this unprecedented way.

The theme of today's Hearing, *An Open Hearing to Invoke Memory and Confirm Voices of Experience*, is also topical and, I might add, long overdue. You see, Racism is a

polymorphous agent of death— of social, civil, and physical death spawning premature births, shortened lives, starving children, debilitating theft of childhood, stolen innocence, stunted aspirations, promises betrayed, expectations unfulfilled... dignity and humanity assailed, abusive larceny, shattered dreams, (irretrievable) peace of mind, degrading insults and insulting stereotypes that are forcibly imposed.

As African American philosopher Leonard Harris affirms,

*“The ability of a population [whether Black or Aboriginal for example] to accumulate wealth and transfer assets to their progeny is stunted by racism. As the bane of honor, respect, and a sense of self-worth, racism surreptitiously stereotypes. It stereotypes its Victim[-Survivors] as persons inherently bereft of virtues and incapable of growth. Racism is the agent that [would] create and sustain a virulent pessimism in its victims. The subtle nuances that encourage granting unmerited and undue status to a racial social kind are the tropes [or recurring themes] of Racism. Racism creates criminals, cruel punishments, and crippling confinement, while the representatives of virtue profit from sustaining the conditions that ferment crime. Systemic denial of a population’s humanity is the hallmark of racism.”* Leonard Harris (Ed.) *Racism: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*, New York: Humanity Books, 437.

Because it attacks our humanity, Racism is a health hazard that attacks our spirit putting us at risk, individually and collectively.

Consequently, this Hearing today constitutes a **sacred** and spiritual space— for our spirits are in need of healing. This is also a **protected** space, intended to be **therapeutic**, addressing above all else, Black Community comfort level.... For, though our Canadian society throughout History has always been very ‘race conscious,’ yet we continue to stolidly maintain a tradition of inexplicitness when it comes to issues of ‘Race’ concerning our Communities.

As a society, we do not seem to ever— even now— be really comfortable with bringing up the matter of ‘race;’ and yet, Racism is of public notoriety in so many Communities of Colour across this country. Racism scars the daily lifescapes of every Black, Aboriginal, and Asian person living in Canada. But we are loath to talk about it; and because of this tradition— this conspiracy of silence and denial— it becomes dangerous for the few to speak up and speak out about racism.

And so, Ladies and Gentlemen, for this major reason today’s forum is crafted to be a **Safe Space**. Through the pooling of our Individual and Collective experiences— our Truths as we have lived them— we are today creating that “**Safe**” Space , wherein the Truth of Racism can be told from Black perspective and from Black comfort level. This truth is reinforced by both our Elders who, with their knowings,

provide historical context and continuity, and by our spiritual leadership who minister to our Community grounding and bringing stability to our collective and individual lives.

Like Émile Zola's 1898 *Open Letter, J'accuse*, or Martin Luther King's 1963 *Open Letter From A Birmingham Jail*...., or 3 decades later, Judge Leon Higginbotham's *Open Letter to Judge Clarence Thomas*, today's Open Hearing is all about bringing Truth as we see and live it into the open, for Public Scrutiny. This space is about Agency, Autonomy, and Authority vested in Black skin; it is about Empowerment; and above all, it is about **Black comfort level**. This Hearing is intended to be a **therapeutic** space, a **Healing** space, a sanctuary for **Recovery**, and a **Nurturing Haven for Those Bruised and Wounded in Spirit...**

This Hearing is also a space heavily invested with Collective Cultural Memory, the Culture of Survival. You see, the habit of Survival has dictated that, to make it successfully through each day, for the most part, we must often banish to the corners and bury in the recesses of our consciousness, the multitudinous and daily, relentless, onslaught of micro-aggressions and macro-assaults that would crush and '*spirit murder*' us as individuals, as a people. However, today, many of us will invariably find resonance and see ourselves reflected...our humiliation, pain and strengths mirrored in the various testimonies and narratives that describe and speak to Racism from the perspectives of both the

Community, and the Organizational and the Individual experiences.

From our particular perspective as a Black Community, we have come to know and see History littered with Black lives — squandered humanity, obscured, wasted, spent, crushed, snuffed out, relegated to oblivion .... From our critical vantage point, we see Black experience and expertise undermined, nullified, erased and disappeared as a matter of course.....

And yet,

- the 1806 experience of that Black Woman, named Peggy aged about 40 years and a Black boy her son, named Jupiter aged about 15 years both of them the property of the subscriber, Peter Russell, and each of them Servants for Life— this experience is also our reality;
- the 1784 experience of Black Birchtown residents, free men and women, set upon, burnt out of house and home and run out of town by disbanded White soldiers— this is also our reality;
- the 1941 experience of Viola Desmond, physically roughed up and ejected from the public theatre and thrown into New Glasgow jail overnight... all because she dared to sit where she chose instead of in the balcony reserved for Blacks— this is also our

reality;

- the experiences of our Black students being subjected in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century to offensive classroom curriculum that undermines and erodes their self concept — this is our reality;
- the experience of young Black men like Buddy Evans and Sandy Seale, cut down in their prime, wrongfully and with impunity— this is also our reality;
- the experience of Noel Johnston, aspiring back then to become a lawyer, and the legacy of his vocational Shopmobile— this is also our reality;
- the experiences of Enid Clayton and other Preston market merchants setting out in the early morning hours for the arduous trek to Halifax to sell their crafts— this is also our reality;
- the experiences of *bona fide* Black graduates leaving Nova Scotia so as to secure employment— this is also our reality;
- the on-going unfair experience of Africville residents— this is also our reality;

- the experiences of uncertainty and precarity of Black landowners in the Prestons— this is also our reality;
- the experience of Black workers still subjected to tainted and toxic discriminatory work environments — this is also our reality.

We need to evoke, invoke and articulate all these forms of evidence so as to ensure that with our intimate knowledge, we are the ones positioned to frame the discourse around the material reality Racism and we become the authority to define the level or degree of remedy relief or reparation necessitated. This gathering is a start. It represents a critical assessment of and departure from our historically reactive or passive role. This forum is a unique opportunity for us Black people in Canada, on the front lines caught up in the social vortex of Race and racism, to start recording, for our progeny, for Posterity, for History, in our own “*Voices of Authenticity*”, the fullness of the knowledge which the 20<sup>th</sup> century has just bequeathed. Our streams of consciousness, our culture, reality, perspectives, experiences and our concerns— past and present— are an indispensable part and parcel of Canadian reality and they should also refract the History and Public policies of this country.

Like Black people elsewhere in the world such as South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), we



too are called upon to innovate. This Hearing is unique. It is **not** about vengefulness. This space is meant to be a comfort zone of safety, geared towards collective Recovery, Healing and Empowerment. This Hearing initiative constitutes an act of Agency to end “Race-erase”, i.e. the erasure and/or contrived invisibility of Black culture, reality, perspectives experiences and concerns. This Open Hearing also represents a proactive auditing and affirming of our collective strengths: Our Open-ness and Hospitality to Others, Our sense of Fairness to Others, The Bonds of Kinship bred of the Skinship that we share, Our Sense of Responsibility to Self, to Family and to Community, our abiding Sense of Spirituality, Our Recognition of our Human frailty in the Context of the Creator’s Universe, Our deep-rooted belief that we too are Significant Humanity, Our Stamina for Survival with Dignity...

The pedagogical value of today’s Hearing is incalculable. As some of you may already know, today’s Open Hearing is part of an ongoing process, a point on the continuum of Community capacity -building. This Hearing represents the third in a series of preliminary activities that will culminate in an International Symposium, *Racism and the Black World Response* scheduled to take place right here in Halifax, next August 5<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> 2001. The evidence adduced today and the ensuing findings will resonate not only provincially, and regionally, but also nationally and internationally.

**May today’s Hearing prove to be a Teaching Moment and an Opportunity for Learning for all of us!**