



BC Black History Awareness Society  
OUR ROOTS RUN DEEP

# Identity & Belonging



## Youth Perspectives

Edited by Alice Mũthoni Mũrage and Jocelyn Wong

The African  
Ancestry Project

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# Acknowledging Our Context

The African Ancestry Project is based on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples.

This Project has entailed partnerships and participation of organizations and individuals from across the Province of British Columbia— from Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, Vancouver Island to the Peace River Regional District. These lands on which we live, work, learn, and play is testament to centuries of stewardship by Indigenous Peoples. These lands also remind us of the brutal colonization and disenfranchisement Indigenous Peoples have experienced throughout Canada. The legacy of colonization is ongoing. We stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples in their push for decolonization, self-determination, and redress for past human rights violations and injustices they continue to suffer. We commit to learning how to practice reconciliation. As readers, we urge you to join us in this commitment. That in our little ways we can make a contribution and not perpetuate harm.

Our struggles and freedoms are tied to each other. As Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, *"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."*

As we reflect on these lands we are privileged to call home, let us:

- Ground ourselves in knowledge about Indigenous Peoples, their histories, and current realities
- Participate in reconciliation efforts in any capacity we can

Above all else, we can no longer claim ignorance.

There are many resources in various formats which we can draw from to learn, unlearn, and recalibrate. Let's commit to learning from resources by Indigenous creators and storytellers, many of which are available online.



# Foreword

The African Ancestry Project was born from a partnership I entered with the BC Black History Awareness Society in 2020. The partnership was based on our shared vision of creating a greater awareness to the diversity of people of African ancestry across the Province of British Columbia. Black people are not a monolith— we are not one people with a singular history, identity, and experience. Our histories and identities are arguably the most diverse of any peoples that have been clumped together. This spans from generational Canadians whose rootedness on this lands span over seven generations, to more recent arrivals with roots from across the globe, to many of mixed ancestries.

The 2016 census revealed that Black immigrants come from over 170 countries, from Africa, the Caribbean, North and South America, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. I took this data and created an interactive map which to this day still mesmerises me when I think of the diversity of this collective categorized as Black based on skin tone. The thousands of individuals born in countries like Russia, Ukraine, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, China, Hungary, and Kazakhstan were surprising to me. We have not even accounted for the diversity within these birth countries. African countries, for instance, are immensely diverse. Take Nigeria, the country of birth of over 41,000 immigrants according to the 2016 census: the country has over 250 ethnic groups—each with a unique culture, language, and traditions. Yet when someone from Nigeria, or other similarly diverse countries, land in Canada, they are categorized as Black regardless of their cultural identity. Historical and ongoing categorization of humans contributes to erasure.

This human categorization is also linked to how people are treated and how societal privileges and penalties are distributed. Racism is central to racial categorization. This is an omnipresent force shaping the fate of individuals; it is a force implemented by individuals and institutions. The mentality that justified enslavement of Africans persists. It is evident in police interactions with Black people, drug mart security following Black patrons, teachers telling Black children they are not good enough, racism in schools and society remaining unaddressed, Black workers being underemployed, underpaid, and unpromoted: These are just a few of the stories shared through the project. Systemic racism is prevalent in Canada. Black people have historically and continue to fight for racial equity. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter inspired young people to join this struggle— it is relevant in Canada.



# Countries of birth of Black immigrants in Canada



Data source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016

Legend: All shaded countries represent birth places of Black immigrants in Canada. The darker the shade, the bigger the immigrant population from the specific country.

[Interactive map, with numbers of immigrants from each country of birth.](#)

## 4

Over 160 people of African ancestry in British Columbia participated in the African Ancestry Project. They wanted their stories, and that of their families and ancestors, to be told. Theirs was part of the tapestry of untold stories. Now they have been told. They have been documented: They are a record of our present and our histories. These stories are just the tip of the iceberg in starting to understand the diversity of people of African ancestry in the province—over 60,000 individuals. I encourage you to read the project report where I weave these stories into a tale of our diverse histories, identities, and experiences. In her contribution to the report, Dr. Yabome Gilpin-Jackson reflected:

*"This report, though not exhaustive, provides a bird's eye view of the histories, experiences, and identities of Black lives and lineage and will resonate with African descendant readers personally and with insights into our diverse community identities. It sheds light upon the many ways we walk this earth in our melanated skins and how we have come to be in British Columbia. This research and dialogue project is a gift to my daughter and all the daughters who share in the quest to answer the ultimate human questions: Who am I? What is my story? How did I come to be here? Where do I belong?"*

Since the launch of the report, I have continued to facilitate dialogue through public events and other community engagements. One of the recommendations that came out of these engagements is the need to bring in youth. Due to legal consent logistics, the project limited research participation to those who were 19 years or older. While participants reflected on their experiences as youth, narratives of our youngest generation were excluded. Acknowledging this need to engage youth at a time when they were transitioning to adulthood and actively developing their ideals and personal values in search for their place and contribution to society, the idea of a youth dialogue series was born. I partnered with Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre of Dialogue in curating and holding space for a BIPOC youth dialogue series. We recognized that some of the struggles and isolation faced by Black youth are likely to be faced by other youth categorized as BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour. We engaged nearly 30 youth, between ages 15 and 19 years, through three dialogue events between 2022 and 2023 under the theme of *Identity and Belonging in Multicultural British Columbia*.

**Identity & Belonging: Youth Perspectives** is a dialogue in and of itself. In curating the magazine, Jocelyn Wong and myself wanted to create space for interaction and reflection. We offer a glimpse of discussions held through the youth dialogue through summary pieces. At the centre of it is contributions by the youth themselves. Community organizations and members also generously contributed to this magazine.

They shared their wisdom, hopes, and dreams for the youth and what the future holds. We conclude with a list of resources targeted to youth. Older youth who supported the dialogue series, 20-25 years old, as facilitators also share reflections on their engagement. We opened the last event in the series to the public. Parents, educators, and other community members shared how impactful it was listening to and engaging with youth. They wanted to understand how to better support younger generations. This magazine is an attempt to bring these conversations to your living rooms, classrooms, and workplaces. To ensure young people and adults alike are engaged beyond the context and timeline of the events that we hosted.

We encourage you to pause and reflect on questions posed throughout the magazine. I hope that you find the format stimulating and engaging.

It has been a beautiful journey of holding space for collective storytelling and genuine dialogue through the African Ancestry Project. I do not take this privilege for granted. I encourage you to take this forward by holding space for dialogue wherever you find yourself. Take the dialogue outside these pages. A luta continua.



*Alice Mũrage*

**Director, African Ancestry Project**

## Read the Report

Alice Mũthoni Mũrage. 2022. Worlds Within: Diverse Histories, Identities, and Experiences of Black People of African Ancestry in British Columbia. African Ancestry Project.





# The Youth Dialogue Series: A Summary

The African Ancestry Project hosted the Youth Dialogue Series between 2022 and 2023 to engage young people in dialogue based on the content of the project's report *Worlds Within*. The Series entailed three online events attended by over 30 BIPOC youth between ages 15 and 19 years, mostly in high school, across the Province of British Columbia. At this age, young people are grappling with, and shaping, their identity and place in society. While schools are important avenues to provide guidance in transition to adulthood, certain topics central to this process are left out of classrooms. Black, Indigenous, Asian and youth of other racialized backgrounds are often isolated inside and outside school spaces where these conversations can be possible. Processing questions and feelings with other youth with similar experiences and curiosities can be an affirming and empowering experience. The Youth Dialogue Series sought to create a space for this exchange. The theme of the youth dialogue series was *Identity and Belonging in Multicultural British Columbia*.

In registering for the event, we asked youth what inspired them to register and what they hope to learn and gain from this experience, which will be highlighted later in this magazine. We worked towards meeting these inspirations and hopes.

**BIPOC youth (ages 15 to 19) in BC!**

Attend events held specifically for youth of racialized backgrounds. Make new friends and connect virtually to explore the theme of:

**"IDENTITY & BELONGING IN MULTICULTURAL BRITISH COLUMBIA"**

**THE AFRICAN ANCESTRY PROJECT: YOUTH DIALOGUE SERIES**

**3 EVENTS**

**NOV 2022 | FEB 2023 | MAY 2023**

Register via QR code or email [africanancestryprojectbc@gmail.com](mailto:africanancestryprojectbc@gmail.com) to express your interest. See you there!

 **BC Black History Awareness Society**  
OUR ROOTS RUN DEEP

 **SFU** MORRIS J. WOSK  
CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

# Multiculturalism & Belonging: Why It Matters to Youth

At the Youth Dialogue Series, we talked about the meaning and potential of multiculturalism. We agreed that multiculturalism cannot be merely the existence of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, but rather a commitment to recognizing and promoting diversity, and more importantly, a responsibility to grant equal rights, justice, and equity. It is only then that the government's commitment to multiculturalism can be felt in real terms.

## WHAT IS MULTICULTURALISM?

*Diversity of  
ethnic &  
cultural groups*

*Recognition  
of diversity*

*Promotion of  
diversity*

*Granting  
of equal  
rights*

*Justice  
and  
equity*

# Timeline

Canada was founded on stolen lands and its ethno-cultural makeup is a product of immigration policies that were used to limit non-white immigrants. As such, we struggle to disentangle ourselves from the legacy of colonization and enslavement, and ongoing racial discrimination.

While there has been shifts over the decades towards more equitable policies and reconciliation, more work still needs to be done to actualize the potential of multiculturalism as a national policy.

**1982 Multiculturalism enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**

"This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians"

**1995 Employment Equity Act**

**1996 Census includes data on "visible minorities"**

**2007 The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement**

**2019, 2024 Canada Anti-Racism Strategy**

**2024 BC Anti-Racism Act**

**1971 Canada Multiculturalism Policy**

"Although there are two languages, there is no official culture."<sup>1</sup>

**1988 Canada Multiculturalism Act**<sup>2</sup>

"[Canada is] the first country in the world to enshrine its multiculturalism policy in legislation...multiculturalism is a defining characteristic of Canadian identity."<sup>3</sup>

**1996 British Columbia Multiculturalism Act**

"When you move to BC, you can continue practising your religious beliefs and cultural traditions. As a member of our ethnically diverse communities, you will also be able to experience the cultural heritage of other people from around the world."<sup>4</sup>

**2000s Commemoration of diversity through days/weeks/months of recognition**

Refer to the next page for examples of these.

**2015 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls**

**2022 BC Anti-Racism Data Act**

**2024 Canada Black Justice Strategy**

[1] G. Laing and Celine Cooper. 2019. Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. The Canadian Encyclopedia.

[2] The Multiculturalism Act and annual report on its implementation.

[3] Government of Canada. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

[4] Welcome BC 2024. Multicultural B.C. Government of British Columbia.

# Notable Dates

## BC Multiculturalism Day

(3rd week of Nov,  
from 2002)

## Islamic History Month

(Oct, from 2007)

## Canadian Multiculturalism Day

(Jun 27, from 2002)

## Black History Month

(Feb, from 2008)

## National Indigenous Peoples Day

(Jun 21, from 1996)

## National Indigenous History Month

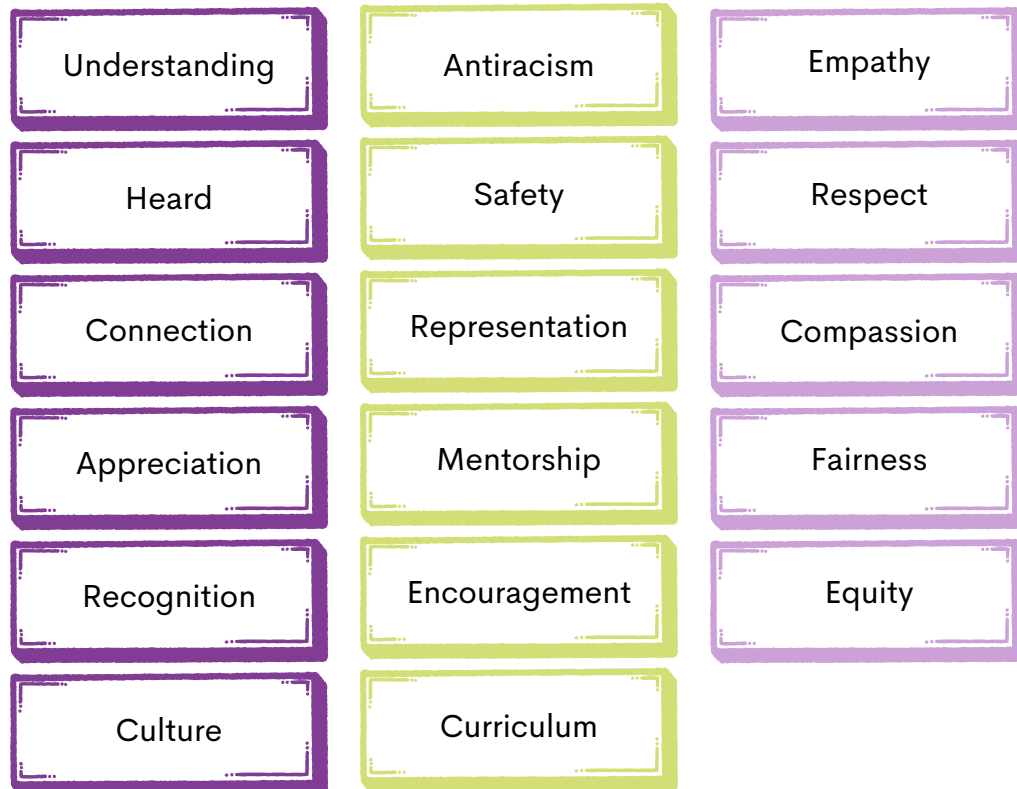
(Jun, from 2007)

## Asian Heritage Month

(May, from 2002)



Participants of the Youth Dialogue Series shared that multiculturalism was important but is most relevant when it improves their sense of belonging at schools and in society. Belonging was defined as feeling safe and supported, where one feels included, accepted, and valued for who they are. This then contributes positively to their wellbeing and happiness. They shared a lot of wisdom on how commitment to multiculturalism can translate to a greater sense of belonging for them. Below are some keywords and quotes from the discussion for the attention of the government, school districts, educators, parents, and community members.



*"I think 'diversity awareness' training for teachers is not enough. Maybe teaching systems thinking or critical race theory for them to understand that multiculturalism and race informs every aspect of our life."*

*"With both Black and Indigenous history, I feel like the only things we learn about is how they have been colonized and not positive things like enjoying their culture, heritage and history."*

*"Knowing you can rely on your teachers already builds a sense of stability and comfort which could translate to belonging."*

# What can be done and by whom to improve your sense of belonging at school or in other spaces?

Provide spaces in schools for research on cultural heritage and offer cultural language courses instead of mandatory French.

Prevent tokenization and ensure teachers respect BIPOC cultures without singling students out.

Provide spaces in schools for research on cultural heritage and offer cultural language courses instead of mandatory French.

Celebrate BIPOC joy, creativity, and wisdom. Embrace affirming aspects of identity.

Increase cultural awareness among teachers and staff, providing safe, open-minded spaces.

Advocate for administrative changes to policies, enabling long-term inclusivity.

Introduce Critical Race Theory, Systems Thinking, and expand Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion training.

Ensure students are not solely responsible for initiating change and compensate them for diversity work, including emotional labour.

Celebrate cultural diversity through events and parties.

Build trust in faculty to create a sense of belonging.

Enforce a no-tolerance policy for racism.

Update curriculum to include the full history of Black people, Canada's colonial past, and trauma-informed, accurate history books.

Introduce classes on BIPOC culture and literature, replacing colonial narratives.

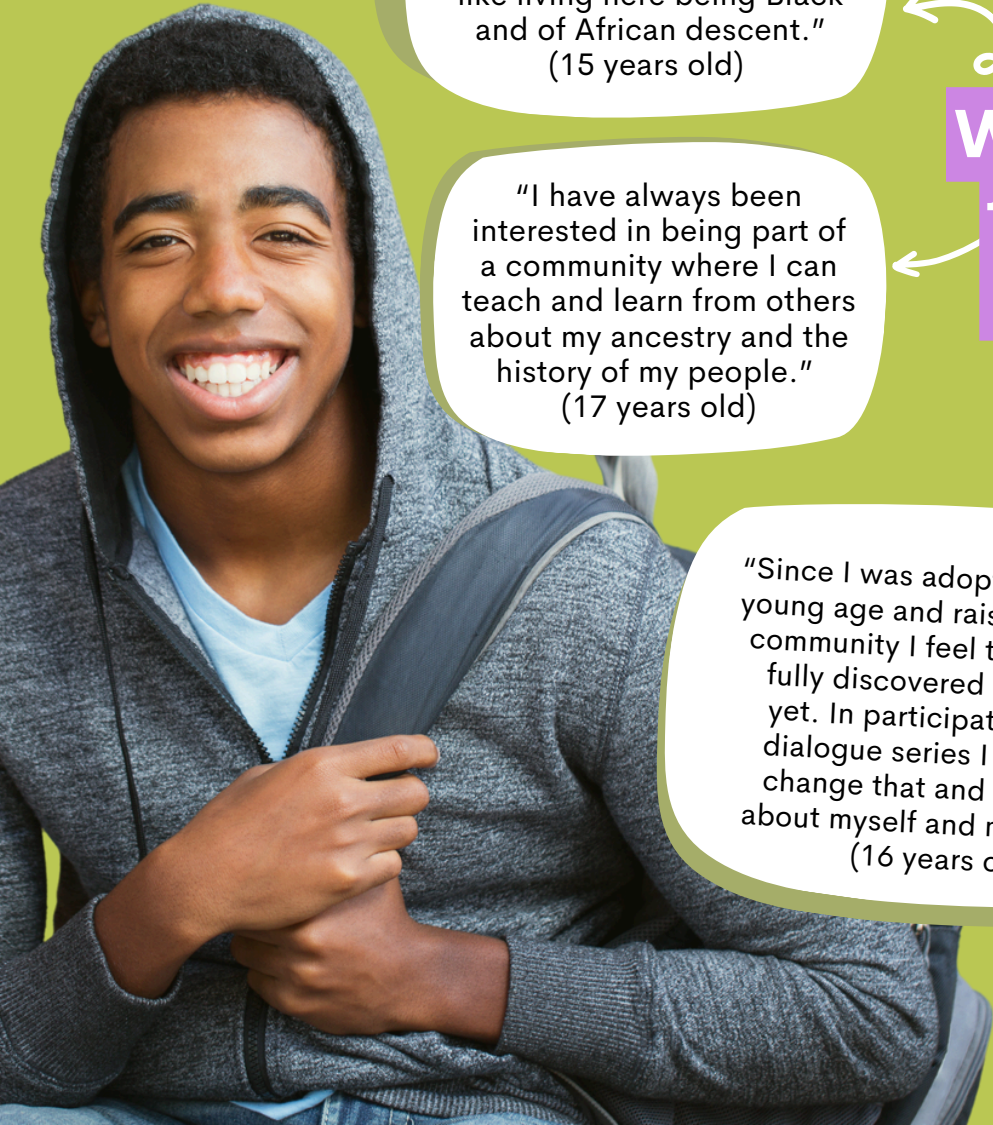
Celebrate cultural music, food, dance, and holidays by centring and accommodating diverse traditions.

Foster dialogue and connection among those with shared experiences.

Include BIPOC representation in teachers, mentors, and leadership roles, reducing the dominance of cis white men in power.

Stop cancel culture and encourage openness to learning about other cultures.

Establish cultural centres for community-building.



"I have been passionate and followed the Black Lives Matter Movement for many years. Taking any opportunity to voice the major public health and human rights issues of police brutality and systemic racism flooded within our earths systems. These issues are usually only pointed out within the United States. Canada dismisses them and does not acknowledge how they happen here too."  
(17 years old)

"Hearing other people's stories. I moved to BC this year and I'm interested to learn more about what it's like living here being Black and of African descent."  
(15 years old)

"I want to make sure that the 2023 narrative of our Black ancestry in Vancouver is correct and preserved."  
(17 years old)

**What inspired you to engage in the Youth Dialogue Series?**

"I have always been interested in being part of a community where I can teach and learn from others about my ancestry and the history of my people."  
(17 years old)

"Many of my peers and I have ancestry from North and East Africa, and it is important that our experience in Canada is shared and understood as part of the African Ancestry Project."  
(16 years old)

"Since I was adopted at a really young age and raised in a white community I feel that I haven't fully discovered my identity yet. In participating in your dialogue series I hope I can change that and learn more about myself and my origins."  
(16 years old)

"Being a biracial person who has struggled with how I identify as a person, finding a community who is connected and can relate plus speaking out about my mixed experience is important to me."  
(18 years old)



# What do you hope to learn from your participation in this dialogue series?

"I want to learn the experiences shared and different across racialized youths. Do we share the same systematic issues? Are we considered equal in Canadian society right now, even if we are considered a multicultural state? Do our experiences differ from city to city?"  
(19 years old)

"I would like to hear from others and learn about how people think and why they think the way they do. I am interested in discussing real subjects with students my age and listening to stories people are willing to share."  
(17 years old)

"I want to learn more about my African identity, my role in today's society and how I as an individual can make meaningful change."  
(16 years old)

"I hope to learn strategies to work together as a society in order to make the world a safe space for the BIPOC community, and gaining tools as I delve deep into my career goals of Human Rights and Social Work."  
(17 years old)

"I belong to the Black Excellence Youth Club at school. It is mainly a forum for us to discuss important ideas about our experience as young Black Canadians. I want to learn how to dialogue peacefully about difficult issues."  
(17 years old)





# Cultivating Connection:

## My Role in the Youth Dialogue Series



**Jocelyn Wong**

Planning & Research Coordinator,  
SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

I had the pleasure of working with Alice Mūrage on the African Ancestry Project's Youth Dialogue Series over the span of two years. More than anything, the experience has highlighted for me the importance of creating intentional spaces for BIPOC youth to explore their identities and navigate challenging topics around race and belonging. Assisting in the coordination of three online events, which engaged young people from across British Columbia, allowed me to contribute to a meaningful project that addressed the need for conversations often overlooked in traditional school settings.

Watching the series come together and seeing youth interact in these safe(r) spaces felt deeply rewarding. The theme of Identity and Belonging in Multicultural British Columbia resonated with the participants, and I saw firsthand how dialogue fostered a sense of connection and empowerment among them. This experience reinforced my belief in the power of dialogue and the importance of inclusive, youth-centered spaces for personal growth and community building. I am continually blown away by the power (some might say \*magic\*) of storytelling.

# Centring Self-Compassion & Self Care



Genique Baker is an intuitive life coach. She was raised by parents of uniquely different cultures and religious backgrounds— of Sri Lankan and Jamaican descent. This inspired her to integrate Eastern spirituality with Western psychology through education and lived experience. Genique works with people of all walks of life to help them align with their most authentic expression. You can find her on Instagram @intention.is.everything

Genique Baker supported the African Ancestry Project youth dialogue series by being available to participants. In the last session, she made a presentation on self-care and healing.

In her presentation, Genique shared how moments of unbelonging, moments of rejection or moments of isolation can feel so threatening, uncomfortable, and painful. This is because our survival used to depend on belonging to a group. Finding your “tribe” is still an important part of the human experience because at our core we are communal beings. Moments of unbelonging are not always in our control. We will almost always experience unbelonging at some point in our lives. It is therefore important to have the tools to process these experiences.

Genique noted that engaging in regular self care can allow us to move quicker and with more ease through moments of unbelonging which can trigger feelings of threat or pain. Self care is the process of establishing behaviours to ensure your wellbeing and health. Examples of self care can include exercise/movement, journaling, getting good sleep, eating a balanced diet, getting out into nature, spending time with loved ones, setting boundaries, engaging in hobbies or activities that bring you joy, meditation, breathwork, getting creative through art or other expression, and speaking to someone you trust, a therapist, counsellor, or coach. Genique emphasized the importance of self-compassion informed by an awareness of our internal dialogue. This allows us to lay down a strong foundation for self care. She noted that everyone can get triggered. It is for this reason that self-compassion and self care needs to be ongoing work.



# Holding onto My Heritage, Fulfilling Our Dreams

My name is Ataklti Tsegay. I was born in Eritrea in 2003 and moved to Canada in 2018 at the age of 15.

To me, being Eritrean means everything. I was born and raised in Eritrea, I did most of my education in Eritrea, that's where I learnt how to walk, how to talk, how to conduct myself, the meaning of respect, the importance of family, and so much more. I met some of my best friends and made my best memories in Eritrea. I hold on to everything I learnt in Eritrea and I am proud of my Eritrean heritage. I love the food, the culture, the art, the music, the dance and most importantly, the people of Eritrea. Eritreans are the nicest and friendliest people in the world. We pride ourselves in our comradery and togetherness. I miss going to church with my parents and grandparents and hanging out with my friends after church.

Moving to Canada was not easy. We moved with my parents and siblings in 2018. Like most immigrant families, we moved to Canada looking for a better life. The one thing I love about Canada is the opportunities that lie here. With hard work, you can make a better life for you and your loved ones. I also love the fact that I can grow up with different perspectives and different cultural understandings. Canada is rich with multiculturalism and diversity and this has allowed me to step out of my bubble and understand how to function in a world beyond just the circle I grew up in.





It has not always been easy. My first few months in Canada were very challenging. I did not speak the language, so making friends, connections, and having an understanding of school were all very difficult. I also missed home and missed my family and friends. It took a lot of hard work and patience for me to finally get myself in a position where I could feel more at home. I challenged myself to read more books, watch videos and movies in English, and took language courses to help me get past my language barrier. The more I understood English, the better I was able to get comfortable in Canada. I was able to make friends, make connections, improve my marks in school and finish high school. Because I came to Canada as a teenager, I had some catching up to do in my education. I did this by utilizing night school and adult school and putting myself in a position to complete all that is required for post secondary education.

My plan is to go into trades, more specifically plumbing. I like working with my hands and getting creative in my work and have been gathering experience to help me with post secondary applications. I have applied to post secondary institutions and I am hoping to start in 2024. I want to have a career as a plumber and potentially start my own business in the future. When my parents moved here, they did so in search of a better life. I want to do everything I can to make sure their goal becomes a reality and we can have the life they wanted for us.

Despite all this, I still hold on to my African heritage. No matter where I go, Eritrea will always be my home. I will closely hold the stories and lessons that I learnt growing up in Eritrea and I will make sure my future kids have a great understanding and appreciation for the rich culture and heritage that Eritrea provides.

— Ataklti Tsegay





# Indigenous Youth

It was very insightful having an Indigenous perspective at the youth panel discussion. Kyle Alec is from the Syilx (Okanagan) Nation and Secwepemc (Shuswap) Nation and is a member of the Penticton Indian Band in Southern British Columbia. He is a male youth representative for the BC Assembly of First Nations.

Kyle shared how connection to culture after high school contributed to a greater sense of belonging for him. He grew up disconnected from his community and held stigma against his culture due to negative stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples fed to him by people around him, including at school. Kyle shared, "I felt a greater sense of belonging when I started connecting with my culture, traditions, and my ancestors. This connection is what holds me together."

Youth who participated in the dialogue series consistently highlighted how connection to culture can have a positive effect to their sense of belonging. When asked about how we can better support Indigenous youth, Kyle's answer was short and simple: "Indigenous youth want to be heard and understood. Just listen."

— Alice Mürage

**Recommended Listen:** *"Gentle Warrior" song created by the students and teachers at Allison Bernard Memorial High School in Eskasoni First Nation.*

[More about Kyle Alec](#)



# Aspirations of Hope:

## A Reflection

I reflect on my experience facilitating the African Ancestry Project Youth Dialogue event in November 2022, from my position as a Sociology and Labour studies professor. I teach and conduct research on race from a political economic perspective, in the context of the Black Canadian immigrant experience. Without a doubt, I come to this reflection with mixed emotions. On one end, I am encouraged by the opportunity to engage the youth on questions of identity and belonging, as such dialogue has often been avoided under Canada's multicultural myth of inclusivity[1]. However, although I am delighted by the fullness of persistence that it takes to engage in these critical discussions, I also grapple with the contradictory experiences that continue to define – and often defy – Black identity and belonging.

A nod to my locationality, while my engagement with the youth dialogue event series emanated from my professional capacity as an educator, it was also motivated by the personal. I say this to acknowledge that our philosophical persuasions and perspectives reflect our subjectivities, which are deeply embedded in our situated positions. Unsurprisingly, then, my experience facilitating the Youth Dialogue and reflecting on this event are informed by my situated positionalities. As a Black African immigrant educator that arrived in Canada as the (then) dependent child of first-generation immigrants from Kenya more than 20 years ago, the youth narratives strongly resonated with me.



Youth contextualized how their identity formation was implicated in overarching processes of Black migration and history in Canada. Drawing on little known but extant histories of waves of Black migration to Canada, the youth contemplated their own backgrounds in relation to Canada's past – pre and post confederation in 1867. In their poignant sharing of the challenges faced by immigrant families, these young people brought out our shared and complex histories.

While learning about the Black experience in Canada has largely been omitted in Canadian classrooms, it was empowering to witness Black youth who had taken it upon themselves to research and share these histories, defying the socio-cultural implications of the institutionalization of "our" erasures. It was in equal measure impressive and inspiring to hear how – amid the "noise" of histories of disadvantage and structures of oppression – these young people carved out a sense of identity, belonging and thriving.

As thematically outlined in this magazine, these youth are strategic as they fulfill their dreams "holding onto their heritage" and "seeking connections," whilst "exploring roots" and "finding community." While the youths' clear articulation of the isolation they face in and outside school and the barriers they contended with as under-represented youth touch a nerve, their affirmations to make a better life exhilarates. In their stories of waxing and waning through the immigrant journey, I envision with hope the reverberations of their aspirations.

— **Maureen Kihika**

Assistant Professor, Sociology and Labour Studies, Simon Fraser University

[1] Maureen Kihika, "'Good Intentions' that 'Do Harm': Canada's state multiculturalism Policy in the case of Black Canadians." *Canadian Review of Sociology*, No. 59 (2022) : 436–450.



## Exploring Identity by Seeking Connection

I participated in the African Ancestry Project's Youth Dialogue Series from November 2022 to May 2023, engaging in numerous Zoom meetings with BIPOC students from across the province.

Adopted at the age of 2 from Ethiopia and now living in Canada, my parents – although not Ethiopian themselves – have actively supported the exploration of my cultural identity. Despite their efforts, I sometimes grapple with feelings of disconnection from my Ethiopian roots, and question my identity. Growing up, I often felt left out for not being fluent in any Ethiopian language and as a result, struggled to connect with other Ethiopians. This challenge worsened as I navigated the complexities of fitting in at school and wrestled with the feeling of not being “Ethiopian enough.”

Despite these struggles, my parents have played a crucial role in shaping my cultural identity. They ensured that my sister and I had the opportunity to visit family in Ethiopia, providing us with firsthand experiences of the culture. They also actively sought out an Ethiopian community that embraced me wholeheartedly. My Ethiopian aunties and uncles show me their love with food and celebrations; I feel a sense of belonging with them.

When I joined the African Ancestry Project's Youth Dialogue Series, I initially felt uncertain about my role. I was unsure about participating or not. However, my unease dissipated as I experienced a warm welcome. I found that I did have valuable things to contribute. Everyone was so welcoming of my perspective and I felt as though I could freely share without the fear of judgement.



During one Zoom discussion about participants' identities, I answered that I identify as Black, but only because I didn't grow up in Africa where I was born - but rather in Canada, where people see me as Black. The conversation opened my eyes to the diverse perspectives within the group; some embraced the term 'Black,' while others rejected it. Surprisingly, there was another participant who, like me, was adopted from Ethiopia. We bonded over the shared experience. The group's diversity, not only in ethnicity but also in experiences and opinions, was striking.

Despite challenging discussions, the group provided a safe space for everyone to share openly about their struggles. It honestly was such a refreshing experience that exposed me to a myriad of circumstances and ideologies among Black Canadians. After all this exploration, I feel I am Ethiopian; I feel I am African. I also feel responsible for supporting my Black community. I am so grateful I had the opportunity to participate!



This is a picture of my name that I saw when I visited Ethiopia! It is written in Amharic ግራር (grar) means Acacia tree.

— **Acacia Rowan**


# “What was your impression of the Youth Dialogue Series as a facilitator?”

The third event in the Youth Dialogue Series, held on May 6, 2023, was opened to the public, inviting adults—parents, educators, policymakers, and other community members—to join youth in meaningful conversations. The event featured a youth panel and small group discussions, with over 60 attendees engaging around the central question:

- **If you had an opportunity as a group (with funding and resources available) to create an initiative that promoted multiculturalism, what would that be? Discuss the core values that will guide your initiative.**

In breakout sessions, groups of five to seven participants shared ideas and explored values essential for fostering inclusivity and cultural understanding in their communities. Six older BIPOC youth (20–25 years old), all alumni or students at Simon Fraser University, supported these group dialogues as facilitators and note takers. We asked them about their impressions of the dialogues. Their reflections will be dispersed throughout this magazine.



A photograph of two young men sitting at a table, laughing heartily. The man on the left has curly hair and is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The man on the right has dreadlocks and is wearing a grey sweater. They are both smiling broadly and looking at each other. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting.

I find myself deeply moved and enlightened by the shared experiences, stories, and perspectives that were brought to the table. This meaningful conversation provided a space where the richness and complexity of multiculturalism could be explored and celebrated. This realization challenged any simplistic notions or stereotypes I may have held and emphasized the importance of recognizing and respecting the unique backgrounds and experiences of individuals. Moreover, hearing personal stories of triumph, resilience, and struggle served as a poignant reminder of the legacy of oppression and systemic injustice that has shaped the lives of marginalized people in Canada. Also, I am reminded that multiculturalism is a continual process, one that requires constant dialogue, reflection, and action. It is about actively engaging with one another, challenging stereotypes, and striving for inclusivity.

— Enoch Sey Koomson, Dialogue Notetaker



# Don't Lose Yourself

"Don't lose yourself" was a sobering reminder to look back at a life of change.

A close friend texted this to me days before the year was to end. Things have certainly changed this year. I've switched jobs, fallen in and out of love, and took on a few more hobbies. I've gotten used to change over the years. In 2021, I changed my mind about the value of the 4 years of college education I'd received. In 2016 I changed schools. In 2012, I changed my style (from not caring, to caring). In 2007, I changed girls that I had a crush on.

While the change of most years has been mostly trivial, 2004 had a special kind of change. In 2004, my family packed their bags and moved to Canada from the Philippines.

I look back at my first few years in Canada fondly. I remember our first snowfall, when my brothers and I excitedly pushed an ever-growing snowball home from school. We didn't think it would get so big and we had to run home and get our dad for help. Despite the highlights, I also remember being made fun of by my peers for my dark skin, funny accent, and different vocabulary. I remember having to change how I pronounced my name because it was "too hard to pronounce." I didn't know yet that I was growing a hatred towards being Filipino. I was beginning to shun the Filipino parts of me away in order to fit in.





This time last year, I was in my hometown in the Philippines, celebrating Christmas like I used to. The streets outside my Lola's house were lined with *parols*, star-shaped Filipino ornamental lanterns hung outside during Christmas time. The same family that had raised me and seen me go, had accepted me with open arms. I wish I could say that it was all the same - that it was as if I had never left. But that's simply untrue. Over 15 years of separation had put a wedge in my relationship with the place I once called home.

Despite all this, I've learned to accept myself and love being Filipino. I have taken a vested interest in learning about Filipino history and involving myself in the culture as much as I can. Part of this is accepting and loving myself as a Filipino-Canadian. I've learned to accept that I won't ever have the life that I could have had, if I never left.

These days, the only thing that remains from the Christmas celebration at Lola's house is the parol hung outside my house and the houses of Filipino-Canadians in Vancouver. My family and I are still here. For now, I think that's enough.

— Mar Emanuel

*I've known these streets for longer than I ever thought*

*Unknowing ears still panic from the traffic's calls*

*I'll return only if I ever leave*

- Excerpt from Mar Emanuel's song, "If I Ever Leave"

[Emanuel's Website](#)





## The Newcomer's Compass

My name is Eyobel Michael. I was born and raised in Eritrea and moved to Canada in 2012 with my parents and 2 younger siblings. I am 26 years old. I also lived in Uganda between 2006 and 2012.

My African heritage is something I hold on to very closely. There is nothing better in the world than finishing a long day of school or work and going home to a freshly made Engera (Eritrean local delicacy). The principles and values I learnt from my grandparents is something that I hold on to dearly. Being African is more than just where I was born. Its beauty lies in the small details. For example, in Eritrea we celebrate the Geez New Year (usually late September) where young people run around their town carrying torches and chanting songs going to neighbours' houses asking for their blessings for the new year. In the center of the capital city, there would be a huge bonfire to close out the celebrations. It's an experience that needs to be lived to be truly appreciated. Back home, we celebrate Christmas on January 7. This means for me I get to celebrate Christmas twice and I implore you to go to an Eritrean church on Christmas day just once in your lifetime. It is an experience to behold.

Growing up in Africa and Canada has its upsides and downsides. On the one hand I get to grow up in a multicultural environment where I can learn and work with people from different walks of life that bring different ideas and perspectives. I also get to learn about new traditions and cultures that help expand my horizon. It is a welcome learning experience that has proven to be a valuable asset in my adult life, especially in my current role as a social worker.

It also comes with its fair share of downsides. Coming as a teenager, I felt a huge culture shock. It felt like restarting your life at 15 years old. It took me almost 3 years to fully adjust to Canada. From the weather to the language to simple everyday interactions, everything felt like a chore. I missed home, my friends and family. I watched my parents give up careers they once held dear to working minimum wage jobs. The Canadian dream was not as advertised.





Our struggles as a family landed us at Umoja Operation Compassion Society, a nonprofit organization that aims to help immigrant Families. Umoja played a huge role in helping us settle. The organization connected my mom with community resources that have been very supportive. I got a chance to volunteer with the organization and once I finished high school, I became the inaugural recipient of the Umoja Scholarship. In 2021, I got an opportunity to work there as a Youth Worker for newcomer youths.

I currently work as a youth worker for immigrant and refugee youths in Canada. This has given me an opportunity to give back to my community and make a difference. I have learned that my experience as a newcomer is one that I share with millions of newcomers. My experience has helped expand my horizon, understand people's experiences on a more personal level and help open doors for our youths that people once upon a time opened for me.

Despite all the ups and downs, one thing I have held onto is my African heritage. I take huge pride in being Eritrean. Working with fellow Eritreans at Umoja is a great reminder of where I am from and the journey that has gone to being the person I am today. The values and principles I learnt back home still guide me today and act as a compass for me and my brothers.

— Eyobel Michael



"In my school, I was the only Muslim wearing hijab. I stuck out throughout my time in school. In one class in grade 11, a social studies teacher showed a video depicting Muslims as terrorists and Muslim women as oppressed. I felt embarrassed and angry. I lost interest in learning from that teacher. My younger sister brought a worksheet from school reinforcing the same narrative. I was hoping things have changed. We need to unlearn and relearn. We need to challenge what we know and what we don't know about Muslims."

— Sabah Ghouse, Youth Panelist

Sabah is a MA student at Simon Fraser University studying Equity Studies in Education



# Finding Belonging in Humanness

Whenever I look at an image of myself, there are many aspects that seem to clash. I remember one morning, when I had just started growing out of my baby fat, I stared back at my reflection in the mirror and studied my round, dumpling-shaped face, jet black bangs, almond eyes, bunny nose, full eyebrows and protruding chin. My features perplexed me and made me ponder: Where did these come from? How could such contrasting features coexist simultaneously on one face—my face? Where did I come from?

Part of growing up is being introduced to society, and as I came across many new faces, I noticed that Western media never spotlighted celebrities that looked like me. Feeling estranged from the world being half of one race and half another, I wanted to erase my Asian identity. I grew to hate how naturally squinted my eyes were and how my hair was so black that it couldn't get any darker or any further from blonde. Unable to bear the chaos my reflection inflicted upon my mind, I shut my eyes and prayed to God that my Asian features would fade and I would one day turn pretty like those celebrities you see on TV.

Chocolate mousse, mountain peaks, morning rooster songs, raspberry fingers, the clink of metal of pétanque balls on the gravel driveway—this is my second home. With my family, I visited paternal relatives in southeastern France once a year, sometimes twice, developing an attachment to the culture. Living in Montreal, I already spoke French, a unique fusion of 'Quebecois French' I learned from school and 'France French' I learned with my father. Our city's culture is also influenced by Europe. It was easy for my heart to feel a sense of belonging in France, a world that drew many similarities to my own. However, my appearance made me question my comfort. It forbade me from feeling belonging to a culture when I physically contrasted from those who really belonged. It created a hole which I attempted to fill by proving that I was "French enough" and forcing integration.



Black brush strokes, steaming Chinese broccoli, mothballs, Ama's squawks at Agong, white tablecloths and crimson walls—to me, this world diverges from my own. I had tried to grasp Mandarin in classes with my grandmother's friend for several years, but it never stuck with me. I never spoke Chinese at home, let alone Taiwanese, and to this day, all I remember are the names of my favourite dishes so I can order food. I have never visited Taiwan. When walking through Chinatown unable to respond to store owners in Chinese, anxiety and shame followed me around; I was a prime example of a whitewashed Asian. I should fit in this box, my physical description and ancestry allows it, but its shape doesn't match that of my identity.

I identified with one cultural group when I felt unallowed to, while simultaneously feeling alienated from the culture I should belong to. I didn't know what to feel, but I knew I never felt fully belonged wherever I went.

Living at Pearson College in a community of international students, one regional group does not dominate over others. Since everyone comes from different cultures, people aren't othered for their background, which has allowed me to see people for more than where they come from and to foster human-to-human connections. Because our upbringing shapes us so much, I naturally assumed a distance from others who grew up in different countries and subconsciously expected an inability to understand them on a deeper level.

However, this expectation was constructed and only created barriers in conversation, which prevented me from true connection. Only once I recognized my own internal biases could I push past first impressions and appearances. I tried entering conversations without expectations, or even with the assumption that I could connect with others on the same level I connected with my friends, and I was pleasantly surprised by how much I had in common with just about anyone, solely on the basis of being human. When I focused on places where I could connect rather than where I couldn't, I found them. The beauty exists in each person's uniqueness, and their differences fuelled my curiosity and strengthened initial connections. These bonds are the most authentic and meaningful, more so than cultural ones, and can be made with anyone.

My mother is a character who never attempts to integrate through conformity. She didn't follow French cultural norms to blend in with my father's family, but when I watch her interact, she gets along with just about anyone while never changing herself. I realize that she doesn't try to fit into a box because she doesn't need to. Confining ourselves or others to a box only reduces a person to one identity, cutting off the possibility of connection through our humanness. If we stepped out of our boxes and looked past them, we would find humans on the other side who aren't so foreign to us, offering gifts of differences forming their individuality.

Just as my mother brings gifts to France, I bring many gifts to my Taiwanese family. When approaching interactions with them, I now see them as people, rather than as a representation of a culture I couldn't live up to. I've shifted my energy from being self-conscious to making and cherishing connections. I don't feel the need to prove I'm French enough to relate to my cousins; I focus on appreciating the culture as my own. I've learned to accept and even love my thick black hair and my almond-shaped eyes, and how they coexist with my full eyebrows. I don't feel discomfort for being different wherever I go anymore because it's not about fitting into a box. It's about realizing there isn't one in the first place.

— Alicia Yang



# Flavours of Heritage



Exploring my Caribbean roots is important to me, as it enhances my understanding of my cultural heritage and personal identity. Visiting restaurants and trying out different Caribbean and African dishes is a fun way to learn about my culture and to evoke memories of my time living in Antigua.

Recently I visited Trini To D Bone, a restaurant which serves authentic Caribbean cuisine. I ordered a vegetable roti and a Ting (a Jamaican sparkling grapefruit beverage), which is the kind of food I enjoyed while living in the Caribbean. The rotis tasted authentic because of their aromatic spices and the rich and familiar taste of potato and spinach. Beyond the delicious food, I also loved the ambience of the restaurant as they played various genres of Caribbean music, had pictures and paintings of Caribbean scenes covering the walls, and a colourful mural on the window. The art, the music, and the laid-back atmosphere reminded me of the slower pace of Caribbean life.

I also visited the House of Boateng restaurant. I was intrigued by their "Afro-European cuisine" which is a fusion of African, West Coast, and European flavors. I opted for the African Bowl which consisted of jollof rice, jerk chicken, chili and smoked shrimp aioli, scrambled eggs, and pickled vegetables. It tasted amazing and I was happy to try jollof rice, a popular West African dish made with rice, tomatoes, onions, and a blend of spices. I also got to try jerk chicken which is a Jamaican dish where the chicken is marinated in a mix of thyme, cinnamon, and scotch bonnet peppers. There were so many unique flavors in the dish and I loved that there was this perfect balance between African and West Coast flavors.

Visiting restaurants like these is always a fun experience and it allows me to connect with and embrace my Caribbean roots. As a biracial person, I've always been curious about my African ancestry and I feel that after exploring my culture, I have developed a deeper sense of belonging. I really believe in the importance of exploring and celebrating your culture, as it can provide a sense of identity and connect you to a community. I know that my identity will continue to develop over time and is always changing. I look forward to learning more things about my African ancestry and fully accepting it as an integral part of who I am.

— Nyah Cochrane



# Finding Community

My full name is Sophia Patricia Beech and I am a mix of West Indian, Irish, and Ukrainian descent. I am currently working at an Aboriginal Friendship Centre and taking courses with an Indigenous focus at the VIU (Vancouver Island University). Outside of work and school I do cross-fit and play women's rugby at the Cowichan Rugby Club.

Growing up in a small community that was not rich in West Indian culture always left me wondering how to navigate my Identity and feel a sense of belonging. STAAR (Students Taking Action Against Racism) was the first group of people that I felt I could be myself in and not be ashamed to share my culture and the struggles that go with being a bi-racial person in a very Western Society. In this group, me and eight others created an anti-racism video, handed out surveys asking about BIPOC youths' experiences, and most importantly, created a safe space for all BIPOC youth who needed it. Furthermore, being a part of this group was truly such an honor and helped me feel more comfortable in my identity.

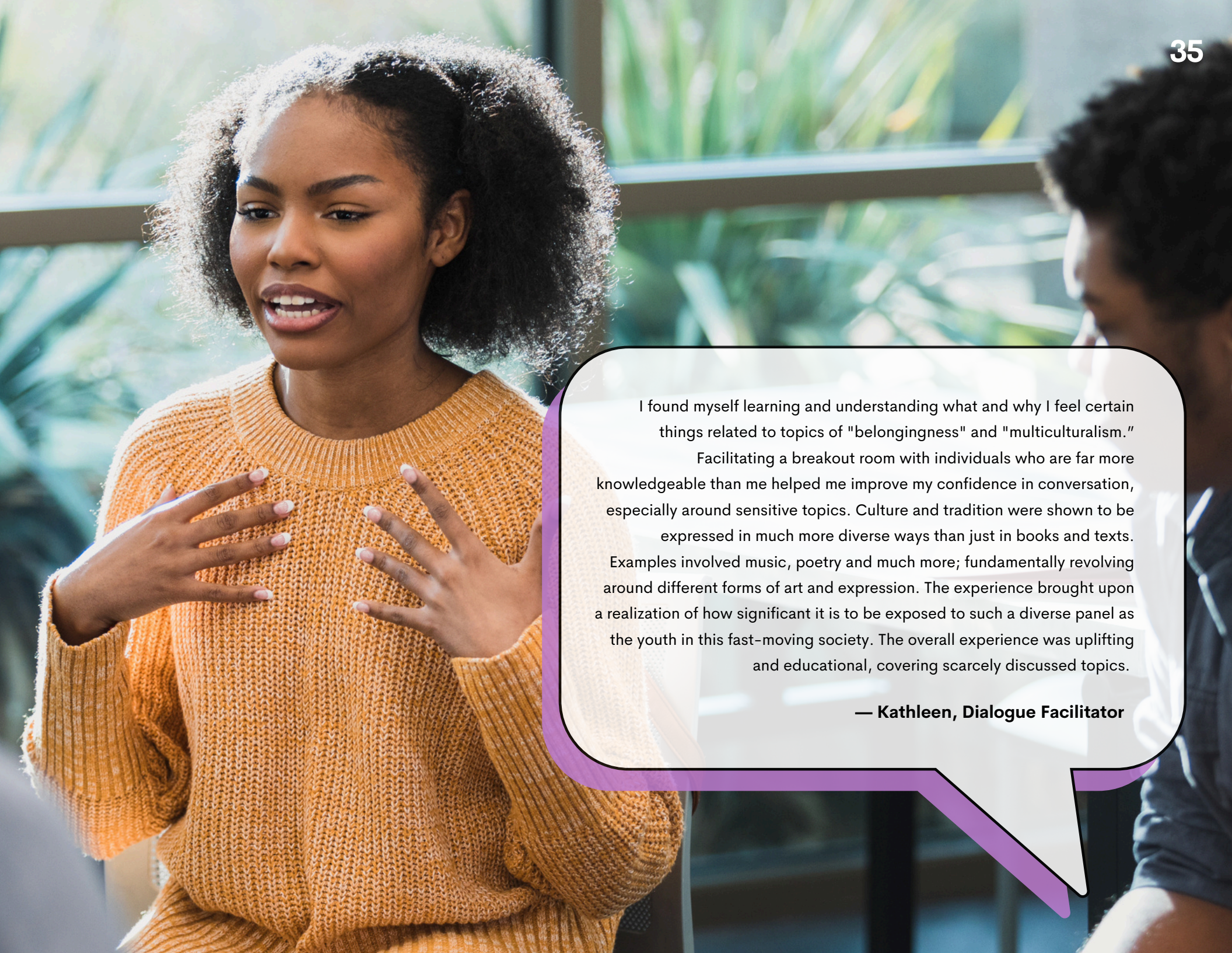
Once I graduated high school, I realized that you get to choose who your community is. For me, this was the rugby community. I have a group of friends and acquaintances who I may not share a culture with, but they all accept and appreciate me for who I am. In conclusion, what I learned most when navigating my identity and how to fit in is that I needed to choose people and groups that I could be my full self around without being nervous if I talked about my culture or where I come from.

— **Sophia Beech**



STAAR is a group that was originally created by teachers and students at Ladysmith Secondary School (LSS) in Vancouver Island. STAAR is a place where students of colour can feel safe discussing their experiences of racism and facilitate teacher-student communication.





I found myself learning and understanding what and why I feel certain things related to topics of "belongingness" and "multiculturalism." Facilitating a breakout room with individuals who are far more knowledgeable than me helped me improve my confidence in conversation, especially around sensitive topics. Culture and tradition were shown to be expressed in much more diverse ways than just in books and texts. Examples involved music, poetry and much more; fundamentally revolving around different forms of art and expression. The experience brought upon a realization of how significant it is to be exposed to such a diverse panel as the youth in this fast-moving society. The overall experience was uplifting and educational, covering scarcely discussed topics.

— Kathleen, Dialogue Facilitator



# Invitation to Reflect: On Identity and Belonging

Youth today face constant influences that challenge their sense of self.

Acknowledging the varied impact of political, economic, and socio-cultural factors on different groups is crucial in understanding how one's identity and belonging compete for significance in our world today. In this time of greater awareness in our information society, also marked by divisiveness, the keywords of belonging and identity gain prominence. These terms hold individual significance, particularly among adolescents, young adults, parents, teachers, and educational administrators. They signify a collective desire to understand unique experiences and foster camaraderie with those whom we meet and interact.

However, in seeking common ground and a shared understanding, it's vital to recognize the personal nature of each individual's identity; a tapestry woven from personal history, intersecting with the present, and constantly evolving and becoming. Our identity continually reinvents itself with each discovery. Understanding one's mind, body, and spirit, along with interactions with the world, shapes this ongoing journey that is influenced by new social or economic realities, cultures and languages, schools of thought, disciplinary lenses, and the osmosis of ideas.

Our belonging is no different. As articulated by Taiye Selasi, it transcends mere origin 'where we are from' and finds 'where one is local', where they feel at peace based on connections, rituals, relationships, and restrictions. Whether a newcomer or migrant, redefining the concept of home becomes pivotal in navigating differences and finding harmony with our identity and belonging in the present.

Our charge as youth then, is to boldly express that (identity and belonging) which is imagined and articulate it to those around us so that we can find how we intersect in this new reality. As youth, identity and belonging become most apparent when challenged, whether through travel, life transitions, or crises. What we value, whom we connect with, and where we find peace during these times reveal the marriage of our past and present, that shape our identity. They teach us about what aspects of our rituals and ancestral practices are a part of us today, they show us the polyvalent nature of what it means to be a diaspora 'from' a given place as this is contrasted with the actions of other (diaspora) from that same place navigating a similar challenge in their own lives.

Our identity is an ongoing narrative, dispelling stereotypes, and challenging the single-story narrative. Belonging, then, is a reflection on our intrinsic values, an authentic expression that circumvents external validation.

It is discovered in introspective questions that cause us to reflect:

- What do I value beyond the societal norms and constructs in which I reside?
- How are these important to who I am (becoming)?
- Which aspect(s) of my value(s) do I wish to share with my world today?
- How can I share these value(s) boldly while respecting others' identity and belonging?
- In what way can my value(s) leave a mark that I am proud of?
- How can these values and actions foster a greater sense of understanding and belonging for others?

For youth, this reflection allows for us to contribute our unique perspectives and normalize the diversity of these experiences. To belong is to authentically share your value(s), understanding that your identity is a continuum of past, present, and future. This belonging transcends societal attributions and represents the essence of our evolving self—a unique and powerful contribution to those around us. As youth it is important to embrace the nebulousness of this space boldly, for in our uniqueness and evolution within it, is the power of the gift of your untethered authentic yourself – a gift to the world.

### **Olaulu Adeleye**

Senior Consultant, Deloitte's Government and Public Sector Services

Associate Faculty, Royal Roads University

School of Communications & Culture and School of Humanitarian Studies

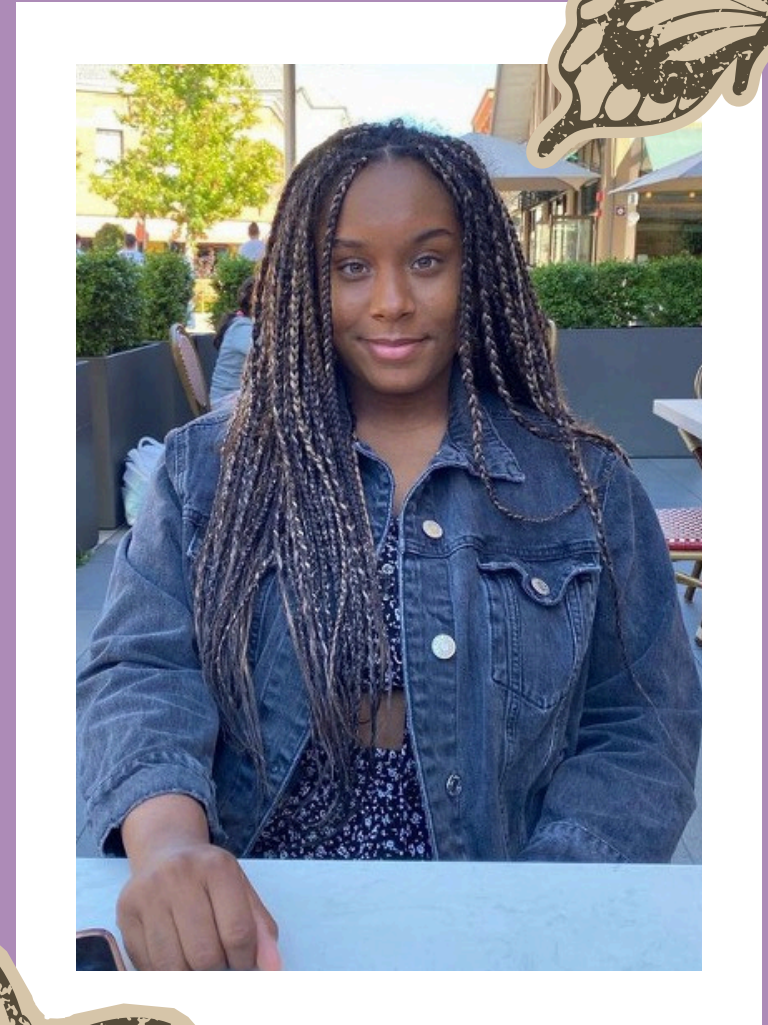




"I felt like the 'only one' for most parts of my life. I was the only Black girl in my class. I felt like I had the duty to destigmatize whatever stereotypes educators or staff had in their minds. I felt a burden of representation; to prove myself and become the opposite of whatever stereotypes people held. Also, it goes without saying that neutrality by educators and staff when students are experiencing racism and injustice can be equally as harmful."

— **Anestasia Elva, Youth Panelist**

Anestasia is a current student at the University of Toronto. She is interested in a career in psychology and in promoting civil rights. Her favourite quote is by Nelson Mandela: *"What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others."*





# Black Voices, Past and Present, Amplifying and Building Each Other Up

As the BC Black History Awareness Society, one of our main goals is the understanding and appreciation of the history of Black people in British Columbia. But the Society is not only looking backwards. We have a great appreciation for the next generation and what their contributions will be, not only to the Black community, but also to society at large. Encouraging children and youth to be interested in the achievements of Black people is about developing an interest in the world, and supporting our collective and individual identity.

We have such a rich history of struggle, resilience, and power. We have fought, and continue to fight, against racism and all of the negative effects that come from it. But we also have such a sense of belonging because we have etched our history into the fabric of the communities we have settled in. We want youth to see themselves in the work we do, to tell us how to better serve and work with them, and create their own rich history.

If I could talk to my younger self, I would tell them not to try and fit into the white mold that we are surrounded by. More and more we are realizing our strength and abilities, and how what sets us apart is actually what is best about us. It isn't easy being a person of colour, but we find our people, we see the beauty in our struggle, and then we overcome it a bit more every day.

This is why the BC Black History Awareness Society is important. It's a collection and a gathering of Black voices from the past and present that amplify and build each other up. This resource is meant to show that many of us have the same struggles, but when we come together, we are empowered.



**BC Black History Awareness Society**  
OUR ROOTS RUN DEEP

**Jamila Douhaibi**

Executive Director, BC Black History Awareness Society

[Learn more about the Society](#)





Alicia Yang is a student in the Climate Action Leadership Program at UWC Pearson College.

"Despite the connection with my French culture, I always felt like I had to prove and justify this sense of belonging as a European because I look Asian. But rather than focusing on how I was perceived by my family, I started to shift my attention to good moments and connections with them. As an in-between of the two cultures, I realized I bring something unique to my family, just as my mom did when she became a part of my dad's family. Differences are a gift, so we should not try to be someone we are not. This only diminishes our light. There is so much more to a person than where they're from or how they look. There's a universal sense of humanness across all people that we can use as a bridge to connect with each other. We need to get past appearances to start really listening and understanding each other."

— Alicia Yang, Youth Panelist



# Inspiring Black Voices of the Future: Black Excellence Day

Anti-Black racism stems from the harmful concept of dehumanizing and creating distance from Black individuals, which fosters detrimental stereotypes and biases. These prejudices often lead to unfair treatment and marginalization of Black youth, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination that hinders their progress and integration into society. The repercussions of anti-Black racism on identity run deep, impacting self-worth, sense of belonging, and causing feelings of isolation and disconnection among young individuals.

Navigating identity as a young Black person in a society influenced by anti-Black racism can be a challenging and intricate path. The constant scrutiny, microaggressions, and systemic barriers can trigger internal struggles as they strive to remain authentic amid unjust stereotypes and prejudices. This battle to affirm their identity against discrimination may result in feelings of isolation and a struggle to define their true self.

Belonging is crucial for all young individuals, yet for Black youth encountering anti-Black racism, it presents a unique challenge. The extensive influence of this form of racism can create difficulties for Black youth to feel embraced and integrated, particularly in environments where they may feel marginalized or unjustly treated. This absence of belonging can lead to significant emotional and psychological repercussions, fostering emotions of solitude, detachment, and a profound sense of being undervalued or misunderstood.





Black youth still endure the negative impacts of anti-Black racism, affecting their identity and sense of belonging. Rooted in deep-seated systemic biases and discrimination, this racism oppresses and marginalizes Black individuals, depriving them of equal opportunities, rights, and dignity. This covert form of racism not only has personal repercussions for young people but also infiltrates various aspects of society, perpetuating disparities and injustices that hinder advancement and equity.

As a Black youth who struggled with my identity, I found it difficult to find belonging in society. The lack of Black history being taught in schools combined with the prejudices of anti-Black racism made it difficult for people to see me as something other than a stereotype.

I understand the marginalization and isolation that many Black youth experience. I wanted to help foster an environment where Black youth feel like they belong; like they are worthy, loved, smart, and appreciated. An environment where they feel like there are no limits to their potential and can focus on thriving, rather than surviving. I created Black Excellence Day as a conduit to uplift Black voices from the past and present to inspire Black voices of the future to feel heard in a world that so often ignores them.

It is essential for individuals to unite and dismantle the unjust systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice to combat anti-Black racism. This involves confronting personal biases, advocating for policy changes, and promoting awareness through education to foster a more equitable society. Through actively opposing anti-Black racism and establishing environments where Black youth are acknowledged, listened to, and appreciated, we can strive towards a future where everyone thrives and feels a sense of belonging.



**Kamika Williams**

President and Co-Founder

Ninandotoo Society

[Learn About Black Excellence Day.](#)

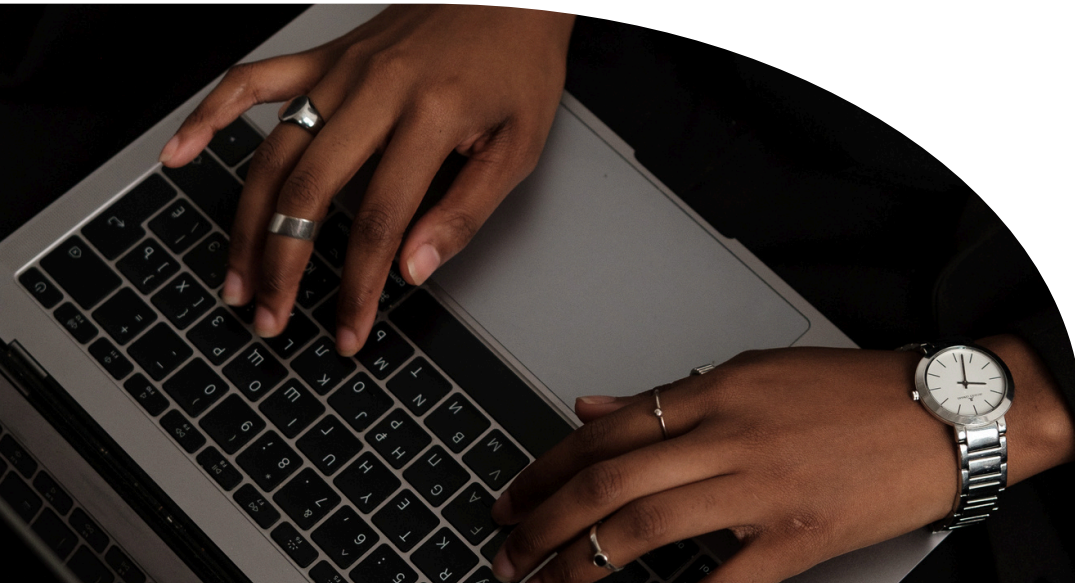
"The main breakout room question of promoting multiculturalism initiatives led participants to share their viewpoints, personal experiences, and suggestions among the group. I found it surprising that despite all the national policies and codes of proper social behaviors implemented by the government, there are still many barriers and difficulties that participants have faced in society as youth, adults, and parents. In the group, there was a consensus that policy only ensures that multiculturalism can be legally and safely present in society. However, policy does not play the critical role in changing the stereotypes in people's minds towards visible minority groups. Improving the educational system was noted to likely be the most efficient way to erase stereotyped mind-sets away from the next generation."

— Zheng (John) Tao, Dialogue Facilitator



"I learned a lot from the youth panellists. I really appreciated their perspectives on self-healing, listening and openness to all perspectives. Listening to people, regardless of the person speaking, is something that really stuck with me and prompted me to think about the complexities of working with folks who may have values that translate to actions that negatively impact certain communities. For example, people who value traditional understandings of gender and project transphobia into the world."

— Akkash Jonathon Aruldas, Dialogue Facilitator



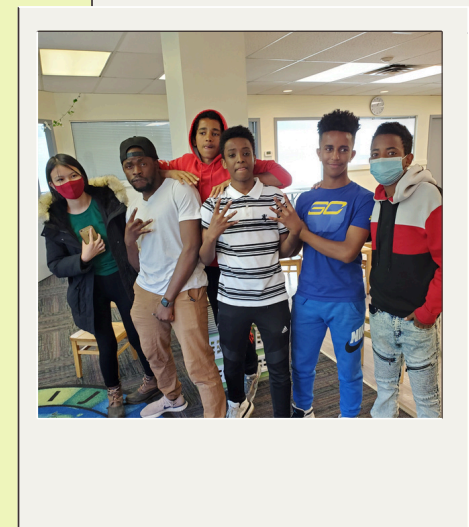
# Umoja's Youth Program:

## Creating Positive Impact for BIPOC Youth

Umoja Operation Compassion Society was founded in 2002 by Amos Kambere and his wife to support immigrant families. 20 years on, Umoja has been there for hundreds of families and continues to support newcomers in their journey to integration in Canada.

In 2021, Umoja opened its doors to BIPOC youth. The purpose of the Umoja Youth Program is to create a home-away-from-home for newcomer youths, where they are free to be themselves and are encouraged to enjoy the comfort and company of peers that are similar to them. The hope is to create a sense of comradery for young newcomers that might be feeling overwhelmed by the changes in their lives and their new home. The program also teaches teens and young adults work-related skills and provides support in their journey through school and the workplace.

For the last 3 years, the Umoja Youth Program has been home to youth from the BIPOC community, with the majority being from Africa. The program has been run by two youths who themselves immigrated from Africa as teenagers. They have used their lived experience to provide a deeper perspective on the youths' struggle and provide support that is based on the concept of doing for others what you would want done for you.





Thanks to the coordinators and volunteers, the program has supported young BIPOC students through school, work, overcoming trauma, dealing with changes, and so much more. The focus of the program is to help youth embrace their journey and their heritage while accepting the changes their new home brings and jumping on the opportunities that are about to come their way. The program focuses on striking the perfect balance of appreciating the past and embracing the future and using the ups and downs of being an immigrant as a learning tool to expand the youths' horizon - not something to use as a crutch or as an excuse.

The Umoja Youth Program follows a curriculum set up to teach youth about work skills, networking, community connections, and career planning. Funded and supported by United Way BC, the appropriately named "Future Leaders Program" is determined to create pathways that youth can utilize through secondary and post secondary education, and prepare them for adulthood while also helping them recognize the options available to them. The program also recognizes the importance of winding down and enjoying your teenage years by taking youth to exciting field trips, hosting movie nights, hosting game nights, providing food and music and entertainment, and anything to make them feel comfortable. The youth can either come for education and stay for the fun or vice versa. Either way, at Umoja, they are guaranteed a home-away-from-home with their friends where they are free to be themselves and embrace their individuality.

**Eyobel Michael**

Future Leaders Program Coordinator

[Learn More About UMOJA](#)





"Something that stuck with me was when in our breakout session one of the youth panellists said: 'Hate crimes are the only type of crimes where victims need to educate perpetrators.' I find this to be true and I was nowhere near as educated as her when I was in high school. At the same time, I got the sense that youth may be experiencing a lot of pressure to 'heal themselves,' implying that being 'healed' is a destination rather than a process. I am all for healing, building self-awareness et cetera, these are all important, but I worry about the implications of perfectionism with the idea that one needs to attain a certain level of healing before doing multiculturalism based work. Perfectionism can lead to inaction. This is just a curiosity I have."

— Akkash Jonathan Aruldas, Dialogue Facilitator



# Advice To Your Younger Self

We asked adult participants in our final Youth Dialogue Series event to answer a prompt:

Learn about Truth and Reconciliation in this nation. The truth about colonialism and how it has impacted so many negatively. I was not taught this in school, but it's very important information. More information about the importance of equity, diversity and inclusion also.

Be strong, risk and persist. Surround yourself with Allies - look for your community.

Be who you feel you are, even if you're not sure yet...the journey is essential to self-discovery and acceptance.

I would tell my younger self that true love and belonging is when you know your truth, through your own eyes, from your own story and then you are able to take in, appreciate and love another's truth, from their eyes and their story.

Be yourself... you are so beautiful and unique. The Creator has given us so many different species and beings. What a boring world if we all looked the same.



**"If you could, what would you advise to your younger self in their search for belonging in BC or Canada?"**



# Summary & A Call to Action

In this magazine, we use the acronym “BIPOC” to refer to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. This represents an incredible diversity of histories, cultures, traditions, identities, and experiences. We use this term for simplicity, and to denote groups of peoples who are racialized, and in many settings in Canada, marginalized.

*Identity & Belonging: Youth Perspectives* brings together the voices of BIPOC youth, scholars, and community leaders to explore the themes of identity and belonging. It builds on the Youth Dialogue Series, which provided a space for young people in British Columbia to share their experiences of navigating identity, race, and community in a multicultural society.

This magazine highlights stories—stories of resilience, challenges, and the search for connection. Youth shared how they face isolation and navigate their complex identities, while older community members and educators contributed their insights and reflections. Through personal narratives and essays, the magazine offers a glimpse into the struggles and triumphs of BIPOC youth, inspiring readers to reflect on their own journeys.

More than just a collection of stories, this magazine is a call to action, encouraging readers to take these conversations into their own communities and continue the work of creating inclusive spaces for all. By listening to and amplifying these voices, we can push for meaningful change in our schools, homes, and society.

**To youth:** Your identity is powerful. Your stories and experiences are vital to shaping a future where all BIPOC voices are heard and valued. Continue to explore and express who you are, and seek out communities that uplift and celebrate your unique identity. The journey to belonging is ongoing, but your contributions make a difference. Carry forward what you’ve learned in this magazine into your everyday life, and continue to build spaces where BIPOC youth can thrive.





Multicultural mural at Bramblewood Elementary School (Coquitlam, British Columbia).

[Image designed by Tammy Pilon with the help of elementary school children.](#)

[An Article on Multiculturalism by The Canadian Encyclopedia.](#)

**To adults and educators:** You are essential allies in fostering belonging. Racialized youth, like all young people, need environments that affirm their identities and provide support as they navigate a world where they may feel excluded or isolated. Reflect on how you can contribute to creating spaces—whether at home, in schools, or in the broader community—where youth feel they truly belong. How are you ensuring that racialized voices are heard and respected in these environments?

**To communities and institutions:** We all have a role in creating a more inclusive world. The work of dismantling systemic barriers and fostering true belonging for racialized individuals is ongoing. From education to workplaces, from policy to representation, there is an urgent need to ensure that BIPOC people are seen and supported in all spaces. This is not just the responsibility of individuals but of communities and institutions that shape our collective experiences.

The stories and reflections in this magazine are a reminder that identity and belonging are fundamental for racialized people. It's up to all of us to take these conversations beyond the pages and into the world—into our homes, schools, workplaces, and communities. Together, we can build a future where everyone, especially racialized individuals, can fully belong. Thank you for taking the time to read this magazine. We hope it serves as a valuable resource in fostering understanding, reflection, and action

— Alice Mürage & Jocelyn Wong



# Youth Resources and Organizations

<b>Afro Van Connect Society</b>	<i>Black-led, youth-driven organization</i>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/afrovanconnect">https://www.instagram.com/afrovanconnect</a>
<b>Aged Out</b>	<i>Info &amp; resources for young adults who were in BC government care</i>	<a href="https://agedout.com">https://agedout.com</a>
<b>Apathy is Boring</b>	<i>Supports youth to be active citizens in Canada's democracy.</i>	<a href="https://www.apathyisboring.com">https://www.apathyisboring.com</a>
<b>BC Black History Awareness Society</b>	<i>Learning centre with ongoing youth initiatives</i>	<a href="https://bcblackhistory.ca">https://bcblackhistory.ca</a>
<b>BC Community Alliance</b>	<i>Supports for Student Learnings Program (mentorship)</i>	<a href="https://bccommunityalliance.com">https://bccommunityalliance.com</a>
<b>Black Boys Code</b>	<i>Science &amp; technology education</i>	<a href="https://blackboyscode.ca">https://blackboyscode.ca</a>
<b>Black Kids Code (Girls)</b>	<i>Science &amp; technology education</i>	<a href="https://blackkidscode.com">https://blackkidscode.com</a>
<b>Black School'd</b>	<i>Student Workshops &amp; Black Youth Summit</i>	<a href="https://www.blackschoold.ca">https://www.blackschoold.ca</a>
<b>Black Youth Helpline</b>	<i>Youth Helpline, Stay-In-School Initiatives &amp; Family Support</i>	<a href="https://blackyouth.ca">https://blackyouth.ca</a>
<b>Empowered Black Girl</b>	<i>Mentorship</i>	<a href="https://www.empoweredblackgirl.com">https://www.empoweredblackgirl.com</a>
<b>Ethos Lab</b>	<i>Science &amp; technology education (STEM programs)</i>	<a href="https://ethoslab.ca">https://ethoslab.ca</a>
<b>Federation of Black Canadians</b>	<i>Supports for Student Learning Program (after school)</i>	<a href="https://fbcfcn.ca">https://fbcfcn.ca</a>
<b>Foundry</b>	<i>Mental health and peer support</i>	<a href="https://foundrybc.ca">https://foundrybc.ca</a>
<b>Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House</b>	<i>Youth programming &amp; grant/bursary opportunities</i>	<a href="https://www.froghollow.bc.ca/programs-services">https://www.froghollow.bc.ca/programs-services</a>
<b>Girls Who Leap</b>	<i>Leadership &amp; mentorship opportunities</i>	<a href="https://www.girlswholeap.com/who-we-are.html">https://www.girlswholeap.com/who-we-are.html</a>
<b>hua foundation</b>	<i>Racial equity &amp; civic engagement for Asian diasporic youth</i>	<a href="https://huafoundation.org">https://huafoundation.org</a>





<b>JrBAA Society (Jr. Black Achievement Awards)</b>	<i>Education, mentorship &amp; Spring Youth Education Retreat</i>	<a href="https://jrbaa.org">https://jrbaa.org</a>
<b>Kids Help Phone</b>	<i>Mental health support</i>	<a href="https://kidshelpphone.ca">https://kidshelpphone.ca</a>
<b>Let Her Talk</b>	<i>Peer support for girls</i>	<a href="https://www.lethertalk.org">https://www.lethertalk.org</a>
<b>Mosaic</b>	<i>Ongoing youth initiatives for newcomers</i>	<a href="https://mosaicbc.org/our-services">https://mosaicbc.org/our-services</a>
<b>QMUNITY</b>	<i>Peer support via queer, trans &amp; two-spirit resource centre</i>	<a href="https://qmunity.ca">https://qmunity.ca</a>
<b>North Shore Women's Centre</b>	<i>Girls' Empowerment Camp (mentorship)</i>	<a href="https://www.northshorewomen.ca">https://www.northshorewomen.ca</a>
<b>RE-IMAGYN BC Magazine</b>	<i>Magazine on 2SLGBTQ+ youth</i>	<a href="https://heyzine.com/flip-book/06f7fdbf45.html">https://heyzine.com/flip-book/06f7fdbf45.html</a>
<b>RYP Youth Society (Realize Youth Potential)</b>	<i>Mentorship &amp; education</i>	<a href="https://rypcanada.com">https://rypcanada.com</a>
<b>Rainbow Refugee Society</b>	<i>Supports those fleeing sexual orientation/gender identity persecution</i>	<a href="https://www.rainbowrefugee.com">https://www.rainbowrefugee.com</a>
<b>Urban Native Youth Association</b>	<i>Delivers 20+ programs for urban Native youth</i>	<a href="https://unya.bc.ca/about/">https://unya.bc.ca/about/</a>
<b>Vancouver Coastal Health</b>	<i>Sheway Pregnancy Outreach program</i>	<a href="https://www.vch.ca/en">https://www.vch.ca/en</a>
<b>Vancouver Foundation (LEVEL BIPOC Grants)</b>	<i>Invests in leadership capacity of BIPOC/youth led organizations in BC</i>	<a href="https://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/grant-seekers">https://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/grant-seekers</a>
<b>YouthCo</b>	<i>HIV and Hep C peer support and advocacy</i>	<a href="https://www.youthco.org">https://www.youthco.org</a>



This list is non-exhaustive and ongoing. Have we missed anything? Notify us about a relevant resource via email:

[africanancestryprojectbc@gmail.com](mailto:africanancestryprojectbc@gmail.com)



*"I find myself deeply moved and enlightened by the shared experiences, stories, and perspectives that were brought to the table. This meaningful conversation provided a space where the richness and complexity of multiculturalism could be explored and celebrated."* — **Enoch, Dialogue Notetaker**



*"It's not about finding where or how you fit into society; it's about realizing that people just exist and that we all share a common ground for connection—our humanness."*

— **Alicia, Youth Panelist**



Learn more about the  
**African Ancestry Project**

