Open Letter to Member Associations of Congress that supported the BCSA demands of the Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences

Greetings:

As you are aware, the BCSA Executive was informed on August 7th, 2019 that the Federation and its partners have revised the theme of the 2020 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences to Bridging Divides: Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism. In so doing, the Federation has now met the four demands communicated in our open letter of June 2nd 2019, following the racial profiling of Shelby McPhee at Congress. We agree that this is a positive outcome, and note that it comes after more than two months of vigilant public pressure on the Federation from the BCSA and many other member associations. We thank you for your support in that regard, and for its contribution to this outcome.

Given your support of our demands, and particularly the demand that the Congress theme address anti-black racism, we realize that your associations will be thinking about how you will craft (or adjust) your 2020 association themes to address anti-black racism, and craft Calls for Papers that meaningfully take it up. To that end, we offer the following suggestions and hope that you will find them helpful as you undertake this work.

We ask you to consider how you might:

1. ensure that anti-black racism is not presented as reductive identity politics or as a special interest issue relevant only to Black people
2. recognize anti-Black racism as pervasive, and not limited to isolated incidents that might be considered exceptional
3. identify anti-Black racism as fundamental to the history and continued functioning of the Canadian settler-colonial nation state, and to post-Enlightenment conceptions of humanity
4. identify and highlight Black scholars already doing this important work within your associations and disciplines
5. involve Black scholars in the development of association themes and CFPs for Congress 2020
6. encourage the participation of Black graduate students at Congress 2020 by planning with and mentoring them in developing conference presentations, contributing toward their conference expenses, and compensating them adequately for their labour
7. critically assess the role of anti-black racism in determining who is and is not present in the association, what areas of scholarship are assumed to be of broad scholarly interest, and which only narrowly-focused, and why

We look forward to your continued involvement in challenging anti-Black racism in the academy and beyond, and look forward to Calls for Papers that critically and creatively take up the new theme and explore how settler-colonialism and anti-Black racism in Canada are inextricably linked and co-constitutive. We also urge you, our fellow member associations to develop short-term and long-term plans to extend this crucial work beyond 2020.

Sincerely,

The Black Canadian Studies Association Executive Team
Federation President’s update regarding the Congress 2019 theme

August 14, 2019

Today, I am pleased to inform you of an important step we are taking to respond to the serious issue of anti-Black racism. The Federation has listened to its members and we share your deep concerns about this issue.

With the strong support of the 2020 Programming Committee, the Federation has revised the theme of Congress 2020 – Bridging Divides: Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism. Over the coming weeks, we will continue working with our partners to incorporate this change into the theme’s 200-word description.

This change opens important opportunities for participants at next year’s Congress. In particular, the revised theme:

- Adds, for the first time, an explicit reference to Anti-Black Racism, setting the stage for critical exchanges about this systemic problem and the nuances of Blackness in society and the academy;
- Seeks to overcome the divisive legacy of colonialism, a critical aspect of promoting reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settler populations;
- Promotes difficult but essential discussions about the most serious issues facing us as scholars, citizens, and members of our society; and
- Remains sufficiently broad (“Bridging Divides”) for thousands of scholars, from more than 70 scholarly associations, to engage deeply in questions specific to their fields of study.

By revising the Congress theme, not only has the Federation addressed all four of the requests made by the Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA) following the June 2 incident at Congress 2019, but more importantly, we have demonstrated our deep desire to address the critical issues it has raised.

We look forward to building on this in the future. Over the coming weeks and months, we will be reaching out to our members as we develop this new theme and an engaging program for Congress.

I am grateful for your patience and support as we addressed this matter, and I urge you to contact me any time if you have comments, questions, or concerns.

Sincerely,

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