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Welcome to IBPOC Connections: An Invitation to Community Making and Intervention for Representation at UBC

Thank you, Maryam Nabavi, for inviting me to say a few words of welcome to IBPOC Connections. I do so as just one of several people who have held meetings over the past while with Maryam and other staff at the Equity and Inclusion Office to contribute to mapping the broad outlines of what has become IBPOC Connections- a project very much in the making.

So on behalf of all who have been involved, Welcome to IBPOC Connections- a site and time for faculty and staff who self identify as Black, Indigenous and/or People of Colour at UBC to build community: to congregate with conviviality, to network, to share stories- happy, sad, infuriating and inspiring stories, to commiserate with one another about the difficult issues we face at UBC, which, let's face it, is an institution not meant for us; to encourage and uplift one another, to collectively make space for ourselves at UBC and to make interventions which will enhance our very survival and work lives at the University.

If you are here I am assuming you take it for granted that it's a good thing to bring Indigenous, Black and People of Colour folks in various roles at UBC together. But rather than start with that taken-for-grantedness, I would like to get to the premise that makes for that premise. In other words, I would like to quite simply and definitively name UBC as a white institution, with all that this involves: white supremacy, white fragility, white diversity, white expectancy, etc., etc. and on the other hand for Indigenous, Black and People of colour folks- various forms of racism (societal, institutional and systemic, individual and dysconscious), marginalization, tokenism, invisibility and hypervisibility, special event status, low expectations, supposed beneficiaries of white largesse, etc., etc. It is the historical and perennial whiteness of UBC that makes our attempt at community and the assertion of our presence necessary.

I consider this gathering, this IBPOC Connections lunch, to be deceptively simple. It is, simply, a place where we gather to share a meal. But it, together with other IBPOC Connections events that might be organized, is also an incubator for doing a politics of recognition at UBC. It is a precursor to opportunities and initiatives for IBPOC faculty and staff to play an important role at the University – with respect to informing policies, processes, building a culture and creating opportunities to move toward a different experience than that of institutional betrayal, that many of you might feel.

So, what are the origins of IBPOC Connections and who can we credit for bringing us together? Credit goes first and foremost to Maryam Nabavi for initiating, leading and guiding the trajectories of this initiative. She has been altogether too modest in her opening address and has not mentioned let alone stressed her own role as initiator and facilitator of this project. Credit also goes to Henry Yu, Principal of St. John's College, for recognizing that this project needed a literal space, a place-making component, and for providing St. John's as that place making space. And credit goes Minelle Mahtani, Senior Advisor to the Provost on Racialized Faculty for

reaching out beyond the strict remit of her work on racialized faculty to listen to the voices of Indigenous, Black and POC staff in order to get a rounded picture of UBC culture and issues, to inform her work on and with racialized faculty. And credit goes to the staff at the Equity and Inclusion Office for doing all the heavy lifting and the legwork of the project- from conducting environmental scans to mapping possible directions for the initiative, from identifying and bringing together the original advisory group to helping to compiling extensive lists of Indigenous and racialized staff and faculty that should be invited to participate in what has become IBPOC Connections.

What do we want to emphasize as purpose for bringing this complex and comprehensive group together? My sense is that IBPOC Connections comes with some strong overarching purposes and goals that Maryam and others are putting forward but importantly, that ultimately IBPOC Connections is and will be what we make it. When I chatted with Maryam she indicated that her vision for this initiative rests in “enhancing the experience and outcomes for IBPOC staff and faculty at UBC” and she indicated that she saw three pathways to this:

- Capacity building
- Leadership
- Community (this lunch falls into this category)

The hope, she said, is to create mechanisms to hear the voices of IBPOC faculty/staff at the institutional level to highlight priorities and be a key stakeholder group whose collective voice advances those priorities – including recruitment/retention/success, professional development, leadership opportunities, etc.

So in what other ways can we conceptualize this group? I cannot help but see IBPOC Connections as an effort to create a community of communities. By this I mean it brings together groups and communities that are already in existence or in formation or can loosely be identified. We could for example take this as a coming together of UBC employees in various institutional locations- the Library or administrative units like Human Resources or the various different academic Departments and Faculties. We could also see ourselves in terms of our sociocultural identities, especially as men and women and gender fluid persons of specific (or mixed) ethnoracial identities- Chinese, South Asians, Blacks, Indigenous, etc., and members of organized groups that represent those identities at UBC such as the Asian Canadian Community Engagement and the UBC Black Caucus. In short there are many different sorts of groups and communities gathered here and issues of concern might be common in some cases and very specific in others, depending on what group or groups one chooses to identify. There are therefore many ways in which we can gather around the tables- to reflect and work strictly along one of more of those axes or indeed to consciously obfuscate the boundaries between them. And our presentations and discussions could deal with issues which pertain to specific groups (e.g. working conditions of administrative assistants across departments; underrepresentation of POC in a particular Faculty) or ones that cut across all these categories but looks different if considered in light of different groups – e.g. racism (and the ways in which for all Indigenous and racialized groups it might be a matter of underrepresentation and tokenism and for Chinese faculty and staff it might be a failure of UBC to represent them adequately to reflect majority-minority status in BC while for black faculty and staff it might be a spotlight on acutely low

numbers in BC which lead to easy erasure of historical presence and contemporary representation in general, including at UBC).

I want to come to something of a conclusion by reiterating that IBPOC Connections is what we make of it. It will be as successful and impactful as we make it. And I want to end by pointing to one thing that fills me with particular hope for our success, for us making a difference at UBC, namely some of the folks I see in our midst today, people I can point to who I know are both particularly well positioned to and also have well earned reputations for making effective progressive change at UBC, an institution which in part because of its very size, usually moves and changes at a glacial pace.

- Staff at the Equity and Inclusion Office who are particularly adept at getting things done. Maryam Nabavi- strategist- equity and inclusion organizational change (the person whose vision has come together as IBPOC Connections. Aftab Erfan- Director of Dialogue and Conflict Management (who has brought together a group of Black folks to address a particular issue of racism that happened at Congress conference this year at UBC, a coming together of Black folks that has resulted in the formation of the UBC Black Caucus. She wants to step aside from leading or bringing this group together since she herself is not Black but we are not letting her- she's being kept in position as honorary black).
- Representatives from Human Resources – I don't need to tell you about the importance of Human Resources for helping us know of the ethnoracial make up of the institution and inform diversity. [I understand that Human Resources at UBCV has a grand total of two Black staff and I also know for a fact that they are both here right now, which means that as we are gathered here there are literally no Black people at Human Resources at UBC]
- Administrators- I need not tell you that administrators are in a position to make real change and so very much worth chatting with. [We did not name administrators in the constituent groups of IBPOC Connections, only staff and faculty. But I see at least one Associate Dean present who is particularly effective, namely Ninan Abraham, Associate Dean, Equity and Diversity, Faculty of Science. He may well be here in his capacity as faculty but I am outing him- he is an effective associate dean of equity and diversity- keep that in mind when you chat with him in line as you both make that important choice between fresh fruit and chocolate cake].
- Henry Yu Principal of St. John's College – he's already provided this hall as meeting place. And he is in a position to speak to another group of folks who are not represented here- international Indigenous and racialized students and how their issues are (or ought to be) part of the diversification concerns of UBC.
- Shirley Nakata – UBC's Ombudsperson – we have in our midst the person whose primary responsibility it is to help us understand the policies and procedures within UBC, to ensure that those policies and procedures are fair and perhaps most important for us, to identify opportunities for improvement.
- Minelle Mahtani, Senior Advisor to the Provost on Racialized Faculty [I'm sure Minelle has enough input from a variety of sources but why should this group not be yet another one? While she is here you have her ear and she in turn has the ear of the Provost- so please, beyond chit-chat about how moist the chicken is, feel free to play telephone with her and through her, with the Provost]

- Several members of VPSICED [You get a prize for knowing and being able to say that the acronym VPSICED stands for Vice Presidential Strategic Implementation Committee for Equity and Diversity]. This is a group that advises the Provost and other VPs on equity and diversity issues at UBC. Need I say more?

This impressive list is just the folks that I know and readily can identify among us. There are probably others I don't know of have not mentioned or who are not in attendance today. Bringing our collective thoughts and recommendations to and through these folks must surely auger well for the success of IBPOC Connections.

Welcome to IBPOC Connections- a site for us- faculty and staff who self identify as Black, Indigenous and/or People of Colour at UBC to at the very least and at the very most, break bread together. And breaking bread together is about so much more than sharing a meal: in many cultures, mine included (where it is more usually sharing rice), it entails breaking down barriers, creating or sustaining a sense of connectedness, indeed intimacy and caring; community building. So let us break bread together and in the process, let us begin the work of making a community of communities; let us collectively make interventions at UBC that will benefit us and the institution; let us start a project that will make UBC a place where we as Indigenous, Black and People of Colour truly belong.