Special Issue on the Impact of Black Lives Matter Movement in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic

DO BLACK LIVES MATTER AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

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Aim/Purpose:	This article aims at exploring how systemic racism predisposes Canadian Blacks to COVID 19 infection, thereby raising the question as to whether Black Live Matters amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
Background	Although many discourses about Blacks' vulnerability abound in the public media and academic literature, their vulnerabilities seem to have been overlooked amid the current COVID-19 global health crisis. Since COVID-19 was detected public health authorities deem older people, children, Indigenous people, and low-income Canadian families and those with weakened immune systems from underlying medical conditions as vulnerable to the pandemic. One group of people conspicuously missing from the vulnerable groups' list is Black people. Drawing on evidence-based data from secondary sources, the article demonstrates that the gravities of the COVID-19 pandemic are deepening racial inequalities in Canada. The article also illustrates how many Black people and other racialized groups are at increased risk of COVID 19 infections and deaths due to a longstanding health inequality.
Methodology	This study relies on evidence-based data drawn from various secondary sources, including academic papers, policy briefs, government reports, credible media sources, press notes and advisories, current newspapers, and online media reportage of the unfolding health crisis about COVID-19 to demonstrate that the gravities of the COVID-19 pandemic are deepening racial inequalities in Canada. Although research that articulates existing studies on Black people and the COVID-19 pandemic is very scanty, this paper is mostly exploratory as it emphasizes synthesizing secondary sources of literature review.
Findings	The study finds that many Black people and other racialized groups are at increased risk of COVID 19 infections and deaths due to a longstanding health inequality. Further, the paper demonstrates that, historically, social determinants of health have prevented Black people from equal access to economic, social and healthcare opportunities. And thus, have exposed a longstanding systemic racism in employment, housing, education, and healthcare. Finally, the paper recommends two innovative strategies to achieve social transformation: 1) Black Canadians should shift from vulnerability to recognizing their vitalities/resiliencies and 2) building allyships with other oppressed groups to stop the spread of the two pandemics: anti-black racism and COVID-19.

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Impact on Society	This paper does not only contribute to our knowledge about the challenges Black people experience during the pandemic, but also enhances our understanding about the innovative strategy to defeat anti-black racism. This strategy implies that the time has come for Black Canadians to move beyond their vulnerabilities to discover their vitality and agency – moving from the discourse of victim hood to resilience, agency, vitality and creativity
Keywords	COVID-19, Black Canadians, Black Live Matters, Anti-Black Racism, Racism

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☐	Cognition	☒	Social	☒	Physical Wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning literature on Black Canadians and other Black people world-wide unequivocally recognizes that anti-Black racism has, for a long time, exposed Black Canadians to an array of vulnerabilities in our modern society. The discourses on anti-Black racism have also highlighted the historical contexts of slavery and colonialism as having far-reaching consequences for Black people. Although many discourses about the vulnerabilities of Blacks abound in both the media and academic literature, these vulnerabilities seem to have been over-looked amid the current novel coronavirus (COVID-19) global health crisis. Public health authorities have deemed older people and those with weakened immune systems from underlying medical conditions to be among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., CDC, 2020; Health Canada, 2020). In Canada, Health Canada (2020) has also identified children, Indigenous people, and low-income families to be more vulnerable to the pandemic. One group left conspicuously absent from the list of vulnerable populations is Black people.

The literature on COVID-19 and Black people is only now emerging; there is very little published scholarly material at this stage of the pandemic on Black Canadians and COVID-19, with the exception of grey literature in electronic and print media (Firang, 2020a). This paper is part of a more extensive study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized communities in Canada. It tells a largely untold story about the lived experiences of Black Canadians in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the paper explores how systemic racism predisposes Black Canadian to COVID-19 infection, thereby raising the question of whether Black lives matter amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The common denominator of Black people being more vulnerable to the current global health crisis is the coexistence of two pandemics: COVID-19 and the virus of systemic racism.

Drawing on evidence-based data from secondary sources, this paper demonstrates how the COVID-19 pandemic has served to expose a longstanding racial injustice in Canadian society. It also illustrates how social determinants of health shed more light on systemic racism, which is manifested through racial inequalities in employment, housing, education, and healthcare. This paper does not only contribute to knowledge about the difficulties and challenges Black people are experiencing during the pandemic but also enhances our understanding of one of the innovative strategies to defeat anti-Black racism: to proclaim that Black lives matter through Blacks' vitalities (resiliencies). This strategy implies that the time has come for Black Canadians to move beyond their vulnerabilities and the discourse of victimhood to discover their resilience,

agency, vitality, and creativity. For this article, Black Canadians refer to all Canadians who self-identify as Black, which includes:

- People who trace their generational roots to sub-Saharan Africa and identify as the descendants of those Black persons who involuntarily came directly to North America during the slave trade;
- Descendants of Black Loyalists, refugees, fugitives, and African American settlers who immigrated to Canada during the American Civil War; and
- Immigrants who recently migrated from the Caribbean and Africa to Canada from the 20th century onwards in search of political freedom or economic opportunities.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

At the time of this research article, the literature on COVID-19 and Black people has just started emerging with little published scholarly material on Black Canadians and COVID-19, with the exception of grey literature in electronic and print media. A library search on keywords and phrases like "Black Canadians" and "COVID-19" on major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Omni, Scopus, Web of Science, and Microsoft Academic, produced surprisingly little or no literature on empirical, conceptual, and theoretical articles on COVID-19 and Black people, other than the exceptional grey literature previously noted. Thus, this article draws on various secondary sources, including academic papers, policy briefs, government reports, press notes and advisories, current newspapers, and online media reportage of the unfolding COVID-19 health crisis. Although research that articulates existing studies on Black people and the COVID-19 pandemic is scarce, this paper is mostly exploratory. In interpreting the COVID-19 data in this article, I caution readers that it is an uncertain venture to write about the pandemic at this stage, as there are many unknowns about the disease. The dynamic circumstances surrounding the disease are still evolving in many countries. How, where, and when the disease will end is still uncertain, and it is too early to predict its expected and actual consequences. As well, scientific observations about the disease continue to change daily. Nonetheless, this article adds to emerging literature on COVID-19 to understand how and why the novel coronavirus is disproportionately infecting Black people.

BLACKS PRESENCE IN CANADA

Tackling the question as to whether Black Lives Matter and how the response to that question is affected by the current pandemic begins by understanding how systemic racism predisposes Black people to COVID-19. The history of Blacks' presence in Canada sets the context to understand the issues of systemic racism, and why Black Canadians continue to experience racial disadvantages in our so-called civilized democratic society.

The bulk of the Canadian literature on Blacks agree that Canada has been home to Black people since the early 1600s, beginning from the time when a freed Black man named Mathieu da Costa, traveling with French navigator Samuel de Champlain, is believed to have voluntarily migrated to Nova Scotia between 1603 and 1608 (e.g., Junne, 2003; Mensah, 2002, 2010; Walker, 1980; Winks, 1971). Thus, Canada's early Black presence was assumed to have been rooted almost entirely in voluntary migration (Walker, 1980; Winks, 1971). However, the subsequent migration of Black people to Canada was involuntary. Successive waves of forced migration, mainly through slavery, forcefully transported Blacks from Africa to migrate from the Caribbean and through America to Canada between the mid-1600s and 1800s, when a few thousand Africans arrived in Canada as slaves (Milan & Tran, 2004). After the American Revolution, approximately 3,000 Black slaves, all of whom supported the British during the American Revolution, were freed to come to Canada (Milan & Tran, 2004). The abolition of slavery in early 1800 allowed British colonies in North America, including Upper Canada, to become safe haven for escaped slaves in the U.S, with many enslaved Black people migrating through the famous Underground Railroad to Canada (Junee, 2003; Milan & Tran, 2004; Winks, 1971). These Black Loyalists joined the many other United Empire Loyalists in settlements across the Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island (Mensah, 2002, 2010; Milan & Tran, 2004; Winks, 1971). Other Black slaves joined their Loyalist slave owners when they migrated to Canada since the Loyalists immigrating from the United States were permitted to bring slaves (Walker, 1980; Winks, 1971). Subsequently, early Black settlements in Canada were established in Eastern Canada, particularly in Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Ontario. Later, with the opening of the western frontier in the mid-1800s, some Black people gradually moved to settle in Western Canada (Milan & Tran, 2004).

The above review indicates that, historically, the Black presence in Canada was marked by involuntary migration of Black people as slaves. One of the repulsions of slavery was that enslaved Black people were treated as commodities rather than human beings. White Europeans viewed slavery in racial terms -

with Black people serving and white people ruling as masters. Slavery shaped the social construction of racism in the North America, precipitating racial inequalities in our society. As John Lewis illustrates, "the scars and stains of racism are still embedded in American society of slavery" (Bowden, 2018, June, p.1). This quote from the U.S senator is a stark reminder that the legacy of slavery is the raison d'etre of racism, which socially constructs Black as inferior and white as a privilege. The implications for such a social categorization of Blacks and whites are further discussed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

THE BLACK POPULATION IN CANADA

Table 1 summarizes data about the Black population in Canada from 1871 to 2016. Reportedly, during the Confederation period (1871), about 21,500 Blacks (or what the early censuses refer to as "Negro") were living in Canada (Milan & Tran, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2016). According to Milan and Tran (2014), in the early 1900s, the Black population's growth did not keep pace with other visible minority groups, particularly the Chinese. For example, while the number of Blacks decreased from 21,400 in 1881 to 19,500 in 1931 (Table 1), the number of other visible minorities, mostly Chinese, grew tenfold from 4,400 to 46,500 in the same period (Milan & Tran, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2016). Most Blacks living in Canada during this time resided in Ontario or the Maritime provinces. Over the years, the number of Blacks in Canada grew slowly to 32,100 in 1961, accounting for 0.2% of the population (Milan & Tran, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2016). By 1981, the Black population in Canada sharply rose almost 600% to 239, 500, with the increasing trend continuing through 1991 when 504,300 Blacks were living in Canada (Milan & Tran, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2016).

The sharp rise in the population of Blacks in Canada from 1981 through 1991 can be attributed to immigration reforms and multiculturalism as a state policy in Canada. During the 1960s, the Canadian immigration policy reforms eliminated preferences for immigrants of European origin at the exclusion of Blacks and others. A points-based system for economic immigrants was implemented by Canadian government to ensure maximum employability in an economy where skilled labour was becoming a priority. Immigrants gained points based on occupational skills, educational level, knowledge of English or French, and age.

Table 1: Black populations in Canada: 1871 – 2016

Year	Population	+/- %
1871	21,500	—
1881	21,400	−0.5%
1901	17,500	−18.2%
1911	16,900	−3.4%

1921	18,300	+8.3%
1931	19,500	+6.6%
1941	22,200	+13.8%
1951	18,000	−18.9%
1961	32,100	+78.3%
1971	34,400	+7.2%
1981	239,500	+596.2%
1991	504,300	+110.6%
2001	662,200	+31.3%
2011	945,665	+42.8%
2016	1,198,540	+26.7%

Source: Statistics Canada Census Profile, 2016

Consequently, the source countries of immigrants became more diversified, including increasing numbers of Blacks from the Caribbean and Africa (Milan & Tran, 2004). Thus, over the last 15 years, the Black population has doubled in size, going from 662,200 persons in 2001 to 1,198,540 persons in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Black Canadians now represent 3.5% of Canada's total population (Statistics Canada, 2016). Population projections from Statistics Canada (2017) indicate the Black population will continue to increase and will represent between 5.0% and 5.6% of Canada's population by 2036.

WHO ARE THE BLACK PEOPLE IN CANADA?

We cannot further discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black people without offering a conceptual understanding of who are the "Black people" in Canada. The social construction of "Black" in our Canadian society has a profound influence on Black people. "Blackness" is associated with negative connotations such as gloom, murkiness, hopelessness, evil, dirt, sin, dishonesty, and all the negative epithets one can think of (Mensah & Williams, 2017). These negative epithets are demoralizing for people who self-identify as Black. In comparison with Blackness, whiteness is upheld as the norm, standard, and rightness to which all other racialized groups are compared. Not surprisingly, Mensah (2010) illustrates how "White," as an antithesis of "Black", generally connotes honour, righteousness, generosity, and grace. The social construction of whiteness and blackness in this way is problematic. Due to the negative connotations of "Black," some Canadian Blacks prefer to adopt the term Afro-Caribbean (Henry, 1994), West Indies (Walker, 1984), African-Caribbean (Anderson, 1993; Henry, 1994), people of African descent (Mensah, 2002, 2010) or African Canadian (Tetteh & Puplampo, 2005) instead of Black. The different ethnic identifications of Blacks in Canada, especially as people of African descent or as African Canadians, is problematic. In the first place, not all people in Africa identify themselves as Black. Most people in North Africa, including those in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, do not identify as

Blacks. Also, these North Africans do not see themselves as descendants of Black slaves who were transported to North America. Likewise, the claim that Blacks in Canada are African Canadian is tricky and complicated. The term African Canadian is occasionally used by some Black Canadians who trace their heritage to the first slaves brought by British and French colonists to the North American mainland (Harrison, 2005; Mensah, 2002). Some Black people of Caribbean origin do not identify as African Canadian as they prefer to be called Caribbean Canadian to maintain the unique Caribbean heritage (Anderson, 1993; Magosci, 1999). In this context, Black Canadians often distinguish between those of Afro-Caribbean ancestry and those of other African roots (Anderson, 1993; Magosci, 1999). Anderson (1993) also queried that not all West Indians and Caribbeans consider themselves Black. The question is, how do we identify Blacks in Canada?

For this paper, Black Canadian is used as the ethnic identification for the descendants of Black people from sub-Saharan African ethnic origin, who are refugees, citizens, and permanent residents of Canada (Mensah, 2010). These descendants of Blacks from sub-Saharan Africa also include those who came to North America directly from Africa during the slave trade; descendants of Black Loyalists, refugees, fugitives, and African American settlers who immigrated to Canada during the American Civil War; as well as those who immigrated from the Caribbean and Africa to Canada in the 20th century for reasons of pursuing political freedom or economic opportunities. The majority of Blacks in Canada are of Caribbean descent, although a reasonable proportion comprises African Americans and their descendants (including those in Nova Scotia) and African immigrants (Mensah, 2010). Nevertheless, all Blacks in Canada originate from sub-Sahara African and subsequently migrated to North America and the Caribbean through slavery.

DIVERSITY AMONG THE BLACK POPULATION IN CANADA

The bulk of the literature and public discourses homogenize Black Canadians under such broad labels as "Blacks in Canada" (Mensah, 2002), "Black Caribbean" (e. g, Henry, 1994; Henry & Tator, 2006) and "African Canadians," (e.g., Tetteh & Puplampo, 2005) without paying much attention to the internal diversity within the group. Arguably, Black Canadians not only have a long-established historical presence in the country, but they are also highly heterogeneous (Mensah, 2010). This group has enormous diversity regarding generational roots, ethnic origins, linguistics, ethnicity, cultural values, social practices, and norms. Historically, while some Blacks can trace their roots within Canada for many generations, others have immigrated to Canada in recent decades from Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. Long-established Black immi-

grants were mostly from the Caribbean, but recent immigrants are predominantly from Africa. According to the 2016 Canada Census, more than half (56.7%) of Black immigrants who landed before 1981 were born in Jamaica and Haiti. Black newcomers now come from about 125 different countries. The top countries of birth for Black immigrants admitted between 2011 and 2016 were Haiti, Nigeria, Jamaica, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Statistics Canada, 2019).

The long-standing historical and generational roots suggest that Blacks in Canada come from diverse ethnic origins. Statistics Canada (2017) reports that the Canadian Black population has more than 200 ethnic or cultural origins. In 2016, Statistics Canada reported that the 10 most ethnic origins among the Canadian Black population were: Jamaican, African, Haitian, Canadian, English, Somali, Nigerian, French, Ethiopian, and Scottish (Statistics Canada, 2016). The diverse ethnic backgrounds also indicate that Black Canadians are linguistically distinct. Those Blacks from sub-Saharan Africa ethnic origin, including Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ghana, speak many different languages. For instance, Nigeria alone has over one hundred ethnic groups, as do Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, and many others, to a lesser degree (de Blij & Murphy, 1993; Mensah, 2010). Given this linguistic diversity, as Mensah (2010) noted, Black Canadians face peculiar intra-group solidarity and ethnic cohesion. Consequently, most Canadian Blacks lack a well-established cultural institution of their own within the broader Canadian society.

Black Canadians are not only diverse in terms of historical, linguistic, and ethnic origin, they are also spatially diverse across the Canadian landscape. Geographically, variations exist in the spatial distribution of Canadian Black population. The vast majority of the Black population lives in large urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2016, 94.3% of Black people lived in Canada's top six census metropolitan areas (CMAs), including Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Edmonton, and Calgary (Statistics Canada, 2017). Toronto has the largest Black population in the country, with 442,015 people or 36.9% of Canada's Black population (Statistics Canada, 2017). This population's size has increased in 15 years, but it now represents a smaller share of Canada's Black population than in 2001 (46.9%) (Statistics Canada, 2017). In Toronto, Ontario, Black people represented 7.5% of the metropolitan population, the highest proportion among Canada's census metropolitan areas. Montréal and Ottawa-Gatineau had the second and third highest proportions of Black populations (Statistics Canada, 2017).

If nothing more, the discussion of diversity among Black Canadians, with the necessary nuance, helps to subvert the common practice of homogenization

(Mensah &Williams, 2017). Recognizing such diversity promotes a sense of be-longing among sub-groups of Canadian Blacks and facilitates the recognition of these groups as worthy prisms through which we can examine some of the problematic issues concerning being Blacks in Canada (Mensah &Williams, 2017). To be meaningful, the ensuing discussion has to, at the very least, acknowledge the vulnerabilities and likely criticisms in naming and claiming on behalf of such a diverse and marginalized group of people. Indeed, any discussion of this group minus the appropriate subtleties feeds into what Mensah (2010) describes as categories of discourse that are at once pandering and homogenizing, if not essentialist. Despite the diversity among them, commonalities exist among the diverse Canadian Black population groups regarding challenges and outcomes related to labour market integration, income inequalities, differential access to resources, health conditions, discrimination, and education (Mensah, 2010; Mensah &Williams, 2017).

RACISM, RACIALIZATION, AND SYSTEMIC RACISM

This section explores how racism and racialization are discursively constructed through the systemic racism of Canada's social, economic and political institutions to marginalize Black people in a white settler society. An analysis of how systemic racism against Black people in Canada operates through institutional avenues provides a context to understand why Canadian Blacks are predisposed to vulnerabilities, like the current COVID-19 pandemic. As critical race scholars have alluded, the same Canadian social, political and economic institutions that are intended to ameliorate social inequalities play significant roles in maintaining and producing racism, especially institutional racism that amplifies inequalities between whites, on one side, and Blacks and other minorities on the other (e.g., Calliste & Dei, 2000; Henry & Tator, 2006; Mullaly, 2010; Razack, 2002). While Canada grapples with its professed commitment to equity, systemic racism remains a major issue.

An understanding of how systemic racism operates and exists in Canadian society requires thoughtful consideration of the concept of racism in Canada. Racism, which is one of the primary structures of oppression, is discrimination based on race. Race is a construct that refers to the visibly observable physical or biological differences among human groups, such as skin colour, hair and facial features (Jeyapal, 2018; Mullaly, 2010). While observable physical traits like skin colour are regarded as identifiers that distinguish human groups from one another, it is the socially constructed meanings assigned to such physical traits and their associated human group – or race – that produce the significant effect of marking differences, both subtle and prominent, as being either superior or inferior (Jeyapal, 2018; Mullaly, 2010). This process of social construc-

tion that makes meaning out of race is referred to as racialization (Jeyapal, 2018; Mullaly, 2010), and it is used to create a binary of categorizing people who are different as being either inferior or superior and in turn assigning them unequal treatment based on such perceived biological or physical differences (Jeyapal, 2018). The Canadian discourse further constructs racialized groups as the "others" who are dangerous, prone to criminality, abnormal, and violent, and who need to be fixed, who must be corrected to be "normal people" (Mensah & Wiliam, 2017).

To say that racialization operates in relation to whiteness is an understatement. Canada, as a white settler society, continues to be constructed through oppressive elements of colonialism and cultural imperialism. Thus, in contemporary society, whiteness is socially, culturally, politically, and economically enforced as the norm, the standard of rightness, against which the 'others' are upheld (Jeyapal, 2018; Mullaly, 2010). This social process creates white privilege, the unearned advantage enjoyed by white Canadians who are primarily of European descent. Hitherto, white settlers have established their social and political institutions and laws as normative and superior, by which Indigenous people and other racial minorities should comply. Thus, Canada was made by and operates through settler institutions embedded with whiteness (Jeyapal, 2018). Whiteness is associated with power and privilege, which provides white people with unearned advantage at the expense of Black people. This social process also creates complex racial hierarchies, racial inequalities and racial injustices between Blacks and whites (Jeyapal, 2018; Mensah & Williams, 2017).

Systemic racism is one of the social processes whereby white privilege and power differentials are manifested in Canadian society. Systemic racism can best be understood at the structural level by unpacking the macro societal structures that create racial inequalities and disadvantages for Black people. Systemic racism, also known as institutional racism, is a form of racism that is embedded as normal practice within Canadian society (Jeyapal, 2018). It creates discrimination in many public institutions, including the criminal justice system, labour market, housing market, healthcare system and education system. This institutional discrimination (systemic racism) is justified in the Canadian social and political systems, and legally constructs racialized groups as visible minorities (Jeyapal, 2018). For instance, Statistics Canada (2016) categorizes visible minorities (as being Chinese, South Asian, East Asian, Black, Arab Central/West Asian, South East Asian or Latin American) separate from white Canadians and Indigenous people. The idea of the visible minority is accepted as the norm of minority status, with negative connotations of inferiority and "otherness" (Jeyapal, 2018; Mensah & Williams, 2017). Visible minority identity as used by these government institutions is disempowering and ambiguous, pro-

moting "othering" of huge swaths of the population (Jeyapal, 2018; Mensah & Williams, 2017). For Black people, such systemic racism or institutional racism, undoubtedly, precipitates array of social inequalities, particularly unequal access to adequate healthcare. Indisputably, for Black Canadians, the lack of access to quality healthcare implies high risk exposure to COVID-19 infection.

THE BLACK LIVES MATTER (BLM) MOVEMENT

In response to issues of racism and systemic racism, the relatively new social action movement known as Black Lives Matter (BLM) has emerged as a voice for Black people. Seen as a decentralized network of activists with no formal hierarchy, BLM adopts non-violent methodology to advocate for social change in connection with racial injustice (Khan-Cullors, 2016). Specifically, BLM denounces police violence towards Black people and continues to call for policy changes around policing that will treat all people equally under the radar of police's law enforcement process (Khan-Cullors, 2016). At its inception in 2013, BLM adopted the *#BlackLivesMatter* on social media platforms (Banks, 2018) to promulgate its ideas and to solicit support from sympathizers who come from all racial backgrounds and who denounce racial injustice in the police and criminal justice system.

Incidents of racial injustice, including the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin, 17, in 2012, were the impetus for BLM using *#BlackLivesMatter* on social media to raise awareness of the unfairness endured by Black people. The BLM movement became known in North America following demonstrations against the 2014 shooting deaths of two African American men, Michael Brown (Missouri) and Eric Garner (New York), at the hands of police (Banks, 2018; Luibrand, 2017). Following a sustained campaign of police brutality against Black people, particularly in the United States, BLM expanded into a national network of over 30 local chapters between 2014 and 2016 (Banks, 2018; (Khan-Cullors, 2016).

BLM became popularized globally following another cluster of Black deaths at the hands of police including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Regis Korchinski-Paquet. These tragic events generated international headlines and ignited global attention for the BLM movement. Reportedly, an estimated 15 million to 26 million people, comprising Blacks, whites and other people of colour, participated in the 2020 BLM protests in the United States and other countries worldwide, making BLM one of the largest social action movements in the world (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020). The movement has advocated for "defunding the police," which would see the reallocation of resources and funds from police forces to community policing that requires al-

ternative emergency response policing models. The deaths of these Black people have not only exposed the realities of racial disparities, but also served as a blatant reminder of a long history of Black oppression by systems and structures controlled predominantly by white supremacy. As discussed earlier, whiteness establishes institutional structures to produce privilege and oppression, which in turn constructs anti-Black racism that feeds into police brutality against Blacks and the overrepresentation of Blacks in the criminal justice system.

While research on police brutality against Blacks is focused primarily on the American experience, Canadian scholars are now delving into research on police brutality against Blacks and Indigenous people (Owusu-Bempa & Wortley 2014). Unlike the situation in the U.S., where race-based crime statistics are readily available to the public, in Canada the criminal justice system is hesitant to release any race-based crime data to the public or researchers. The lack of race-based data has prompted some Canadian researchers like, Akwasi Owusu-Bempah and Scot Wortley of the University of Toronto—to advocate for the release of race-based crime data (Owusu-Bempa & Wortley, 2014). Nonetheless, the available literature suggests that Black people are generally treated poorly in the Canadian justice system. This differential treatment is not only discernible in the administration of justice, or in incidences of police brutality and harassment, but also in the lack of jobs and positions of power for Blacks in the criminal justice system, including police services, courts, and correctional systems. It's no wonder David Tanovich (2006) has commented that "the colour of justice in Canada is White" (p. 1).

Although, the BLM movement is providing a legitimate voice of social resistance against racial injustice, the racial discrimination against Blacks in Canada, the gravities of the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate and deepen racial inequalities in Canada. For Black Canadians, the COVID-19 pandemic can be gloomier and murkier compared to the general population. This is true given that the deadly novel coronavirus is infecting a disparate proportion of Black people worldwide, raising a legitimate puzzle as to whether Black lives matter amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BLACK CANADIANS

COVID-19, the novel coronavirus caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was initially detected in November 2019 at Wuhan in the Hubei province of China. Within two months of its discovery, the disease swiftly spread to many countries and territories around the world, compelling the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19 a pandemic, implying that the disease had spread to every country and territory in the world. At the time of this study,

health experts have declared that there is no pre-existing immunity against the COVID-19, and the disease does not discriminate against any person (Johns Hopkins University, 2020; WHO, 2020) regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, ability, class and so on. However, the general consensus is that the disease has severe health consequences for older people and those with underlying health conditions (e.g., AIDS, immunosuppressive diseases, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema, heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, cancer, diabetes, sickle-cell anemia, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis) (Johns Hopkins University, 2020; WHO, 2020).

To mitigate the spread of the virus, the response to the COVID-19 crisis has been rightly focused on medical intervention, containment, and vaccine creation (WHO, May 2020). Governments at all levels worldwide, including Canadian governments, have moved in unison to pass emergency legislation that prioritizes and enforces safety measures – "social distancing," "lockdown" conditions, border closures - to stop the spread of the virus. To alleviate the pandemic's social and economic costs, Canada has shown compassion to its most vulnerable citizens, including the elderly, unsheltered persons, children and low-income families, by providing emergency financial relief and social programs for most Canadians (Firang, 2020a). These financial and social safety programs provide most Canadians with a sense of economic security and a social safety net. Unfortunately, these relief packages and social programs only address the surface of the problem, as COVID-19 cases and fatalities continue to soar.

At the time of writing this article, almost 59 million COVID-19 cases, including more than 1.4 million deaths, have been reported worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020; Worldometer, 2020). Canadian health authorities have also reported more than 337,000 cases, and 11,000 deaths from COVID-19 (Health Canada, 2020). In Ontario, where this author resides, slightly more than 60,000 cases and 3,000 deaths have been reported; in Toronto alone, 38,000 cases and 1,820 deaths are counted (Toronto Public Health, 2020). These statistics are staggering. While older people and those with weakened immune systems from underlying medical conditions are deemed vulnerable to the pandemic (Health Canada, 2020), children, Indigenous people, and low-income Canadian families are also deemed vulnerable (Health Canada, 2020). One group of people conspicuously missing from the list of vulnerable groups: Black people.

In the midst of all the perplexity around COVID-19, a startling pattern that cannot be ignored has emerged from the disease worldwide: the deadly coronavirus is infecting a disproportionate number of Black people globally. In the

United Kingdom, United States, and Canada, to mention only a few countries impacted, recent research data shows that there are higher rates of COVID-19 in Black neighbourhoods. For instance**,** in the United Kingdom, a study conducted by Oxford University found that Black people were about twice as likely to die of COVID-19 compared to white people (Williamson, Walker, Bhaskaran, Bacon & Bates, 2020). Williamson et al. (2020) also conclude that pre-existing medical conditions alone were not enough to explain the trend, and that the overrepresentation was likely due to social factors, such as a higher likelihood among Black people to work frontline jobs and live-in homes with higher household density. Likewise, in the United States, recent studies on the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed growing evidence of Black people being disproportionately impacted (Stokes, Zambrano, Anderson, et al., 2020; Killerby, Link-Gelles, Haight, et al., 2020; Price-Haygood, Burton, Fort & Seoane, 2020; Millet, Jones, Benkeser et al., 2020). In particular, Millet et al. (2020) demonstrate that U.S. counties with higher proportions of Black residents have more COVID-19 cases and fatalities after adjusting for county-level characteristics such as age, poverty, comorbidities, and epidemic duration.

In Canada, it is reported that Black people and other racial minorities make up a majority of those hospitalized with COVID-19 in the country's largest cities (CBC, 2020; Wherry, 2020). In Toronto, the biggest and most densely populated city in Canada, social activists advocated for the collection and release of race-based statistics on the COVID-19 pandemic in the city. The data released by the City of Toronto is summarized in Table 2 and show a correlation between the rate of COVID-19 infections and racialized communities in Toronto.

Table 2: COVID-19 cases by ethno-racial group.

Ethno-racial group	% of Toronto population	% of COVID-19 cases
Arab/Middle Eastern/Western Asian	4	11
Black	8	23
East Asian	13	4
Latin America	3	9
South Asian or Indo-Caribbean	13	20
South Asian	7	14
White	48	18

Source: Toronto Public Health, 2020

Looking at Table 2, it is clear that Black people only represent 8% of Toronto's population but they top the rate of COVID-19 infections: Blacks comprise 23% of the total COVID-19 cases in Toronto. Whites make up almost half (48%) of the Toronto population, but represent only 18% of the total COVID-19 cases in Toronto (Toronto Public Health, 2020). Table 2 also sheds light on

how many Black people and other racialized ethnic minority groups in Canada are at increased risk of COVID-19 infections and deaths, which can be attributed to the longstanding racial injustices and health inequalities in the country. As noted earlier, readers are encouraged to exercise caution in interpreting the above COVID-19 data, since the dynamic circumstances surrounding the disease are still evolving in many countries.

SYSTEMIC RACISM, COVID-19 AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Systemic racism is the most common factor with regards to black people being more vulnerable to COVID-19 infection and deaths. To say the least, systemic racism predisposes Black people to COVID-19 infection (CBC, 2020, June). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater impact on Black people, because they suffer greater health and fitness inequalities in Canadian society. COVID 19 pandemic seems to have exposed the long-standing health inequalities that exist in Canadian society due to institutional discrimination and the practice of racism in the Canadian healthcare system. The pandemic has shed more light on how many Black people and other racialized ethnic minority groups in Canada are at increased risk of COVID 19 infections and deaths due to longstanding inequalities in our healthcare system.

Historically, social determinants of health have prevented Black people from equal access to economic, social and healthcare opportunities. Simply explained, social determinants of health are those conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health and quality-of life risks and outcomes (Statistics Canada, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2020; WHO, 2008). Thus, social determinants of health include conditions or resources, like appropriate housing, good education, public safety, availability of healthy foods, and clean air, can promote positive health outcomes for a population group (Statistics Canada, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2020; WHO, 2008). For all Canadians, access to these resources would no doubt provide strength and resilience against any infectious disease. The differences in our living conditions explain in part why some Canadians are healthier than others. These differences are due to structural inequalities in Canadian society that allow some groups, mostly white people, to benefit from, and gain access to, key resources in our communities. The living conditions of many Black Canadians may contribute to fundamental health ailments that make it difficult for them to follow the steps to prevent spreading and contracting COVID-19. In some cases, these social determinants of health even prevent Black Canadians from accessing treatment if they get infected with the virus. The inequalities in the social determinants of

health affecting Black Canadians are interrelated, and influence a wide range of health and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.

DENIAL OF SYSTEMIC RACISM

In their attempts to understand why Blacks are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, Canadian health authorities seem to deny systemic racism as the driving force behind the high infection rate among Black people. Recently, a team of Canadian medical scientists have received funding to study antibodies in the blood of Black Canadians to understand the high rates of infections among Black Canadians (Slaughter, 2020). The proposed research intends to collect blood samples from Black Canadians to determine whether a peculiar genetic disorder or blood type predisposes Black people to COVID-19 infection (Slaughter, 2020). The study intends to randomly sample 2,000 Blacks and test for the prevalence of antibodies, which are created naturally when the body is exposed to the virus (Slaughter, 2020). By collecting a large-scale antibody test, the researchers hope to better understand how COVID-19 affects Black people, a sub-population that is reported in many other countries outside of Canada to have disproportionately suffered dire consequences of the novel coronavirus (Slaughter, 2020). Unfortunately, the proposed research seems to deny systemic racism as the underlying cause of high COVID-19 infection rate among Black Canadians. It does not primarily aim to explore the social determinants of health as the driving force for poor health outcomes for Black people. It is limited to just the COVID-19 infection.

UNDERSTANDING THE INCREASED RISK OF COVID-19 AMONG BLACK PEOPLE

Some of the many social determinants of health that place Black Canadians at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19 is the sub-population's positive association with manifestations of acts of systemic racism carried out against its members. This practice of systemic discrimination and anti-Black racism is embedded in the Canadian social and economic institutions, particularly the health care system, labour market, housing, and education systems. This leads to chronic and toxic stress and shapes the social and economic factors that put some Black people at increased risk of the COVID-19 (Cordes & Castro, 2020; Paradies, 2006; Simons, Lei, & Beach, 2018). It is important to note that these four Canadian sub-systems - healthcare, labour market, housing, and education - do not act independently in determining the socio-economic and psycho-social status of Blacks. The systems are interdependent. They interact with one another to produce proxy variables that are indicators of the systemic racism against black people.

HEALTHCARE ACCESS AND UTILIZATION

The dynamics of systemic racism in the Canadian healthcare system, especially discrimination against Black people in terms of access to quality healthcare, have received less attention in the scholarly literature. Much of the discussions on the dynamics of racism in the Canadian healthcare system have focused on Indigenous people. While it has been well established that Indigenous people lack access to quality healthcare, Black Canadians also endure limited access to an adequate healthcare system. As Mensah and William (2017) noted, perhaps due to Canada's universal healthcare insurance system, many Canadians dispute the claim that inequities and racism exist in the Canadian healthcare system. Fortunately, there are studies that suggest Blacks and other racial minorities have differential access to the Canadian health systems (e.g., Mensah & Williams, 2017; Puxley, 2014). However, even when they do, Black and other racialized persons are treated differently regarding eligibility and referrals to special medical intervention (Mensah & Williams, 2017). A case in point: the example of 45-year-old Sinclair, a Black man who sought medical treatment for a bladder infection at Winnipeg Health Science Center in 2008 and was left unattended in the emergency room for several hours and later died sitting in his wheelchair (Mensah & Williams, 2017; Puxley, 2014).

HOUSING

The systemic racism against Blacks in the Canadian healthcare system is manifested in the residential concentration of Blacks in poor housing conditions and poor neighbourhoods. In Canada's large cities like Toronto and Montreal, research has confirmed that Blacks and other racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to reside in poor housing conditions in crowded neighbourhoods (Firang, 2019; Mensah, 2014; Murdie, 2002, 2003; Owusu, 1998), which explains why it is more challenging to follow prevention strategies aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19. In these residential segregated neighbourhoods, access to health care facilities for Black people is limited. Although residential concentration of Blacks in segregated neighbourhoods produce benefits as a result of the bonding social capital that takes place within Black cultural ethnic networks, the subjective and objective wellbeing of members of these neighbourhoods are nevertheless undermined by lack of access to employment opportunities, healthy food, and good health care practices. Moreover, growing and disproportionate unemployment rates for Black people during the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to greater risk of eviction and homelessness, or concentration and overcrowding due to the necessity of sharing of housing. In the United States, researchers have also found that poor housing conditions are associated with more COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in areas where Blacks and other racial minority groups live, learn, work, play, and wor-

ship (Kim & Bostwick, 2020; Wadhera, Wadhera, Gaba, Figueroa, Joynt Maddox, Yeh, & Shen, 2020).

LABOUR MARKET INEQUALITIES

In Canada, several studies demonstrate that Black people and other ethnic minority groups face discrimination in the Canadian labour market. Studies have shown that Black Canadians' positionality within Canadian society has made them second-class citizens, as many well-educated Black Canadians remain engaged in low-paying, menial jobs (Firang, 2020b; Mensah, 2014; Tetteh & Puplampo, 2005). In his recent studies on Ghanaians (Blacks and racialized immigrants) in Toronto, Firang (2020b, 2019) demonstrates that Blacks immigrants, even when they have attained a higher level of education compared to the general Toronto population, are overrepresented in the processing and manufacturing occupations (Firang, 2020b). The studies further reveal that the occupational profile of Ghanaians reflects structural inequalities (e.g. discrimination and racism) in the Canadian labour market (Firang, 2020b; 2019). Undoubtedly, the low occupation status of Ghanaians implies low-income earnings and poor health outcomes. In particular, Black people are disproportionately represented in precarious, but essential, work settings such as personal support healthcare facilities, factories, grocery stores, and public transportation (i.e., taxi or cub). Black Canadians who work in precarious work settings are more likely to be exposed to the coronavirus due to several factors, such as close contact with the public and an inability to work from home (Statistics Canada, 2020).

EDUCATIONAL, INCOME, AND WEALTH GAPS

Systemic racism has a longstanding existence in the Canadian educational sector that produces inequities for access to high-quality education for Canadian Blacks. Mensah and William (2017) show that common manifestations of systemic racism in Canadian schools are ethnocentric biases of school curricula and pedagogy, as well as low expectations of Black students' abilities. Unsurprisingly, most of these racial practices are tied to longstanding stereotypes of Blacks' academic inabilities. The systemic racism in the educational system not only leads to lower high school completion rates, but also create barriers to post-secondary education among Black children and youth. Barrier to post-secondary education may limit future job opportunities, create lower paying jobs or generate less stable and precarious jobs for Black youth. A recently released report from Statistics Canada (2020) on the social determinants of health and socioeconomic status of Canada's Black population between 2001 and 2016 confirms the reality of systemic racism in Canada. The report uncovers mounting evidence of socio-economic inequalities between the general Ca-

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nadian population and Black Canadians. Among the key findings of the Statistics Canada's (2020) report is the significant wage gap between Black people and the rest of the Canadian population; people Black earned $18,000 less than other general populations. As noted above, many Black Canadians work in precarious job settings that endanger them with the greater chance to be exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19 due to reasons such as close contact with the public, and a limited ability to work from home (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Also, Black people with limited job options are likely to have less flexibility to vacate risky occupations that may put them at a greater risk of exposure to the novel coronavirus. People in these circumstances are unable to miss work, even if they are sick, because their meager income cannot afford them basic needs like food.

The above discussions highlight how in a complex social system critical issues of racial injustice through the dynamics of the interactions in our Canadian society can reduce the vitality of a racialized population group. The discussions also underscore the point that anti-black racism is not only expressed in forms of police brutality, but also it can manifest itself through systemic racism in employment, housing, education, and healthcare, to disproportionately expose racialized people to global health crisis. The pressures the COVID-19 pandemic will even worsen these socio-economic conditions leading to longer periods of unemployment, issues of housing affordability, deepen health inequalities, and poor educational performances for Black Canadians

SHIFTING FROM VULNERABILITY TO VITALITY

Exploring innovative strategies for social and economic transformation is critical for Black Canadians. Movements such as Black Lives Matter have given a new, vital voice to promoting such social change. Two strategies by which social transformation can be achieved: shifting from vulnerability to recognizing vitalities/resiliencies and building network of allies with other oppressed groups to stop the spread of the two pandemics: anti-Black racism and COVID-19. As noted earlier, a lot of discourses about the vulnerability of Blacks abounds in the public media and academic literature. The time has now come for Black Canadians to move beyond our vulnerabilities to discover our vitality and agency – moving from the discourse of victimhood to resilience, agency, vitality and creativity. As Black people, one strategy to defeat anti-Black racism is to proclaim that Black lives matter through our vitalities (resiliencies), which exemplify this to be true. Shifting from a focus on our vulnerabilities to recognition of our vitalities in Canadian society will declare the inherent worth and dignity of our Black humanity. By vitality, I am referring to resiliency – an ability and capacity developed through life experience, which influences how we, as individu-

als, respond to difficult situations and undesirable events (Mullaly, 2010). As it is used here in this paper, resiliency also implies those personal attributes and competencies developed through our personal experiences that allow individuals to navigate and adapt through negative life experiences in contemporary society (Akbar, Ray & Preston, 2018; Connor & Davidson, 2003). For Black Canadians, resiliency includes our strong personal attributes, competencies and capacities that enable us, as individuals, to successfully operate and adapt to the adversity and distress (Connor & Davidson, 2003) of anti-Black racism in Canadian society. This is crucial in the sense that the pandemic of anti-Black racism in the Canada society has reached what Morton Grodins referred to as a tipping point, sorites paradox or critical mass (Grodzins, 1958). Black people will need to change their reactionary behaviour towards racism (Grodzins, 1958) to focus instead on building immunity to the virus of anti-Black racism or becoming self-sustaining to the vulnerabilities of anti-Black racism. To build strong immunity to anti-Black racism, Black Canadians need to focus their resiliency on how to transform the Black community. We can build such transformation if we focus on how Blacks are building resilience towards the enduring problem of anti-Black racism by shifting towards how Blacks can contribute in many ways to the growth, diversity and development of the Canadian mosaic in areas of employment, education, sports and others. After a long history of settlement in Canada, Blacks are now building resilience to allow them to cope with anti-Black racism in our Canadian society. Reminding ourselves of the many notable Black Canadians who have held high-profile public office will serve to strengthen our resiliencies and capacities to fight against or cope with the anti-Black racism virus. Learning from notable Black Canadians like Michaëlle Jean, Donald Oliver, Stanley Grizzle, Rosemary Brown, Donovan Bailey, Dr. Clarence Bayne, Dorothy Williams and Lincoln Alexander – to name but a few -will open doors for many Black Canadians. With the resurgence of two related pandemics, perhaps, we need to follow the examples of the above notables to prove our worth and dignity by shifting the focus from our vulnerabilities to vitalities.

BUILDING ALLIES

In addressing the pandemic of anti-Black racism, not only will Black people need to build resiliency, we will need to establish allies with all those who fight against social and racial injustice. Black people in Canada always have "good white friends" who support the fight against anti-Black racism (Dei, 2020). These white friends are genuine allies who we can rely on in our fight against Black people. At the same time, we should be aware that some of these white friends can reproduce racial injustice against Black people in spite of their good intentions. We must also build allies with other oppressed and marginalized

groups, such as Indigenous people, to recognize our convergent histories of action against colonial powers and institutions. Building allies also means building strong coalition with other marginalized groups, such as those who are suffering ableism, sexism, heterosexism and xenophobia (Dei, 2020). Finally, this article recommends that all allies fighting to stop anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression using the momentum kindled by the Black Lives Matter movement to amplify the racial injustices meted out against Black people in Canadian society. Each voice can make huge difference in the fight against anti-Black racism if only we build within our Black communities' collective solidarity that mobilizes our collective action against racism.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing upon a variety of sources, this article has explored an important question as to whether Black lives matter amid the current global health crisis of COVID-19. The article argues that systemic racism predisposes Black Canadians to COVID-19 infections and fatalities. The pandemic has only exposed the longstanding inequities and racial injustices in Canadian society. Systemic racism against Black Canadians will worsen in the wake of the current global health crisis. As the editors of this special issue have alluded, the gravities of the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate and deepen racial inequalities in Canada. Fortunately, for Black Canadians, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has provided a legitimate voice of social resistance to inequality and injustice. The author contends that BLM activists should not only demand significant reforms of Canadian political, social and economic institutions to remove structural barriers that prevent equal access to opportunities for Black Canadians, but equally important is the need to encourage a shift among Black Canadians from focusing on our vulnerabilities to our vitalities. Shifting towards vitalities implies building resiliency that allows Blacks Canadians to combat that the tipping point or critical mass threshold of anti-Black racism. In the meantime, BLM should continue to expand their dialogue to create a new social discourse as well as develop community events that question structural racism, putting in place policies that promote equity for Black and other marginalized communities. This article contends that examining and exploring innovative strategies for social and economic transformation is critical for Black Canadians to promote the social change to which BLM has given a vital new voice. The ways to achieve this is by shifting from vulnerability to recognizing vitalities/resiliencies and building allyships with other oppressed groups to stop the spread of the dual pandemics of anti-Black racism and COVID-19.

An important limitation about this study, as noted earlier, is regarding the interpretation of the COVID-19 data in this article. Readers are cautioned about the many unknowns that remain with respect to the pandemic. The dynamic circumstances surrounding the disease are still evolving in many countries, and so are their impacts. How, where, and when the disease will end is still uncertain, and it is too early to predict its expected and actual impact. Nonetheless, some scientific observations about the disease continue to change daily. Hence, some of the ideas presented in this paper may or may not remain valid. However, we do hope that the article offers some bases for further research on the complexities and structural dynamics of the processes of anti-black racism and the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, empirical studies that shed light on protective factors such as social networks and social capital that use the dependencies in the populations to create resilience in the population. The transnational diversities of Black Canadian population are sources of creativity that can be used to strengthen those social entrepreneurial responses/ingenuities that are necessary to enable Black Canadians to shift from states of vulnerability to vitalities during the current pandemic.

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