SALZBURG GLOBAL LGBT* FORUM
LGBT* COMMUNITIES IN TIMES OF COVID-19: CONFRONTING ISSUES OF RACISM

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*LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. We are using this term as it is currently widely used in human rights conversations on sexual orientation and gender identity in many parts of the world, and we would wish it to be read as inclusive of other cultural concepts, contemporary or historical, to express sexuality and gender, intersex and gender non-conforming identities.

INTRODUCTION
This meeting was the fourth of its kind to strengthen online engagement with Salzburg Global Fellows participating in the Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum amid the COVID-19 emergency, focusing specifically on another pressing global crisis: racism and social injustices faced by racialized communities. As part of Salzburg Global Seminar’s commitment to a better world, the online gathering addressed how to best build conversations on racism that allow opportunities to listen, learn, and engage with diverse voices, especially those within the LGBT community.

Racism is deeply embedded in our history, culture, and societal norms and values. Racism can be reflected in the way society functions, how power is distributed, and how citizens interact with the state and public services. It can be both conscious and unconscious and is often felt through a failure to reflect the interests or hear the voices of those affected by racism.

Around the world, white people benefit while many people of color suffer disproportionately. COVID-19 has highlighted the disproportionate lack of equal access to food and housing, health care, education, jobs, and pay by people of color in many societies. LGBT people of color who already face discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity are especially at risk.
PANEL DISCUSSION
This discussion was organized by a group of Fellows within the LGBT* Forum – Bisi Alimi, Lee Badgett, Angeline Jackson, Faris Cuchi Gezahagn, and Sudeshan Reddy. They echoed the group’s wider call for an in-depth discussion on racism within the LGBT context.

Klaus Mueller, Founder and Chair of the Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum, opened the discussion by thanking the preparation team for their valuable insights and taking on the responsibility in designing and planning the online meeting. He briefly referenced how colonialism, slavery, and the Holocaust are deeply embedded in our history, as is the perpetuating concept of “human races”. The primary biological justification for defining groups of humans as “races”, based on the color of their skin or the shape of their eyes or skulls, has led to the discrimination, persecution, and murder of millions of people. Quoting the Jena Declaration, he emphasized that there is no biological basis for the concept of human races:

“The concept of race is the result of racism, not its prerequisite.”

Bisi Alimi, Nigeria/UK, discussed why it is important to accept conversations regarding racism will never be “comfortable.” Bisi, the first Nigerian man to come out as gay on Nigerian national television, now resides in the UK, where roots of colonialism run deep. He said to learn about the effects of racism, one must accept that historical figures and heroes often participated in acts that perpetuated racism; or that the school system has failed to teach us about the intrinsic societal values that preserve racism. He emphasized he isn’t afraid to call all white people racist, just as he isn’t afraid to say all men are sexist or all straight people are homophobic because systemic prejudices are built into society and affect all its members. But he believes many people are ready to “embark on a journey to unlearn their social conditioning” and work at erasing their racism. In closing, he urged that without a system where everyone can discuss race, sexuality, and gender issues openly, no change can come.

Lee Badgett, USA, spoke about the long and complicated history of racism in the United States, particularly towards African-Americans, and why the discussion of racism is so personal. Lee is an economist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst whose research relates to economic issues specific to the LGBT community. She notes accusations of racism or racist behavior illicit two common responses from non-racialized people; “this is not about me, I don’t benefit from racism,” or, “I don’t have a racist bone in my body.” Despite evidence proving the existence of unconscious bias in employment and social settings, Lee says most people still fail to recognize that racism is systemic and white privilege often blinds us to that. The Black Lives Matter Movement for her is also a sign of hope. More people are also using the arts to connect and learn about racism in all its forms. Progress, she notes, will only come from these personal commitments to make change happen both within oneself and then in the community at large.
Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, Ethiopia/Austria, shed light on how anti-black racism stands out in the broader context of racism. Faris, an LGBT refugee and co-founder of the House of Guramayle, which supports LGBT individuals in Ethiopia, said there is a lack of understanding about how anti-blackness manifests. Faris noted that darker-skinned people face a more severe and prevalent form of prejudice than other racialized communities. Faris used the example of the "house servant" in slavery; those with lighter skin were often given this title, whereas the darker-skinned slaves were not. Further, there are nuances in understanding blackness and the black experience that deserve their own seat at the table when discussing issues of racism. This part of the discussion sparked a question about the term Person of Color (PoC) and whether it fairly captured the black experience. Faris indicated this term flattens the experience of darker-skinned bodies and emphasized that the lived experience of blackness often deserves its own distinction.

Sudeshan Reddy, South Africa, echoed the sentiment of becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable, speaking vividly of his experience growing up in apartheid South Africa. Noting that institutionalized racism defined his childhood, he described how pivotal it was to witness the country’s first democratic election and watch a black majority government under Nelson Mandela enact true change. Yet, despite living through the most profound transformation – one that few societies have seen – he notes that racism remains in different ways. The undoing of laws does not automatically undo attitudes, prejudices, and deeply ingrained discrimination. Sudeshan suggests at the precipice of change, we need to have these uncomfortable conversations about race to slowly strip it from societal norms. That means decolonizing the curriculum in schools and providing a world view that does not begin at European colonization, for example. Finally, he noted that you need allies that go beyond just one political issue to undo such institutional racism.

BREAKOUT GROUPS
Fellows gathered in small breakout groups to discuss the panelists’ insights and explain their own regional context regarding racism and race inequalities.

GROUP 1
Fellows raised the comparison between racism in the US and Europe, noting that it would be rooted in arrogance to believe that racism is only an American issue. "Why do people always push away issues of racism to Americans as if racism does not exist in Europe?" asked one participant. Another Fellow noted the pain and lived experiences of Black Persons of Color (BPoC) and queer bodies are sometimes misused in political propaganda in Austria and Europe. One Fellow noted that in Asia, class can play a large role in how racial and religious minorities experience discrimination. Finally, the group discussed how conversations about race could go from reactive to proactive.

GROUP 2
Looking beyond the European and North American context, Fellows in this group highlighted racism within other areas of the world. One Fellow touched on Arab racism against black African people, while others highlighted targeted discrimination within the South Asian community. Participants also spoke
about the need to challenge these different layers of racism at every level and speak out against often-subliminal forms of discrimination. Similarly, countries that claim to have no racialized communities run the risk of denying the existence and manifold expressions of racism in their society altogether. The hyper valorization of “white skin” in many Asian, African and Arab countries was also discussed, such as the advertising and use of skin lightening creams and the idea that lighter skin is more desirable; issues which have been exacerbated by colonialism, but not necessarily caused entirely by colonialism. Finally, the group discussed the danger of “othering” in general for political purposes and why we must understand cultural identities are not fixed but constantly evolve and merge.

GROUP 3
Fellows discussed the modalities of how anti-blackness manifests itself within queer communities, with the blatant racism on dating apps as just one example. Three different perspectives were discussed: the structural visibility of queer bodies (challenging the way mainstream media presents queerness, often predominantly white and lacking in black experiences); personal visibility (BPoC are often the last invited to the table and have little say in directing the conversation) and desirability (access to education also depends on what kind of representation or bodies the institute desires). Fellows also discussed how the “PoC” term divides the world into whites and “non-whites”, erasing the varied experience that people of color have and instead paint them all with the same brush. The group also discussed the racism within communities of color and how it is often an area that goes undiscovered in the wider discussion of racism.

CONCLUSION
Despite the complexities regarding global issues of racism, the group agreed that finding space to become comfortable with the uncomfortable, especially within the LGBT context, is vital to navigating a path forward both globally and within regional borders. A Fellow stated that global discussions such as this helped him to get a fuller understanding of the complex issues at hand, with the resolve to learn more about racism in his home country. Others mentioned that the conversation’s personal tone was helpful to reflect on one’s own assumptions and practices. In conclusion, three perspectives were highlighted:

- Conversations on racism concern all, and LGBT people need to acknowledge, explore and confront racism in all its forms within their own communities.
- An important step forward is realizing and recognizing privileges that both are grounded in and strengthen systemic racism.
- We must commit to confronting racism both urgently while also understanding the long-term process needed to fully eradicate racism.

Nicole Bogart is a journalist and writer based in Alberta, Canada. Her work aims to promote the intrinsic value of storytelling in our understanding of global issues, particularly LGBT and women’s rights. Nicole is passionate about creating human connections to these issues to promote understanding and equality. She is a co-author of Salzburg Global LGBT Forum: Building a Global Community, a report chronicling the five-year impact of the Salzburg Global LGBT Forum.