

WHAT WORDS CAN I USE? WHAT STORIES CAN I TELL?

Hotsheets

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This is becoming an increasingly relevant issue in Canadian letters. For example, Andray Domise addresses this in his article *Stuff White People Write*.ⁱ As well, The Writers Union of Canada has been addressing this since the 1995 *Writing and Race Conference* and similar concerns are raised by the Playwrights Guild of Canada's *Equity in Theatre Initiative* as well as by the Professional Association of Canadian Theatre's *Equity Diversity Initiative*. And then there is the current controversy regarding Joseph Boyden and his self-identification as Indigenous.

I also wrote a piece in March 2016 regarding those who critique theatre stories where I cite several sources that indicate this issue is neither new nor limited to Canada.ⁱⁱ For example:

- Ross Jackson's accusing American theatre of three very troubling practices: slotting, tokenism, and dehumanizationⁱⁱⁱ
- Canstage and its selection of all-White directors, playwrights, choreographers and translators^{iv}
- The challenges issued by Real Theatre Canada in regard to allegations of racism in Vancouver theatre^v
- **Figuring the Plural**, an examination of Indigenous, racialized and culturally specific arts organizations in Canada and the United States^{vi}
- Natasha Bakht's article on how South Asian dance forms have been reviewed^{vii}
- George Elliot Clarke's article about pervasive racism in Canadian Theatre^{viii}

STEPS TO TAKE

1. Get To Know The Words And Their Meaning:

"Equity," "Diversity," "Anti-Oppression," "Intersectionality," "Indigeneity," "Racialization," "Inclusion," "Tolerance"—what do these words mean? Why are there so many of them? What's common and different about them? This field is full of terms that change constantly with several texts providing glossaries for what appear to be a never-ending minefield of words and the ideas associated with them, making it easy to see why many are perplexed about what these terms mean and which are appropriate.^{ix}

In their glossary of terms, Lopes and Thomas provide an historical context exploring the contingent nature of such definitions and why they change over time. They note that these words derive from government categorization and community processes of self-naming. In both scenarios, naming and definitions have changed and, for the latter, will likely continue to do so. The government's influence can be seen as categorization that contains and limits, whereas community processes are much more expansive. Both have cultural implications to writers regarding the stories we write and the language we use.

For example, while the Multiculturalism Act provides a shift from the past history of assimilation to Western values and norms, it has been roundly critiqued for its focus on cultural celebrations and avoidance of substantive issues of equality, including in the arts.^x Further, the term 'equity,' while proposing some advances in terminology, presents other challenges in its homogenization of 'designated' groups as 'Aboriginal,' 'visible minorities,' 'persons



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with disabilities,' and 'women.'^{xi} As such, this approach leaves us only with 'thin' descriptions of the lives around us.

2. Go Beyond What is Given—Read, Attend, Listen, Ask:

On the other hand, parallel developments in feminist, Indigenous and racialized communities are evident during this time and, while one might think community self-naming would find a home in a truly multicultural society, past and present discrimination has not been fully addressed.

To challenge this and to tell stories from these communities, there have been considerable efforts by Indigenous and racialized peoples, women, persons with disabilities, the LGBTQ communities and others to articulate their identities and to have this recognized, particularly in the world of writing, and how this affects standards of excellence, practice, adjudication and selection. It also points to who is involved in these initiatives. Where are these voices in determining contemporary writing? Is it possible to open up to this needed discussion without these artists being involved? Who sits on the editorial boards? Whose work is sought out by publishers?

This is the approach being taken by several groups across Canada, e.g., The Equity In Theatre Project of the Playwrights Guild of Canada, the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, SAVAC, ImagiNative, ReelAsian, Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario, the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, the National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition, Tangled Art+Disability, The Festival of Literary Diversity, The Deaf Disabled and Mad Alliance of Canada.^{xii}

3. Discover Your Own Identity And Its Privileges:

As with any change in thinking, there is the challenge of naming and the construction of meaning. As Said and Fanon suggest, terminology sits within the context of the times in which it is used and is often contested, and that European hegemony created 'norms' in which sexism, racism and other currently disparaged categories were like breathing air.^{xiii} Therefore, unless these things have been identified, eliminated and remedied, they will find their way into the contemporary, in the language we use and the stories we write.

This is a challenge as writers may need to consider their own personal identities and the privileges such confers. For example, one might ask: Where do I fit in all of this? Does my race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, class background provide me with access to things others do not have? Does my identity shadow the importance of the lives around me and prompt me to consider that I know their lives and can write about them? How do I begin to question my own privilege and to write based on that personal knowledge? When do I step out of the way of marginalized writers and support their work and explorations they engage us in?

This is part of the process to identify, eliminate and remedy. It is where writers, using an equity and diversity lens, can challenge themselves to change those constructs built on Eurocentric values and standards. It is an opportunity to hear and support the voice of the 'other,' to acknowledge these voices in fullness so that their stories can be told and, through this, give guidance on language to use and stories to tell and by whom.



ⁱ Literary Review of Canada, October 2016

ⁱⁱ <http://theatrecentre.org/?p=7293>. The Theatre Centre

ⁱⁱⁱ *Blackness in Nonprofit Theater: Where Representation Becomes Marginalization*, **Equity, Diversity, Inclusion Project with NPO**, January 29, 2016

^{iv} See *Matthew Jocelyn ducks real question on Canadian Stage diversity*, **Globe and Mail**, January 29, 2016, J. Kelly Nestruck,

^v See *Allegations of systemic racism in Vancouver theatre could spark change*, <http://globalnews.ca/news/2143702/allegations-of-systemic-racism-in-vancouvers-theatre-scene-could-spark-change/>

^{vi} Mina Malton et al, Art Institute of Chicago, 2014

^{vii} See *Mere Song and Dance*, in **Pluralism in the Arts in Canada: A Change is Gonna Come**, edited by Charles C. Smith, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

^{viii} See *The Stage is Not White and Neither is Canada*, in **Pluralism in the Arts in Canada: A Change is Gonna Come**, edited by Charles C. Smith, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

^{ix} For example, see: **The Colour of Democracy**, Frances Henry, C. Tator, W. Mattis; **Dancing on Live Embers**, Tina Lopes and Barb Thomas, Broadview Press; *Cultural Diversity in the Media Arts*, Independent Media Arts Alliance and National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition in **Pluralism in the Arts in Canada: A Change is Gonna Come** ed. Charles C. Smith, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2012; and *Arts and Equity: A Toolkit for Community Engagement*, Skye Louis and Leah Burns, Neighbourhood Arts Network in **Pluralism in the Arts in Canada: A Change is Gonna Come** ed. Charles C. Smith, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2012; **Figuring the Plural**, Mina Para Matlon et al, Art Institute of Chicago, 2014

^x See Natasha Bakht, *Mere "Song and Dance": Complicating the Multicultural Imperative in the Arts*, and, George Elliot Clarke, *The Stage is Not White – And Neither is Canada*, in **Pluralism in the Arts in Canada: A Change is Gonna Come** ed. Charles C. Smith, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2012

^{xi} See Justice R. Abella **Report of the Commission on Equality in Employment**, Government of Canada, 1984. This document proposed these terms that then became codified in Federal employment equity legislation and the Federal Contractors Program.

^{xii} <http://eit.playwrightsguild.ca/>; <http://www.acc-cca.com/>; <http://savac.net/>; <http://www.imagenative.org/home/>; <http://www.reelasian.com/>; <https://cpamo.wordpress.com/>; <http://ipaa.ca/>; <http://www.oboro.net/en/organisation/national-indigenous-media-arts-coalition-nimac> ; <http://tangledarts.org/>; www.ddmaac.org

^{xiii} Edward Said **Culture and Imperialism of Civilization**, Vintage Books 1994. Frantz Fanon *Racism and Culture*, in **Toward the African Revolution**, Monthly Review Press, 1964