

August 18, 2020

To the Board of Directors of Lakeshore Arts:

This letter has taken me quite some time to write and I do hope you will understand my need to write it. When I stepped down from my tenure as Operations Manager at Lakeshore Arts, the organization had just released a [statement on Anti-Black racism](#) (June 17, 2020), penned by then Executive Director Susan Nagy with support from the Board of Directors. In this public statement, the leadership of Lakeshore Arts made clear commitments to keep the organization accountable to supporting the fight against anti-Black racism long after it had stopped trending. Among those commitments were the following:

- *We will commit to identifying and dismantling white supremacy culture in our workplace; examining how our norms, standards, policies and practices centre white people's ideas, attitudes, beliefs, work and communication styles and create strategies to uproot these biases and create an anti-oppressive, intersectional workplace.*
- *We commit to embedding an anti-racism and anti-oppression lens into recruitment and hiring of both staff and Board members, identifying any discriminatory organizational practices and potential barriers for racialized candidates such as use of personal networks to fill vacancies, informal decision making processes and inflated or unnecessary job requirements (including overemphasis on paid experience and formal education). We will work to ensure that racialized people attain leadership positions in our organization not only part time, temporary or entry level positions.*

A little over one month later (July 30, 2020) the organization [announced their new Executive Director: Ashley Watson](#), a white woman who has held previous positions on the Board and staff at Lakeshore Arts. I was justifiably taken aback at this news.

In my three years at Lakeshore Arts, I saw an organization that was growing, shifting, and evolving - poised to become a true leader in the community arts sector. [Susan's departure](#) from the organization came at an unintentionally opportune time. It presented an opportunity for Lakeshore Arts to show true leadership and disrupt the status quo, while ensuring that the June 17th statement was not just more lip-service in a sector rife with performative statements and actions; a sector overwhelmingly populated and led by white people. Your placement of Ashley, *another white woman*, as the new leader of LSA was a violent action towards the Black communities that support you: community members, organizations, former employees, and the Black artists you employ to facilitate your programs. It directly conflicts with and negates the statement you put out to the public a month prior. It is for this reason that I, a former member of the LSA management team and a Black woman, along with some of the aforementioned artists you have worked with in the past (named below), simply cannot remain silent. In this industry, the culture of silence equates to complicity, and it has created dangerous and toxic environments for Black arts, community, and non-profit workers across the country.

At its core, your placement of Ashley at the helm of your organization is rooted in white supremacist culture. It is a vicious cycle that we have seen repeated ad nauseum. So here's what we would like to put forward for the Board of Directors to consider:

- 1) Your recent actions have spoken louder than your statement against anti-Black racism. How do you now plan on moving forward in accountability towards the other commitments you have made, in a way that can prevent further harm to the Black community, specifically those who you continue to interact with (Black artists and facilitators, Black program participants, future Black employees)?
- 2) There is often a recurring justification that no Black, Indigenous, or POC candidates applied for a position; or that they were not suited to the position. If there were no applicants, what barriers do you think prevented applications? If there were applicants, were your criteria and assessment of the applicants fair and equitable? Was "*external expertise from Black, Indigenous and racialized leaders*" sought in making the hiring decision?
- 3) You currently have an opening for a management position within your organization. How will you ensure that the issues presented above are not repeated in this hiring process?

It is not enough to superficially claim diversity and inclusion. It is not enough to post about the many Black, Indigenous, and POC artists you engage with and hire. It is not enough to repost and share content from Black, Indigenous, and POC organizations and individuals.

Just as anti-Black racism has been an insidious, often unacknowledged reality across Canada, so too must your organization actively evaluate and confront how you have maintained systemic racism and oppression, and how you will take direct action against it across all your operations.

Lakeshore Arts missed an opportunity to stand behind their Black Lives Matter statement. You now have an opportunity to acknowledge, reflect, listen, and TAKE ACTION so that no further harm is caused.

On behalf of myself and the collective of artists mentioned in the signature of this letter, I sincerely hope you will take this matter seriously, and publicly re-issue a clarified statement and plan of action addressing the above.

We look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,

Natassia Morris

with support from the following artists;

Paulina O'Kieffe- Anthony
Keisha James
Patrick Walters

Joshua 'Scribe' Watkis
Ebti Nabag
Faduma Mohamed