

# **CULTURAL EQUITY GROUP RESEARCH REPORT**

Prepared for: **The Cultural Equity Group**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY**

This report is a qualitative analysis of the public testimonials presented at the two Cultural Equity Group community meetings held on December 7, 1996 and February 15, 1997. As well, some observations raised at Steering Committee meetings are also discussed in this document. The main objective this study is to analyze and report upon the comments and observations of those who expressed their feelings, opinions and intentions with regard to the establishment of a Cultural Equity Fund as related during the Community meetings and, to a lesser extent, the Steering Committee meetings.

Given the scope of the issue being studied i.e., Cultural Equity in Manitoba and constraints on time and funding, this report focuses on one main objective. That is to distill the collective voice of those who feel passionately enough about this issue, pro or con, to speak about it publicly into a document that is succinct and readable.

This report is based upon two main sources of information 1) the transcripts of the two community meetings, 2) the minutes and author's private notes taken at of the Steering Committee meetings. The analysis is subjective and is solely the opinion of the author of this report; however, the quotes used have been approved and validated by the speakers.

This report is distinct from the conventional market research reports in that, in this matter, a degree of subjectivity rather than objectivity is required to achieve the objective – communicating about very touchy issues such as racism, discrimination, barriers and obstacles.

Whether or not the reader agrees with the opinions being expressed, this report is intended to serve as an overture as opposed to a salvo in what should become a mutually constructive dialogue.

## II. MAJOR FINDINGS

### A. DIFFICULTIES IN COMMUNICATING ABOUT RACIAL ISSUES

The very concept of a Cultural Equity Fund suggests that there are those who believe that their needs are not currently being met by the status quo. Communicating these sensitive issues can often be the most difficult part of the process.

For this reason a section was included about the difficulty in communicating about discrimination. Although this topic was brought up frequently at the community meetings, it was really in the rather intimate and revealing Steering Committee meetings that patterns of behaviour appeared to emerge from the various personal experiences. The categories of “Denial” used in this section are not meant to be scientific as that is not the purpose of this report but rather descriptive.

#### 1. Context

Participants at both community meetings repeatedly referred to incidences in their lives in which they experienced unfair treatment based upon their race. Evidently, these unpleasant experiences influence the artists' perspectives of both their social and professional communities. For these artists, the possibility of encountering unfair behaviour based on race is not regarded to be unlikely because they have experienced such incidences since childhood.

*“Growing up, I would have to convince half the population that I was indeed Indian ...and the other half that I was indeed white. ...Having people come up to you on the bus after your mother gets off and asking, ‘is that really your mother? But you’re mostly white aren’t you?’ We all have that common experience”.*

**Jordan Wheeler** – Screenwriter

From the outset of the Cultural Equity Group steering committee meetings and throughout the public testimonials, it was clear that participants welcomed a safe forum where they could tell their stories and vent frustrations with other artists who had similar experiences. This collective sigh of relief was fostered by the common understanding that communicating about racial problems with non-minorities can be as frustrating and oppressive as the actual incidences being addressed. The common belief amongst the artists is that people who have not experienced racism or discrimination do not understand what these things are nor what they feel like.

*“It’s hard for me to talk about racism because it is not that open”.* **Debby Keeper**  
– Visual Artist



As such, one of the key difficulties in communicating about racial inequities appears to be the task of instilling in the listener a grasp of the context of the grievance. This context being a lifetime of evidence that not only are oppressive actions, omissions, misunderstandings and attitudes plausible, they are commonplace.

## **2. Denial of the Existence of Discrimination**

During the intimate weekly meetings, participants frequently mentioned experiences they'd had in attempting to discuss specific incidences of discrimination and the frequent tendency for those who have not experienced discrimination to deny that it exists. In the weekly steering committee meetings the artists identified a number of common reactions to equity grievances. Upon examination, these reactions appear to form some standard patterns of defensive behavior that kick in when an equity grievance is alleged. The following is a subjective summary and analysis of the situations related at these meetings. The whimsical titles reflect the tone of the discussions from which these categories emerged:

### **a. "Clutching Straws"**

This is the attempt to seek out any other explanation for the grievance other than racial inequity despite the absurdity of the diversion. Most people who have experienced racism are familiar with relating an experience to someone who has not experienced racism only to have them instantly respond "well are you sure there isn't another explanation for this?" This does not discount the legitimate screening out of fallacious claims, however, the distinction here is that confronted parties all too often *immediately* seek out an alternate explanation *prior to* or *rather than* examining the evidence provided to substantiate the grievance.

### **b. "Some of My Best Friends are..."**

This is the tendency for the party being confronted to take a specific grievance personally as an accusation of racism on a personal level. As no one really believes they are racist, this mindset usually causes feelings of anger, frustration and even betrayal, particularly if the grievance was raised by someone who the confrontee had heretofore regarded favourably.

### **c. "Whine, Whine, Whine"**

This is a stage of equity grievances whereby the confronted party dismisses claims made by the confronters as being blanketly *not credible* for any number of reasons, usually centering around the confronter's emotional state (evidenced by the fact that they would even make such an accusation) or the belief that "these people are always whining about something".

#### **d. "Why should they get special treatment?"**

This is the commonly held belief that affirmative action programs discriminate against the majority to promote less qualified individuals at the expense of others. Individuals at the Steering Committee meetings mentioned that few who hold this opinion can ever provide any specific statistics or evidence to support their indignation.

#### **e. "The playing field is level...isn't it?"**

These are the people who honestly believe that if a person is talented and works hard, she or he will succeed despite any obstacles. These individuals are often hard workers who have overcome their own obstacles but still have difficulty understanding that battling discrimination can also be a form of hard work and that not all obstacles can be overcome without some form of direct confrontation. An American newsman once described someone who is unaware of his advantages as being "born on third base but he thinks he hit a triple".

All the above mindsets result in the **communication** of the grievance becoming *more noteworthy than the content* of the grievance. The confronter is usually then distracted by the commotion caused by the communication of the grievance and the problems often go unresolved.

### **3. Communicating the Complexity of Equity Issues**

Another difficulty outlined in the communication about equity issues was having issues regarded in their full complexity. There is a tendency in all areas of society to seek out simple and elegant "Black and White" solutions to problems as is evidenced by the media's attempts to reduce the most complex political and economic issues to 20 second "sound bites". When applied to racial or cultural issues, this tendency is particularly destructive because issues being confronted often transcend conventional mainstream knowledge about the area in question. It is then necessary for those making the grievance to educate those being communicated to, which is all too often a futile endeavor.

*"For a film I was cast as an extra (they said) 'Bring your Pow Wow costume.' Calling a Pow Wow outfit a costume is a big insult. Costumes are something you wear at Halloween. She was shocked that I didn't have a Pow Wow outfit (and asked me why). I said, 'Because, I'm not a dancer'." **Debby Keeper** – Actor/ Visual artist*

## **B. PERCEIVED OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS**

Many of the artists offering testimonials gave explicit examples of specific barriers or obstacles they had encountered in their careers. While each experience was unique, the problems tended to fall under specific categories. It is interesting to note that, for illustrative purposes, these various categories of obstacles can be pictured as forming a multi-layered pyramid-like structure, breaking down the larger issue into components.

As each specific barrier to equity is addressed, another problem appears to arise. At the base of the pyramid we find a *lack of visibility*. It has been widely believed that the lack of credible visibility and access is the main equity problem and that by having proportional representation by people of colour at all levels of artistic development, the playing field would undisputedly be leveled. As we ascend the equity obstacle course, we observe a complex network of new obstacles continuing to appear in what is interpreted by some, as a synergistic attempt on the part of the cultural organism to maintain the status quo - not unlike a body manufacturing anti-bodies to deal with an invader

### **1. Lack of Visibility**

Historically, this has been the key issue embraced by artists of colour - the absence of any real or relevant visibility in any form of mainstream art or culture from the educational level to administration. Increasing relevant and real representation of and by artists of colour remains at the core of all equity movements today.

*“When I first started in theatre and was an aspiring artist and writer I remember going to ...established institutions for artists... and not seeing anybody who reflected who I was at all.”* **Joy Keeper** Writer/Apprentice television producer

### **2. Lack of Ownership of Self-Depictions**

Part of the visibility problem is that representation by and of people of colour in the visual arts have historically been at best, inaccurate or incomplete and at worst, destructive. Most often the depictions or representations of people of colour have not been controlled by these individuals but are rather, the vision of someone who has little actual experience with the culture being portrayed.

*“(North of 60) was ostensibly a Native show because Native faces appear on cameras but...it isn’t really a Native show. The values, the attitudes that come across on camera are more rooted in urban Toronto than the Northwest Territories. It’s a typical white show with a lot of brown faces.”* **Jordan Wheeler** – Screenwriter/North of 60

No matter how generous the attempt, there often remain inaccuracies and negative characterizations which then permeate the public psyche and re-circulate in subsequent works in a descending spiral of misrepresentation. These inaccuracies can range from blatant stereotyping (Black criminals and prostitutes, drunk or naive Native Canadians,) to patronizing over simplifications of complex racial issues.

*"I'm insulted to take my kids to some of the shows up on the screen. You see these derogatory things said about Native people." **Jim Compton**-Journalist/Broadcaster*

Another dilemma that occurs in the lack of ownership of self-representation is a distortion or misinterpretation of the aesthetic appreciation of a project or work. While it is not necessary that all people involved in a project be of it's ilk, there are times when mainstream aesthetic conventions may, with the best intentions, compromise a piece of work.

*"In the early eighties I started playing reggae in the bars in Winnipeg. In reggae each instrument has a rhythmic function...the bass in reggae has to be very loud and very bassy. The sound technicians were used to the bass having a more linear percussive role in the music like Bon Jovi and Van Halen. They were not comfortable turning the bass up and making it as bassy as we needed in order for our music to interlock and sound like one whole piece of music. As a result, the people wouldn't dance. When we spoke to the soundmen later they would say, 'I'm not crazy about reggae because all the songs sound the same to me'. In this example the very people who think they are helping you fulfil your vision are the ones who are unwittingly undermining it...as skilled as they may be." **Gerry Atwell** – Musician/writer*

Undoubtedly, the most violent examples of this lack of ownership of media self-depictions are found in the portrayal of First Nations people in the North American popular culture. Destructive images of First Nations people are still being dumped into popular culture contributing to serious social problems within these communities.

*"This is a life and death struggle. It affects the next generation. (We must) continue to address the issues of who gets to tell our stories, who gets to adjudicate our art and craft and say its art. (I read) a document that looked at the impact of television on Northern Native communities. Within it, it said, the people are so affected by the television that they were losing their language...their will to be a government...they were committing suicide...sniffing solvents and killing themselves." **Jim Compton**-Journalist/Broadcaster*

First Nations artists mentioned that they are still battling with dilemmas like whether or not to let their children watch Peter Pan or Pocahontas with their highly offensive characterizations of Native people.

*"My kids you know, this is what motivates me...talking to them about Peter Pan and why the Indians on the other end of the Island weren't like them."* **Jordan Wheeler.**

### **3. Tokenism / Typecasting & Ghetto-ization**

In the past few years, self-ownership of images has improved somewhat (actual Native actors are more frequently cast to play "Indians" in movies these days) but is still far from being realistically representative of the communities and individuals being portrayed. Even a visible minority artist who has climbed the first obstacle of visibility and the second step of achieving some ownership of the representation is then confronted by the next layer of the pyramid - the three parallel bricks of Tokenism, Typecasting and Ghetto-ization.

#### **a. Tokenism**

It has been widely believed that the key to increasing visibility was to attempt to "cosmopolitanize" art and media by placing a few people of colour into the system. Many contributing artists and journalists owe their careers to these affirmative action style job placements. However, token visibility still did not afford these artists and journalist either "ownership" of their work nor "mobility" in their career to transcend their ascribed role, which sometimes was to be "shut up and be visible". These individuals found themselves trapped in a minority-spokesperson ghetto; often unable to produce the work they were most passionate about.

*Sure we have Native reporters telling the stories but they are edited from a white middle class news perspective. These discussions are not made by us because there are no Native people in management, and the only ones who would make it into management is if they have the same views as the other white middle class managers.* **Jim Compton.**

## **b. Typecasting**

Artists from all disciplines remarked that typecasting is prevalent, mostly so in the visual arts. Native actors are often "Typed" or called upon only to play specific characterizations of Native roles. With typecasting, the artist's ethnicity is either superficially necessary in the story (for example, to show off the unprejudiced humanitarianism of the protagonist); or randomly injected to give an impression of inclusiveness or exoticness. Curiously, in order to maintain these "Types" the actors must sometimes keep their hair long and go to tanning salons to ensure they "look like an Indian" for their auditions.

*"I am an Indian 'Type' which is one of the reasons I continue to keep my hair long and asking for lighting to accentuate my ethnic background." **Billy Merasty** – Actor*

*"My skin wasn't dark enough, so if I went to an audition I had to do some tanning." **Debby Keeper** – Actor/Visual artist*

## **c. Ghetto-ization**

Like typecasting and tokenism, ghetto-ization is the even more insidious tendency to restrict the artist to what is perceived as their realm of "expertise". Artists who are highly regarded within matters relating to their ethnicity often have great difficulty in pursuing mainstream endeavors.

*"One of the problems I've had sometimes in getting things screened is that (some of) my work doesn't contain Native content. I find that awful because I am a human being and some experiences to human beings are pretty universal." **Debby Keeper** – Actor/Visual artist*

## **5. Lack of Representation at Decision Making Levels**

Conventional thinking has traditionally held that the above barriers, *lack of visibility, lack of ownership of self-depictions, tokenism typecasting and ghetto-ization* were all the result of a lack of proportional representation at decision making levels. Participants at the community meetings spoke of the lack of representation of people of colour in decision-making capacities in all phases of media and art production from training and education to funding juries, production and administration.

Undoubtedly, initiatives to further minority representation at decision-making levels have resulted in many positive changes. Projects that would not otherwise be undertaken are often initiated, validated or otherwise supported by the few minority representatives on juries or in administration roles.

*“There’s things that the mainstream media is doing now that it never would have done ten years ago...In the past year at ‘24 Hours’ we’ve done shows, stories documentaries that never would have been done five years ago. My point is, there is an effort from the mainstream organizations to bring about change.”* **Rod Carleton** - Journalist

The problem remains, however, that while some projects may benefit from the support of people of colour in positions of influence, other projects are either overlooked, out and out rejected or "re-tooled" to address the aesthetic and perceived market needs of the mainstream society.

*“One episode (of North of 60) I remember, we closed the season with a bootlegger’s son being banished to the bush for a year. Now in real life...people go off to the bush, spend a year and come back and ninety-nine times out of a hundred they’ve had a wonderful experience. But because the producer lives in Toronto he immediately thought of himself banished to the bush for a year and he, of course would go nuts. And so the Native character who is banished to the bush goes nuts despite all my protestations and despite all the arguments from our cultural advisors who we employed in the show.”* **Jordan Wheeler** - Screenwriter

The powers of these minority individuals on grant juries and in management and production are insufficient to comprehensively undertake some projects that may offend, confuse or disinterest the greater mainstream media machine.

*“To us (Native people), the tree is a pinnacle of life and the human being is at the low end of it because we are not balanced. There is no good versus evil concept. There is no devil. Christ and the devil are all rolled into one being we call the Trickster, who can be both. The good/evil aspect of western drama does not fit our thinking. So when Native people write their stories, their outlines and scripts, the absence of the ‘good versus evil’ premise throws the funders off.”* **Jordan Wheeler** - Screenwriter

The obstacles to minority creators are not exclusively limited to the production phase of projects. Even producers who have managed to create work sometimes encounter barriers in the distribution phase. Artists report that there is a widely held opinion in Canadian media, arts and broadcasting that there is no market for works that are too ethnic. The belief is that the general public cannot relate to these works, the subject matter is alienating and these projects are simply a hard sell to higher ups.

*“(This) deals with ‘Prairie Soul, a documentary that I produced and wrote in 1991. It’s about the very well hidden history of Black music in Winnipeg and Manitoba. (After six months and obtaining no interest from Canadian broadcasters) I said ‘well evidently this thing is substandard’. On a whim I sent it across the border to Prairie Public TV and within a week the guy was calling saying ‘we can do something with this’. It got nominated for an award from PBS. I called a couple of newspapers and that wasn’t newsworthy enough (to write about)”* **Adrian Peek** – Musician/Filmmaker

## **C. CREATING A CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

### **1. Recognition of Responsibilities**

Many individuals noted that they are not out looking for problems. The artists acknowledged that they must investigate the opportunities already offered by the mainstream arts and media establishment. Participants also recognized their responsibility to “learn the machine” or rather to familiarize themselves with how the current system really works by completing their proper training and taking workshops and courses available.

*“We’ve come a long way. I was at a (television production) workshop (and there was) a big executive producer there from the CBC. She stated that one of the reasons she was taking this workshop is to learn how to produce her own feature film and get it on the big screen and to learn the mindset of the people at Telefilm, the people at CBC, the people making the decisions.”* **Joy Forde** – Programmer WTN

### **2. Recognition of Progress Being Made**

Throughout the Steering Committee meetings and the Community Meetings artists recognized that progress is steadily being made in the development of artists of colour. Specific programs, broadcasters, government agencies and individuals were lauded for their sincere and decisive efforts to address these issues. Those funding this study were applauded for their direct and decisive involvement. As well, participants were concerned that allies in these industries may be discouraged if the Cultural Equity Group appears to be painting grievances with too broad a brush.

*“There is an effort by the mainstream organizations to bring about some change. There is some morality change going on. I find it very frustrating when I hear blanket condemnation of mainstream organizations. I can tell you that the organizations that are (changing) are very offended by what they hear and justifiably so. They should be. I know I would be.”* **Rod Carelton** - Journalist

### 3. Need for Infrastructure

It is largely because of these efforts not in spite of them that the artists of colour now feel ready to move to the next phase of development - the establishment of a comprehensive creative infrastructure to nurture works from inception to realization.

*“We have a talent pool in Winnipeg to warrant a fund. We have writers, actors, filmmakers, people in television, production people. But the fact is we are lacking a comprehensive creative infrastructure...a body of talent, skills, funding and goodwilled enthusiasm that nurtures a vision from conception to delivery.” **Gerry Atwell** - Musician/writer*

Competition for dwindling arts funding is getting more intense as Public and private funding programs are being reduced or deleted.

*“Traditionally, the (recently eliminated Canada Council grant) ‘Explorations’ was the natural space for new emerging artists, especially artists of colour across Canada. Explorations had a philosophy that the artists shouldn’t have to adapt their creativity to the fine work of the Canada Council but the Canada Council should adapt to the needs of the new emerging artist.” **Hugo Torres** - Musician*

The establishment of a creative infrastructure is regarded as an inevitable step in the development of this arts community. Greater opportunities for these artists would strengthen the overall arts community as more creators and developers have the opportunity to employ local support people and purchase local materials.

## **IV. RECOMENDATIONS**

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are submitted for the consideration of the Cultural Equity Group Steering Committee:

1. The Cultural Equity Group Steering Committee should hold a General Meeting to formally establish an autonomous Cultural Equity Group. This would entail the election of a Board of Directors and the development and adoption of a Constitution as well as formal registration with the proper government bodies.
2. This organization should then solicit the public and private sector to establish and administer a Cultural Equity Fund.
3. This fund should be used for the following:
  - To provide financial assistance to both established and emerging member artists and media personnel to fully or partially fund projects or expenses related to the creation of works;
  - To establish outreach programs to seek out talented but alienated artists who could benefit from greater training or resources;
  - To develop cross-cultural awareness programs and materials for arts institutions, media institutions, funding bodies, juries and programmers.
4. This organization should also offer to assist adjudicating bodies that are attempting to review or enhance the inclusiveness of their existing selection processes.
5. As with any arts related organization, this group should actively seek out relationships and partnerships with the private sector in order to broaden the financial base of the Cultural Equity Fund and to relieve the burden placed on already strained public sector funding bodies.