

April 20, 2021

Dear Ms. Vesely,

After reading your letter, I am once again reminded that it is not the racism in this country that scares me the most, but the denial of it. Your failed attempt to placate me with your statistics is just a way of sustaining systemic black racism in the Ontario Arts Council through psychological and racial gaslighting.

Before I begin addressing your letter, let it be clear that I do not take systemic racism, or any racism lightly and I will not be categorized as the angry, or misinformed black man.

In your letter dated April 14th, you wrote *“In this program (Media Arts Creation Projects), like most OAC programs, decisions about grants are made through a peer assessment process, not by staff. Applications submitted to a program deadline are reviewed and assessed by a group of other media artists.”* Peer assessors-media artists-grant judges, whatever you want to call them, may not be paid staff, but they are staff members, nevertheless. They represent OAC in the role of assessing grants for the Media Arts Creation Projects; and as staff members, their conduct whether good or bad, reflect on OAC. So, if the peer assessors are engaging in systemic black racism, then OAC is engaging in systemic racism.

You also stated that *“OAC ensures that the composition of each (grant) assessment panel is diverse in order to support the equity of outcomes.”* Let me bring to your attention that your “diverse” assessment panel with its one token POC assessor (not necessarily black) and one token indigenous assessor is still predominantly white; and is accused by me of promoting white privilege through its selection of grant winners.

Just like the Oscars (hashtag #OscarsSoWhite), the Golden Globes and the U.K Bafta, your organization is entrenched in disparities. Much like the Oscars, the problem mainly lies in the assessment panels. One may say that OAC’s peer assessment panels are made up of professionals who only vote and select the best grant applicants for awards. Not so, there have been numerous articles written about peer assessment and race. Specifically, how “biases, both implicit and explicit, negatively impact the way people perceive members of disadvantaged groups.” When it comes to peer assessment, people of colour, particularly blacks, on average, often receive lower scores than their white counterparts.

[file:///C:/Users/USER/Downloads/a-review-of-bias-in-peer-assessment%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/USER/Downloads/a-review-of-bias-in-peer-assessment%20(1).pdf)

Furthermore, you mentioned that *“When an applicant calls for feedback on their application, the officer (Mark Haslam) can only provide assessor feedback if the assessors (judging panel) discussed the application.”* Yet, I noted on your website that *before the assessment meeting assessors must:*

- *read all the applications, review artistic examples and support documents, and make notes about each application based on the assessment criteria, granting program priorities, and OAC priorities*
- *In project grant programs, assessors are required to pre-score the applications before the meeting.*

Correct me if I am wrong, but does this not mean that the assessors must provide notes and scores for all grant applications? This only makes sense. If the assessors are not making notes or scoring all applications, how do they know who qualifies for the discussion round? When Mr. Haslam was asked for feedback from my April 2020 application, he said there were no discussions because my application did not make it to the discussion round. Where were the notes, the scores? One would think that there must be some sort of rating system to indicate why my application and those of others did not make it to the discussion portion of the assessment process.

Let me proceed, on further examination of your website, I noted that Mark Haslam as an OAC program officer is responsible for chairing and facilitating the assessment meetings. Other duties include reminding assessors of OAC priorities, program priorities and the budget context; ensuring assessors share a common understanding of the assessment criteria; serving as a resource person and providing information and historical context in operating grant programs; and overseeing and recording the rating/ranking process.

One would believe that Mark Haslam with 15 years as an OAC program officer and after chairing/facilitating the April 2020 assessment meeting(s) would have knowledge as to what the assessment panel was/is looking for and thus provide me with some feedback. He did not even provide me with even *“general suggestions.”* What was the point of giving 207 April 2020 grant applicants the opportunity to speak with an OAC officer if there was nothing to discuss?

Moreover, you stated that Mr. Haslam’s comment to me *“that there was nothing wrong with my application was meant to be reassuring and encouraging”*. It may not be obvious to you, but I am not a dog or a child. I do not require reassurance, encouragement, or your condescending tone. I am a professional and I demand fairness and equality in your assessment process. I already know that my April 2020 application was *“technically complete.”* What I wanted to know was how my application was assessed because emphatically, I do not believe it was even looked at.

What’s more, your letter states that *“most OAC programs are highly competitive due to limited funding. As a result, submitting an eligible and complete application to an OAC program does not guarantee funding and many very, good projects are not funded because of a lack of resources.”* Let me bring to your attention that *“many very, good projects”* are not funded because **there are numerous projects/recipients who are awarded grants multiple times. I counted a total of 33 predominantly white grant award recipients (from 2015 to 2020) who had multiple award wins. The chance of this happening five times is a fluke. It becomes a pattern when thirty-three recipients receive grant awards multiple times in a ‘highly competitive’ competition.**

Additionally, your attempt to patronize me by reiterating that I won numerous awards for my film work and that *“(the receipt of) a grant can be validating, not receiving a grant does not mean that there was no merit to (my) application.”*

On the contrary, Ms. Vesely, not winning a grant means:

- I cannot fund my projects
- I cannot advance in my career
- I have to work harder to reach the same level of success as my white counterparts

My completing films and winning awards are “validations” of my hard work. Winning a grant is the catalyst to my success. Winning serves as a huge boost to my budget.

Ms. Vesely, if you do not believe systemic racism and bias exist in the Ontario Arts Council, could you kindly explain, or reflect on the following:

- Despite your statistics presented in your April 14<sup>th</sup> letter that breaks down grant award recipients by race for 2018 and 2019, there is still a disproportionate amount of white grant award winners and assessors from 2015 to 2020.
- One of the assessors in the October 2018 grant period is Yasmine and one of the award winners is Nadine. Consequently, in April 2020, Nadine is now an assessor and Yasmine is one of the award winners-Is this not a conflict of interest - or at least suspicious?
- April 2019 grant award recipients include Courtney and Nesa. Subsequent grant period October 2019, Nesa is now an assessor and Courtney once again is a grant award winner-Is this not a conflict of interest – or at least suspicious?
- According to your website-**Recommended assessors need not be former grant applicants or recipients**. Yet I found 5 examples of predominantly white assessors who were former grant award recipients and 5 grant award recipients that were former assessors-----some were even assessors and grant award recipients in the same calendar year.
- You really want me to believe that the artist that was an assessor in 2017 and received a grant in 2018, that the peer assessors in 2018 did not have any knowledge that the artist had previously served as an assessor. How could they not know? Did they not have access to your website? The deadline for the April 2021 applications was on April 6<sup>th</sup>, the names of the assessors and grant winners for April and October 2020 were already posted on your website prior to this date for all to see.
- As for the artist who applied and won an award twice in the 2019 calendar year, I would think that the rule that prohibited applicants from applying in consecutive grant application periods would still apply to her. It just seems highly suspicious that for an extremely competitive competition, and out of 122 applicants in April 2019 and 116 applicants in October 2019, she could win twice in the same calendar year. I wonder if having Nesa, as an assessor, had anything to do with it?
- For a highly competitive program, an enormous amount of grant recipients win and receive grants multiple times. In April 2020 alone, there were 207 grant applications. Thirty-one grants were awarded and out of those thirty-one recipients, six (predominantly white) recipients won grants in previous years. One recipient was even a judge in a previous year.

After reflecting on some of the above allegations, one cannot help but believe that systemic racism and bias do exist in your organization? It would be interesting to know how many assessors and grant award recipients actually have undisclosed working/personal relationships.

Ms. Vesely, we are in agreement that *“there is more work to be done to combat racism and achieve equity in our institutions and in society.”* The impact of systemic racism and oppression are devastating, isolating and all too often traumatic to one’s physical and mental well-being. I believe the first step *“to combat”* this disease is to first acknowledge that racism does exist and second, one needs to examine how racism is normalized in the grant assessment panels at OAC.

In conclusion, since you refuse to see and acknowledge the bias that is right in front of your eyes and in your organization, what good is a strategic plan for the next 5 years. Other than advancing my career, my current issue and focus are with OAC's racist assessment panels. I refuse to be distracted by the Ontario Arts Council's five-year strategic plans, public consultations, or stakeholder survey. Which in my opinion is just plain racial doublespeak.

Let's fight the virus that we know as racism and not just cover it up with a band-aid.

**When you do not acknowledge and you do nothing, you are complicit in racism.** And having the option to do nothing is a privilege.

Sincerely,  
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**Please visit:**

1. Storage Room preview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64xoN2fpysg>
2. Films in the Making (my website) <https://www.filmsinthemaking.com/>
3. Ontario Arts Council <https://www.arts.on.ca/home?lang=en-ca>

**Articles**

4. The Oscars Long History of Getting Called Out for lack of Diversity <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/01/16/oscars-long-history-getting-called-out-lack-diversity/>
5. The Hashtag that Changed the Oscars: An Oral History <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarswhite-history.html>