

Brittney's Personal Letter

My name is Brittney Bear Hat and I am writing this letter to expand on the joint letter put forward by myself, Richelle Bear Hat, Rocio Graham, Dan Cardinal McCartney, Alia Shahab and Teresa Tam. I want to further expand on the personal mistreatment that I have experienced while on the 2019 Collider Residency and in the 2020 Planetary exhibition at Contemporary Calgary (CC).

Here is a [LINK \(https://jointletterto.cc/\)](https://jointletterto.cc/) to the joint letter and coinciding documents put together by those mentioned above.

First, I would like to acknowledge the recent gracious and much needed movements for Black voices and Black Lives Matter empowerment that have allowed many marginalized communities to find truth. I would also like to make space and acknowledgement of the land where Elbow River and Bow River confluence, this is one of my home territories that has been understood as Kootsisáw (Tsuut'ina), Mohkínstsis (Blackfoot), and Wincheesh-pah (Stoney Nakoda) for many millennia. There is a statement that has been passed on to me by my father that holds me authentic to my lineage, my ancestors and the voices of my community. This is one of my core sources for empowerment. *"There is Honour and Humility, in our Indian Ways. As a Father I am Honoured that you are an Independent, Confident, Healthy, and an Educated Blackfoot, Cree/Dunnaza' Woman. In our Indian Ways I am Humbled by your strength to seek what you need in your Life to become Whole and Balanced and find your Truth".*

My work and interaction with CC has left me unwhole and unbalanced in my truth. CC reached out to me in the spring of 2019 and asked me to participate in their upcoming residency, Collider, that would be held in their new space in Calgary's former Centennial Planetarium. I had some reservations about CC to begin with, as I had previous unresolved trauma with this organization from a similar structure of programming back in 2014. The Collider framework for the residency was to have an organic community of local artists within this space that would allow each artist to invite anyone they so choose. While this structure seemed hopeful, ultimately it proved ill-supported by CC, as we as artists were expected to fulfill multiple and exceeding roles for which we were neither administratively supported, nor financially compensated. We cannot be artists and the curator. I felt very uneasy about the responsibility that was thrust upon me to impact another artist to uphold this confusion of improper boundaries. At this point, I could only think of one artist who could handle this type of labour and provide me with a sense of trust that I was not receiving from CC: my sister Richelle Bear Hat. We have both experienced forms of institutionalized racism and systemic imbalance here in Mohkínstsis; CC has added to this imbalance with Collider's lack of curatorial structure and Planetary's lack of responsibility to the artists they invited to participate.

CC has made some efforts to open pathways for communication between some of the Indigenous and racialized artists raising concerns. Up until this point many of these conversations were still ongoing but due the strain on our abilities, the artists that have been in-conversation with CC felt that we have given an excess of our knowledge and labour. I think one thing that deserves recognition is that this entire process happened behind closed doors and CC allowed their harmful colonial structures to hold us in silence and confined with our traumas. We removed our work from Planetary without the ability to speak truth or find healing; we went into mediated conversations with the hope of being heard; we have been mistreated by an organization that allowed unjust behaviours to be their excuses for why they couldn't do better. Within my work, I am constantly uncovering the truth and integrity that has been handed down to me. I am an

Indigenous dreamer that makes work about my identity; this work is for my nation, my ancestors and for my community. CC does not have the capacity to handle the depth of care that goes into upholding this type of work. I am relieved that I am no longer beholden to this organization. With my own labour that I have gained through this experience, I can amplify the voices that have been a part of this grueling process.

During the exhibition, my feelings of mistreatment began to resurface from being asked to provide more work that was not a part of my contract and having multiple incidents of not being heard. I did not have the strength to display the true scope of my practice or allow any form of images that displayed either myself or my family, as there was no trust implemented on CC's part to truly understand the weight that I carried within my practice. I made the decision to give a new body of work that was still in its developing stages. In an Instagram post made on January 24th, CC described the show as an "interactive exhibition featuring 36 talented Calgary based artists" which is not a fitting description of the vast diversity between all of the works within this show. With that in mind, there were many patrons touching my work due to the label of Planetary being an interactive exhibition, which resulted in one of my pieces breaking. My new work for this project, *These Gifts*, consisted of 5 small unfired ceramic sculptures on three plinths. These sculptures are very delicate and were never intended for patrons to handle, which I had expressed to both Ryan Doherty (the chief curator) and staff when developing the work. I felt it to be very unjust to have to make employees of an institution claiming to be "welcoming, inclusive, engaging and **relevant**", be aware of the labour they should be prepared for; not to mention the description's blatant misrepresentation of this exhibition that did not properly speak to the many diverse practices involved. To me this communicates a lack of knowledge to the duty -- you the art institution -- has for artist practices that are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and equity-seeking individuals. From these microaggressions, I have resolved that CC does not know how to provide care for artists like myself that have deeply meaningful and vulnerable work.

There is a long list of how CC has let me down and for the ease of my mental health. I will give just a short list of what some of those things are:

- I was promised multiple forms of resources; ei. full operating wood shop, a full budget for production, and other resources for the clay sculptures (kiln).
- During the entire Collider residency, I had no contract. I only received one for the Planetary exhibition.
- When it came to producing *These Gifts*, the production fees were left for me to cover. I submitted a request for some of the costs to be covered by CC but was denied, if CC was to cover these costs then the items produced would be property of CC.
- After my work was damaged, there has been no outreach from CC. No payment for damaged work, or coverage which is standard in most artists contracts.

I've had quite a bit of time for reflection in my silence and I would like to acknowledge the other voices that have stood with me during this rocky path. I have not had many opportunities where my voice gets to travel with other strong spirits. Usually I face this kind of conflict, as a singular voice, that either gets gaslighted into apologizing for the feelings that are left unresolved or outnumbered by individuals that do not know how to create safe environments for my truth to be heard. CC in my personal opinion, is not prepared for the required labour that goes into uplifting our Indigenous and racialized artists' integrity nor the dignity that our stories/practices demand. We have provided CC with many forms of labour that have

unfortunately been left unrecognized. I would like to point out that not very many institutions receive this type of generosity from marginalized communities. We could have left CC out of the conversation and made this public as these traumas were unfolding. We did not; we choose to have communication with care like so many of our ancestors have before us. CC chose their problematic structure as a predominantly white organization to decide what their labour is.

I hope CC can justly sit with their uncomfortableness and find better pathways forward.

Brittney Bear Hat.