

Teresa's Personal Letter

Hello everyone, I am Teresa Tam. This letter is a personal follow-up to the joint statement regarding Contemporary Calgary (CC) written together with Alia Shahab, Brittney Bear Hat, Dan Cardinal McCartney, Richelle Bear Hat, and Rocio Graham, all who I want to express deep gratitude for taking on this work and journey together. This letter is to clarify my personal experiences and where I stand in this situation.

For context on the situation that involves me and the artists listed above click [<here>](https://jointletterto.cc/) (<https://jointletterto.cc/>).

Firstly, I would like to thank all the Black voices, words, and actions that have been so urgently shared online and in physical spaces. It is their leadership which informed and rallied action within me, to question where I stand and what I am doing for the community I am in. I would also like to recognize that this letter was written on the land where Elbow River and Bow River meet, known as Kootsisáw (Tsuut'ina), Mohkínstsis (Blackfoot), and Wincheesh-pah (Stoney Nakoda), which has so graciously nourished me my entire life and kept me safe. And lastly, though I find it hard, I would also like to acknowledge my ancestors who displaced their cultures, families, and lives for the possibility of a better life for their children and future generations.

I'm not sure what I want to achieve through this letter, as it feels like I've said all I have wanted to for the past two months regarding this situation, but these were words uttered behind closed doors. While it is important to have conversations where people can feel vulnerable, it makes it hard to share publicly when the urgency to speak is gone and tiredness sets in. But this is work that needs to be done, work I have started and am committed to.

I don't have one example I can share with my time with CC. Instead of one big incident that I've pinpointed as an issue, I remember a series of small moments and the general sense of unease and distrust. Micro-aggressions that I'm just so used to absorbing and then forgetting as a coping mechanism. I never felt that CC as an organization cared for the work I was doing. During my time with CC, I did my best to avoid interacting with the organization where I could. I was just participating because it was an opportunity I could take at the time. I have reflected on my decision with deep shame, as I went in knowing CC was being exploitative with their Collider residency and later, the Planetary exhibition. Perhaps I had hoped CC had or would change, but my initial doubts were only further confirmed. By the time Planetary opened, I barely mentioned I was part of it and had compromised my project so that I could protect myself and my practice from further exploitation. I had explicitly negated racialized elements from my work because I couldn't trust CC to protect and understand what I make. With every organization I've worked with, I have had some level of self-negation — how could I not when almost all current systems are rooted in settler colonialism? But the amount of negation I inflicted on myself with CC made me question whether I should continue to be an artist. Do I have to continue to work with these institutions to maintain this career? Is it worth it?

What makes the situation with CC so insidious is that it's deeply rooted in a system and culture that is accepted, one that I also participate in and have resigned to. It's hard to pinpoint with clarity and words why they are so racist, so problematic, even though I can feel it in my body. And knowingly or unknowingly, they're creating a situation that makes it hard for any one individual to realize the mechanisms of how they are being treated poorly. CC has power, money, and access. They wield it without thinking about how it

affects and extracts from people. It's clear that CC's bottom line guides their actions and takes top priority. CC's model is deeply imperialist and colonial; extractive and concerned about its own survival and fiscal goals at all costs. I don't want a "world-class art gallery" as long as the model they use to reach such a level eviscerates people of their dignity whenever they engage with the organization in any meaningful way.

By sharing stories and being in conversation with CC, it became clear that they are unable to fully comprehend the depth and severity of the organization's inability to treat people as people at all levels: board members, staff, volunteers, artists, and their audience. Who and what is CC upholding and prioritizing if not people whom they're supposed to care for?

CC may be newly housed after years without a building, but the organization is not new. It inherited all three of the arts institutions that merged. It has the power and prestige of Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of Calgary, and Institute of Modern and Contemporary Art. But CC also inherits all the past issues of the three institutions.

CC is having a hard time naming and recognizing this situation as an issue of racism.

They don't recognize that even though individuals aren't being explicitly and knowingly racist, it doesn't mean the structures and systems of the organization aren't inherently racist and will always be so regardless of one's actions and inactions. CC is exhibiting fragility at the moment, as seen in how privately apologetic they've been and ready to right wrongs that they perceive need to be tackled right away, instead of just hearing what I and the other artists have to say regarding what needs to change. They think they see the issue, but they don't understand how far it goes.

I had this feeling that CC wanted me to keep them accountable and be there to tell them what they've been doing is right. They want my approval, but I'm not the one who can give them that approval. It's up to the wider BIPOC community to decide. I am just one voice and perspective, and my choice doesn't speak for all racialized people, but my choice does impact them, as this is what happens in a racist system.

CC thinks they are doing the right thing, but they're too caught up in the idea of being 'right' and doing 'good'. Who are they being 'right' and doing 'good' for? They don't have me or BIPOC artists in mind when they take action, they only think about the ideology of rightness, not the real and tangible experiences of BIPOC people and how we move through life; the levels and layers we struggle through, but also the internalized survival mechanisms we have built just so we can even show up. BIPOC artists are often disadvantaged systemically to reach the same levels as our white peers. I don't want CC to do what's 'right', I want them to stop and re-evaluate themselves and what systems they perpetuate that cause harm towards BIPOC artists, and to not give space and opportunities to BIPOC artists until they can handle the various, massive, and intersectional weights that a BIPOC person holds within. Until then, CC is only using us for clout, without tangibly enriching us as artists, audience, and community.

By sharing this, it's bringing potential and undue harm to BIPOC individuals working with CC now. As the organization continues with its programming, trying to do what's 'right' in the public perception, this letter is in opposition to the artists in their current programming, such as the [Field Trip residencies](https://www.fieldtrip.art/field-trips/meet-the-artists-of-the-inaugural-field-trip-artist-residency) (<https://www.fieldtrip.art/field-trips/meet-the-artists-of-the-inaugural-field-trip-artist-residency>). This is lateral violence between myself and the BIPOC artists, but this is caused by CC trying to be 'good' without stopping to think what this would do to the individuals they're exploiting. Even though I had shared my

frustrations in how the organization works, they still went ahead with creating these opportunities without ever addressing what they had done wrong.

CC is not a space that is ready to be inclusive and equitable for BIPOC and marginalized artists. They are not suitable to give these opportunities when they themselves perpetuate gatekeeping and harm that BIPOC artists encounter within institutions.

They've had two months of listening and learning, and what do they have to show for it? Art programming that invites artists to explore and address systemic racism that they're supposed to be doing themselves. They're placing the burden of education on BIPOC artists but to the benefit of only the institution, not to all racialized people.

So I'll end this by asking CC: who are you really for? What are you really trying to achieve and is it worth it? Are you willing to eschew power for the sake of becoming better?

Thanks for taking the time to read this letter,

Teresa