

Statement from the TWUC Equity Task Force in Response to WRITE MAGAZINE editorial “Winning the Appropriation Prize”

The following is an amended statement that has been corrected for accuracy by the Equity Task Force.

We, the Equity Task Force of TWUC are writing in response to the editorial in the latest issue of WRITE. We are angry and appalled by the publication of “Winning the Appropriation Prize” by the paid primary editor in the editorial column. In the context of working to recruit writers historically marginalized in the union, this essay contradicts and dismisses the racist systemic barriers faced by Indigenous writers and other racialized writers. This is especially insulting given that this issue features the work of many Indigenous writers.

Cultural appropriation, for Indigenous writers, is often theft of culture. As a concept, a practice and an issue, it has a long and complex history on Turtle Island/in Canada. It is one of the more recent phenomena marking a long history of violent colonial appropriations by settlers against Indigenous peoples. An important part of its history resides in the 1993 conference *The Appropriate Voice*, held in Orillia, Ontario and led by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias and Daniel David Moses, which was a TWUC sponsored conference. For Niedzviecki to suggest that cultural appropriation is just a device for our imaginary work is highly problematic and re-entrenches the deeply racist assumptions about art, and about what constitutes giving and taking.

The piece states: “There is no formula to appropriately appropriating. Instead it’s up to each of us to find the right measures of respect, learning and truth telling.” In making such a statement, he fails to recognize or acknowledge that not all writers play on the same playing field and that “appropriation” is not a fair game, as the page is not a terra nullius, in spite of appearances to a privileged few. Appropriation is thus not a practice that can simply be taken up by anyone at any time. There are historical and colonial relations in place, which we all inherit, each of us differently. The theft of voice, stories, culture, and identity are part of a long-standing settler agenda for cultural genocide and cannot be treated lightly. The tongue-in-cheek call for an “Appropriation Prize” is deeply offensive and dismissive of the history of colonization. What will TWUC offer next, a “Best Colonizer” prize?

Also to suggest further in the essay that, “... Indigenous writers, buffeted by history and circumstance, so often must write from what they don’t know”, is both uninformed and offensive, especially when so much Indigenous knowledge has been either erased from the historical record or has already been appropriated without attribution. This statement also partakes of a long-debunked false universalism.

The only statement in the editorial that is accurate is the piece’s claim, “Indigenous writing is the most vital and compelling force in writing and publishing in Canada today.” In this historical present when we speak of reconciliation, we as a union and as a collective of Canadian/Turtle Island writers must make space and support Indigenous writers.

Hal Niedzviecki’s resignation was the right decision under these appalling circumstances.

However, what troubles us most is not the ill-informed words of a single editor, but the structural racism that gets reproduced and becomes representative of the Union when such voices are authorized to speak for the Union. The Union thus appears negligent, structurally racist and utterly lacking in historical memory at best. At worst, it appears potentially malicious.

We thank TWUC for issuing its apology. This is an important first step, but we don't think it goes far enough. This issue is not about "hurt feelings", but about justice. An apology is only worth its salt if it opens the door to better actions and better relations in the future.

We offer a set of demands to rectify this truly dire situation, and to begin (again) the work of respect and reconciliation.

Demands:

1. Retraction of editorial essay, "Winning the Appropriation Prize" by Hal Niedzviecki.
2. Official apology from TWUC to be posted on the official TWUC site and published in the next issue of WRITE.
3. Anti-racist education for all staff, National Council, editorial committee members.
4. Protocols for editing all issues of WRITE that build in accountability to issues of race and colonialism.
5. Turn over WRITE to Indigenous and other racialized editors and writers for the next 3 issues in consultation with the Equity Task Force.
6. Broadcast/publish this statement to all TWUC members, the public, on the TWUC website and in the next issue of WRITE.
7. Affirmative action hiring for the next editor of WRITE. Job description must specify not only "Indigenous writer or writer of colour" but also, "active and respected in Indigenous sovereignty or anti-racist cultural movements for at least three years".
8. Affirmative action hiring for future TWUC office staff. Job posting to specify in the criteria that eligible candidates should be able to demonstrate: "active and respected in anti-oppression cultural movements for at least three years". Priority must be given to the following equity-seeking groups: Indigenous writers, racialized writers, writers with disabilities and trans writers.
9. Dedicate a future issue of WRITE to bringing historical context to cultural appropriation, Indigenous writers and writers of colour within TWUC.
10. Paid equity officer position housed in the main TWUC offices. Again, hiring criteria must consider only candidates with "active and respected in anti-oppression cultural movements for at least three years". Priority must be given to the following equity-seeking groups: Indigenous writers, racialized writers, writers with disabilities and trans writers.

Signed, TWUC Equity Task Force

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