

ADDRESSING ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN CANADIAN WRITING & PUBLISHING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2020, The Writers' Union of Canada (TWUC) hosted a meeting for Black writers to share their experiences navigating the Canadian writing and publishing industry. Facilitated by Lawrence Hill, the meeting included writers working in a range of genres. They engaged in a robust conversation that covered negative experiences with agents, editors, publishers, awards, and festivals; ideas on how to improve CanLit; sharing resources among Black writers; and expressions of gratitude for others who have paved the way within CanLit.

The enclosed report is a thematic summary of this wide-ranging discussion and includes writers' recommendations to address anti-Black racism in our industry. The Union recognizes our responsibility to continue to address structural inequities within and beyond our organization. We are sharing this report with industry partners and ask that you, too, consider the relevant recommendations as part of your role in working toward a more diverse, inclusive CanLit.

The Union thanks the Black Writers' Meeting participants for sharing their experiences, ideas, and advice.

RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

PUBLISHERS & EDITORS

- Acquire more Black authors and illustrators to tell stories about their communities
- Hire more Black editors and empower them to advocate for their authors
- Provide all editors with diverse cultural competency training
- Do not promote stories that include cultural inaccuracies
- Work toward greater diversity among staff of publishing houses
- Recognize, encourage, and support the need for more Black individuals in CanLit

LITERARY AGENTS

- Acquire more Black authors
- Hire more Black agents who have a deeper understanding of different cultural contexts

FESTIVALS & AWARDS

- Ensure programming committees, juries, and other decision-making groups reflect the diversity of the writing community

BOOK REVIEWS

- Literary magazines, journals, and newspapers should hire more Black literary critics

TRANSPARENCY AT TWUC

- Work toward implementing recommendations in this report and continue to implement Equity Implementation Plan to improve opportunities for BIPOC and other marginalized writers
- Support more opportunities for Black writers to gather, share notes, and assist each other
- Work toward expanding BIPOC Writers Connect program to provide longer-term mentorships



BLACK WRITERS' MEETING

Summary by Jessica Kirk
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INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, September 10, 2020, with the assistance of Jessica Kirk of The Writers' Union of Canada (TWUC), Lawrence Hill facilitated a 90-minute virtual meeting for writers in Canada who identify as Black to speak with one another about their experiences with writing and Canada's literary and publishing industry. What started as a meeting for Black members of The Writers' Union of Canada quickly attracted a much more expansive list of registrants.

Black writers with all kinds of literary experiences were in attendance — children's lit and YA authors, journalists, Black scholars, poets, screenplay writers, contemporary fiction writers, essayists, and memoirists. Many were enthusiastic to join a virtual meeting with a community of Black writers, while others attended with interest in learning more about the Union. Some attendees were generous enough to share difficult experiences they had with TWUC members, and expressed that they were hopeful to see what tangible supports and initiatives for Black writers might come out of the gathering. There were also threads of Black and Indigenous relations — Black writers expressed that there are threads between Black and Indigenous experiences with and concerns about CanLit.

The Black Writers' Meeting involved grievances about experiences with agents, editors, publishers, awards, and festivals; ideas on how to improve CanLit; sharing resources among Black writers; and expressions of gratitude for others who have paved the way within CanLit. Black Canadian writers like Dionne Brand and M. Nourbese Philip, publishers like Sister Vision Press and Williams-Wallace, and bookstores like A Different Booklist were mentioned for having cultivated a terrain for continued efforts to create more inclusive and equitable outcomes. As well, Jael Richardson (and the FOLD) and Whitney French (and Hush Harbour Press) were congratulated consistently throughout the meeting for doing crucial groundwork within the industry today.

The following outline is organized thematically. Each section includes context behind the discussions that took place, followed by directives for different stakeholders within Canada's literary industry. The outline also includes thematically organized resources for writers — some of which were shared during the meeting, while others are offered by TWUC. It is our hope that this meeting outline will serve as a tangible resource for stakeholders and authors within CanLit to create a fairer landscape to support Black writers.

AGENTS

Writers' experiences with literary agents in Canada are very diverse, and the meeting included a fair balance of agented and unagented authors. One writer shared that their agent expressed to them that their goal was to help them build a career out of their writing. While there had been some positive experiences, other



writers shared that it can be exhausting having to have additional conversations with their agents about the compromises they weren't willing to make with their stories and their writing.

A number of attendees expressed the difficulty in finding an agent, and that experiencing consistent rejection was hurtful. A few even admitted that it was harder to find an agent than write the book itself. Many attendees published their books unagented, and one writer conveyed that agents should be removed from the industry completely — the writer felt that their biases and their role as gatekeepers are barriers.

Some writers also shared that there aren't enough Black agents in the industry, that agents aren't willing to represent writers who centre Black characters or Black experiences, and that agents often misunderstand the kind of stories being told. While attendees understood that agents have a fiduciary duty to make money for themselves and their authors, Black writers indicated that literature has to mean more than that.

At the meeting, emerging writers were advised to bypass agents and directly approach smaller presses who seem to be more interested in working with Black writers, then approach agents when they have acquired publishing offers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- For agencies to hire more Black agents who have deeper understanding of different cultural contexts
- For agencies to acquire more Black authors

RESOURCES

- A free [list of literary agencies](#) is available on TWUC's website.
- A number of Black, Indigenous, and racialized agents were referenced during the meeting, including Léonicka Valcius, Hana el Niwairi, Aeman Ansari, Chelene Knight, and Sam Hiyate. One writer cautioned that since there are so few literary agents who are BIPOC, they are likely overwhelmed and overworked.
- There will be a TWUC Webinar on “Ins and Outs of Literary Agents” in November 2020 featuring Léonicka Valcius and Zalika Reid-Benta.

EDITORS

Black writers' experiences with editors was the most consistently discussed topic. For starters, navigating language barriers seemed to have been particularly frustrating for Black writers — they expressed a constant lack of familiarity/understanding about the usage and importance of using different dialects within their stories (Patois, Arabic, or otherwise). While working with their editor, one writer told the group that cultural phrases had been written off as grammatical errors or language that needed to be corrected. Some writers shared the ways that working with their editor made them second guess whether or not their story was even worth telling. Writers in attendance encouraged each other to tell their own culturally diverse stories.

One writer retold their experience being hired as an acquisitions editor, sharing their initial excitement about helping to acquire new Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized writers' stories. They ended up spending the entire time at the publishing house butting heads with people about what storytelling is for Black people, and were told to bring in Black writers and let other staff handle the rest. Ultimately, this writer learned that it's not enough to hire more Black editors — publishers also need to trust that the people they hire know what is best for their communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- For TWUC to advocate for publishers to hire more Black editors, and that these editors be given more decision-making power to advocate with/for their authors
- For TWUC to advocate for more training for all publishing editors, ensuring that authors are offered more culturally responsive editing experiences

LITERARY COMMUNITIES & TRANSPARENCY

Black writers at the meeting expressed that Canada's literary industry is tightly knit, and that there aren't as many clear paths for accessing resources or supports as they would hope. One writer in particular expressed that people in CanLit sometimes hoard their resources and experiences due to supposed scarcity. In another writer's experience, they have ended up relying on mentors from the United States for culturally-specific training on how to improve their writing and their work. With that in mind, another attendee asked how Black writers in Canada could come together and leverage their own creativity and power in order to create formal and informal mentorship opportunities and support for each other.

Another writer asked how Black writers can gain access to a gated world — particularly when they have internalized comments from professors and editors telling them that nobody wants to hear stories about Black girls. During moments of particular political intensity, some writers found that non-Black literary communities have found it difficult to “stomach their kind of writing.”

A few writers were met with hostility while trying to do equity work within Union spaces, and would like to see TWUC be more vocal in addressing how attitudes entrenched with white supremacy put marginalized writers at risk. In their experience, when they have challenged cultural appropriation within the Union, Union members have felt very comfortable saying rude, hateful comments, and they were enabled by the organization's support.

One writer expressed the need for more publishers that Black people can consider as allies, more space for Black writers to host meetings, and institutions to support the growth of Black writers' presentation in the arts.

A meeting attendee challenged established Black authors to support emerging Black writers when they have opportunities to do so. While their book was on a reading circuit, this writer used their platform to amplify other writers' works.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That TWUC work toward implementing the changes in this report and continuing to implement changes in the Equity Implementation Report — written by Charles C. Smith and funded by Canada Council for the Arts — to show its commitment to improving opportunities for BIPOC and other marginalized writers
- That TWUC support other opportunities for Black writers to gather, share notes, and assist each other
- That TWUC work toward expanding BIPOC Writers Connect to provide longer-term mentorships

RESOURCES

- TWUC's [Writers' How-To Series](#) is a collection of professional guides, available for purchase through TWUC's website.



MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION & OWN VOICES

Many attendees shared that they don't feel understood as writers, and that their stories, languages, and characters are also not understood by editors, publishers, or agents. One writer affirmed that they are doing more than just telling stories — rather, they are creating artifacts to leave behind for others to use. With that in mind, they take the authenticity of their craft very seriously, and expressed how important it was for them not to be any organization's token Black person.

Many writers expressed a desire to exist beyond a monolith. Since there are so many experiences and expressions of Blackness in Canada, there should be room for a diversity of Black stories to be told — not only those that reinforce negative stereotypes about what it means to be Black. For example, one author spoke about their desires for the literary industry to move beyond Toronto-centric expressions of Blackness. Even though Toronto has the largest Black population in the country, Black people have longstanding histories and presence across the country. Another author shared that oral storytelling traditions should be better supported and honoured in Canada.

A few writers shared that children's literature in CanLit is very behind on conversations around "Own Voice." Large publishers in Canada have been very comfortable with pitching and promoting stories that centre Black girls, even when they aren't written by Black authors or drawn by Black illustrators. One writer pointed out that there have not only been cultural inaccuracies across those stories, but those publishers also have few or no Black writers or illustrators on their children's literature rosters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- For TWUC to support the call for "Own Voice," encouraging publishers to hire more Black editors and acquire works by more Black writers and Black illustrators to tell stories about their communities
- For TWUC to actively condemn publishers' promotion of stories that involve cultural inaccuracies

BOOK REVIEWS

Black writers spent a fair amount of time discussing book reviews at the meeting, particularly because reviews are tied to book sales. Attendees expressed that there are challenges with getting press and having reviews written about their work as Black writers. With that in mind, some writers were actively looking for reviews, as well as different ways to support each other's work. There seemed to have also been an appetite for community-led reviews, though some attendees admitted that literary magazines and newspapers should look toward hiring more Black literary critics who better understand the context of their writing.

RECOMMENDATION

- For TWUC to advocate for literary magazines, journals, and newspapers to hire more Black literary critics

RESOURCES

- *Quill & Quire* is a Canadian magazine of book news and reviews, which might serve as useful.



PUBLISHING

In the wake of protests against police brutality, a Black writer in attendance made reference to the fact that publishers have started having conversations about hiring more Black people to increase diversity within their staff and their acquired authors. They went on to comment on how puzzled they were that it had taken an uprising for this to occur, rather than naturally realizing there weren't any Black people in the room.

One writer shared that statements about challenging anti-Black racism and promoting inclusion and diversity from literary industries are “lip service,” particularly because publishers are still unwilling to publish their work. They went on to share that when the publishers expressed that their writing was not relevant enough, this writer read between the lines and interpreted it as the publisher believing that Black people and their stories are not marketable enough for them to invest their time and resources. Another writer was also met with an unwillingness to have their work published in various Canadian literary magazines. They opted for pitching to U.S. literary magazines instead, since they are much more willing to publish the writer's work.

Another attendee spoke to their experience being hired as a Black acquisitions editor. It was a good thing for a publisher to do, but they mentioned that as the only Black person in the room, it can be very lonely for such a person to work in an unsupportive environment.

Many attendees commented on the fact that there aren't enough Black or Indigenous editors in major publishing houses, which some referred to as the “Big Five.” Attendees admitted that their storytelling is frequently challenged, which is why there should be more editors who understand the writing and will champion their work to be published and read. A few writers spoke about how much of a difference it makes to have collaborative publishing experiences with editors, designers, and other publishing staff.

One writer advised that attendees should seek out opportunities among receptive members of the literary community, and network with people who see their work and see them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- For TWUC to advocate for greater diversity within staff at publishing houses as well as greater diversity of authors and illustrators acquired
- For organizations within Canada's literary and publishing industry to recognize, encourage, and support the need for more Black writers and Black people who either work in or are interested in working within CanLit

RESOURCES

- Caitlin Press, Arsenal Pulp Press, and Hush Harbour Press were each directly referenced as publishers who are open to developing meaningful relationships with Black authors.
- The [Writers' Guide to Canadian Publishers](#) is available for purchase on TWUC's website.
- HarperCollins Canada launched their “[Read Better](#)” campaign, which included a call for submissions for unagented, unpublished middle-grade manuscripts from BIPOC creators that was open until September 30, 2020.



AWARDS & FESTIVALS

Black writers at the meeting expressed that there is very little representation of Black writers at award ceremonies and literary festivals. The few who are invited to these events feel tokenized, and are often the only Black person in a room filled with authors. Writers shared a sense of anxiety around their presence and performance, fearful that if they say the wrong thing they won't be invited to participate in future years.

Attendees noticed that literary awards are quick to feature one or two Black writers on their promotional posters, but very few of these authors end up receiving any awards. They expressed that there is very little interest in platforming stories about Black experiences written for Black people.

Black writers shared that representation within organizations would seem like an obvious place to start, but addressing these barriers has not been a priority for the literary festivals they have attended. For example, one author shared their reflections about one literary festival that prioritizes gender as their only benchmark for diversity, and that their organizing committee lacks diversity. When this author addressed their concerns with the festival organizers, they were met with hostility and an unwillingness to listen. This author, along with other meeting attendees, expressed that there is little to no representation across boards, jury members, or prize winners for literary awards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- For TWUC to advocate for more diversity within literary festival and selection committees, boards, and other organizational structures

RESOURCES

- The [Festival of Literary Diversity \(FOLD\)](#) exists to celebrate a diversity of writers, including BIPOC writers, and offers panels and workshops in which participants can learn more about how to succeed in the world of publishing. The main literary festival happens in May, and FOLD Kids takes place in October.

CONCLUSION

At the meeting, Black writers congratulated one another for not only writing important stories, but for doing the work of advocating for others within Canada's publishing and literary industry. One attendee praised the untold stories, about the people who are contributing to the kind of work that makes critical Black writing possible. Attendees urged that this conversation should go beyond one session, and should include continued dialogue with one another and Black artists across other disciplines.

Beyond the statements supporting Black life, one writer acknowledged that TWUC, the League of Canadian Poets, and other arts service organizations were taking steps toward structurally addressing anti-Black racism. Writers urged that more work needs to be done, and expressed that challenging anti-Black racism is also tied to resisting anti-Indigeneity. One writer insisted that the room needs to be much more diverse, and that people should feel comfortable, safe, and trusted within those spaces. Another shared that they are consistently training themselves to stop apologizing for taking up space.

The Writers' Union of Canada thanks all participants for attending the Black Writers' Meeting and for sharing their thoughts, ideas, experiences, and advice.