



# METRO ARTS

NASHVILLE OFFICE OF ARTS + CULTURE

**PUBLIC COMMENT**  
**Metro Art Board of Commissioners**  
**Feb. 3, 2022 12 p.m.**

**Commissioners:** Jim Schmidt (Chair), Matia Powell (Vice Chair), Will Cheek (Sec. /Treasurer), Jane Alvis, Ellen Angelico, Dexter Brewer, Marianne Byrd, Bonnie Dow, Clay Haynes, Sheri Nichols Bucy, Paula Roberts, and Campbell West

**METRO ARTS MISSION:**  
**Drive an Equitable and Vibrant Community through the Arts**

- A. Call to Order & Welcome
- B. Action Items:
  - 1. Metro HR Fact Finders Report Recommendations and Action Steps

Public Comment: [B1](#) | [B2](#) | [B3](#) | [B4](#) | [B5](#) | [B6](#) | B7 | B8 | B9 | B10 | B11 | B12

- C. Executive Session
- D. Adjourn Meeting

**Comment B1:**

Dear CARE/Metro Arts Commission,

I am submitting a comment in light of the release of the Metro HR Fact Finding report that was recently released. In order for Metro Arts to live up to its mission of driving a more equitable community, a third-party group must come in and do an investigation. Within these investigations conducted by Metro HR, there are many named instances of BIPOC employees, both former and current, experiencing microaggressions and other racially oppressive systems/behavior in the workplace. For any reconciliation to happen, the harm must be named and accountability for the negative impact must take place. The only way this can happen is for a neutral outside group with experience in antiracism to come in and make recommendations.

As Commissioner Angelico stated to the Nashville Scene, “We may not have violated any rules, but that doesn't mean we didn't do something wrong. The rules are there to tell us what's permissible and not permissible — not to tell us what's right and wrong.” Metro Arts has made the efforts to go above and beyond by being the only Metro agency with an equity statement. In order to live up to this statement, it is imperative that these values are not only implemented in a superficial, front-facing way, but also internally. Specifically, the equity statement says that, “Metro Arts will commit to frequent and on-going, agency-wide honest conversations about race, class, age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age and income status.” Clearly, there is a severe lack of trust and honesty internally. Also, more importantly, Metro Arts “commits to exposing and unraveling [inequity] through our own leadership, practices and policies.” Now is the moment for Metro Arts to prove that they are truly an equitable and antiracist organization by putting the words they have released to the community to action.

It is absolutely imperative for there to be a third-party, neutral group to come in and do an investigation. I hope that CARE and the Commission decide to do so briskly to restore trust with Metro Arts employees as well as the Nashville community at large.

Thank you,  
Isabel Tipton-Krispin  
District 9

To whom it may concern:

My name is Lydia Cook and I was once a proud member of the Nashville Arts Commission. However, I'm saddened and angry as it has come to my attention about the blatant racism inequality and injustices toward your former black African American workers. In 2017 I participated in your THRIVE program and the end result was a book titled "Beautiful Brown Faces." I partnered with Nashville Peacemakers and we were able to help underprivileged youth on the north side of Nashville express themselves via poetry and spoken word. As an African-American woman, artist, and advocate my soul rejoiced. Now to hear that your organization allows such volatile treatment to its black workers who serve and served the community makes me sick. When deciding to become a member of the Nashville Arts Commission I believed it to be an organization of equality and heartfelt substance that wanted to improve our communities and our World At Large. Had I known the corruption and prejudice that lived behind the walls at the Nashville Arts Commission I would have never offered my time and energy. My sole purpose as a humanitarian is to make our world a better place hands on community by community person to person. I thought this to be the same agenda of the Nashville Arts Commission. Clearly, I was wrong! My desire is to see people of color treated fairly and your organization does not do this. Enough is enough!

Lydia Cook

Dear Metro Arts Commissioners,

You have heard from me enough to know how I feel about the issue of poor leadership and racial discrimination by Metro Arts staff, and to know what I believe is the best course of action for this body to move forward if it wants to regain the trust of the Nashville artist community and the arts organizations it serves. Furthermore, I submitted a comment to yesterday's CARE meeting in the hopes they will make those recommendations to this larger body.

I am sure the investigation into Janine Christiano's complaint is ongoing, but I know the Fact Finders found no evidence of intentional discrimination against Metro Arts staffers. I am sure you know, however, that discrimination can occur without it being intentional. Indeed, that is a cornerstone of systemic racism. I am sure you all know that, of course, since this Commission places such an emphasis on cultural equity and anti-racist practices.

For the leadership of this Commission to dismiss the complainants claims because the investigators "did not find the allegations of discrimination to be substantiated" is to miss the point completely of how racial discrimination works - both intentional and systemic.

If this Commission doesn't want to follow my suggestions, that's fine! I could be wrong, I could be going too far, I don't know; I just believe that I am doing the right thing. If that's the case, I would suggest you listen to your own staff and what they are asking for:

Specifically, I encourage the Arts Commission to:

- Hire a [qualified third party consultant](#) in DEI
- Implement specific equity accountability standards for leadership based on Metro Arts Equity Statement with appropriate consequences
- Interrogate the use and effect of [PIPs](#) within the agency and implement more honest and effective methods to either [coach or discipline](#) as needed
- Engage in open, honest, and comprehensive discussions about Metro Arts' historic and current racial equity practices (internal and external to the agency)
- Be honest about harm caused and do what is needed to repair and restore relationships based on feedback from those harmed

Lastly, I want to make sure you are aware of the damage this Commission continues to do to the community with its inaction and bureaucracy - individual artists and arts organizations (large and small) have lost trust in this body to effectively promote and safeguard the Arts in Nashville. If you are not willing to do the hard work of cultural equity within this Commission and your staff leadership, why should we trust you to guide us in that work?

Sincerely,

Alan Fey  
(District 17)  
Freelance Arts Administrator

ALIAS Chamber Ensemble, Managing Dir.; Nashville Philharmonic Orchestra, Operations Mgr.; Make Music Nashville, Executive Dir.

Thandiwe Shiprah  
www.thandiweshiprah.com info@musewisdom.com 615-837-6487  
TO: arts@nashville.org  
RE: Lauren Fitzgerald

Dear Colleagues:

I have known Lauren Fitzgerald since 2014 and we have worked together on several projects that I've led in my capacity as an independent artist and producer of community arts programming in Nashville. In each of these projects, Lauren has distinguished herself by performing with professionalism, integrity, and great dedication to providing Nashville audiences with high quality arts experiences.

I first met Lauren prior to her joining Metro Arts and while attending an artist convening in North Carolina. I was immediately impressed with her critical thinking skills and the spirit of cooperation she brought to the discussions with other attendees at the gathering. I was excited to learn that we both lived in Nashville and I contacted her upon returning with an invitation to collaborate. She is greatly informed about local arts issues and has brought creativity and an even-tempered attitude to every project that we've worked on together.

In writing this letter, I hope to assure you that I have the utmost admiration for Lauren's artistry and her leadership in the effort to achieve cultural equity in the arts. I would be happy to provide any additional information if you need it. Please feel free to email me at info@musewisdom.com or contact me by phone at 615-837-6487.

Kindest regards,

Thandiwe Shiprah

I imagine you find yourself at a challenging intersection. When charged with fiscal responsibility and public benefit, it's tempting to look at challenges and complaints from the bare-bones perspective of formal policy and fact-finding documents.

How do we consider 'public benefit' with a big picture view?

Wisdom tells us that when we ask for patience, we are given opportunities to exercise patience, not a magic wand wave dose of instant patience. When we advocate for the arts and creativity and equity, opportunities to exercise those values will be highlighted.

The way this body navigates the issues brought up by former (and current) employees around workplace dynamics of race is the opportunity to exercise the art (and skill) of creating equity.

Acknowledge.

Apologize.

Learn.

Do. & thereby teach.

I urge you not to lose the soul of this matter in some sort of nitpicking exercise of individual versus institution, intent versus impact, or measured policy versus person-centered practice.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Pruitt-Gaines

Working Artist & former Metro Arts Commissioner

As a working artist, who has participated in almost all programs that Metro Arts has offered, I have collaborated with everyone involved in the complaints. In my experience, both Lauren Fitzgerald and Cecilia Olusola Tribble, were always helpful, available and professional. It was heartbreaking to read and hear about their experiences. I believe them. White supremacy is layered into all of us and our institutions. It is critical that we address issues of equity head-on and dig to discover what are the policies and procedures that contribute to such a hostile work environment. If this much harm has been caused, it is more than about one person in leadership, and I hope the Commission will take these questions extremely seriously.

[Kristen Chapman](#)



Metro Nashville Arts Commission  
Metro Southeast Campus  
1417 Murfreesboro Pike  
Nashville, TN 37217

Metro Arts Commissioners:

We are writing to uphold and remind each other of our shared commitment to robust conversations and action around racial equity in the arts and beyond. In this regard, we support a substantive response to the grievances shared by former and current Metro Art employees of color. This action is important not only for Metro Arts, but also for the potential impact of these inequalities as they trickle down, in direct and indirect ways, to those the Nashville arts community serves.

Since Metro Arts has been awaiting the human resources report to take further action, we anticipate that solutions and remedies are forthcoming imminently. While we are not in a position to investigate and adjudicate this matter as an organization, we want to emphasize the following thoughts and recommendations as the response unfolds:

- With a new Chief Diversity Officer, a diverse Metro Arts Commission board, a Metro Human Relations Commission, and a Committee for Antiracism and Equity, Metro Arts and Metro government have equipped themselves with multiple safeguards, experts, and resources to address these matters. We would ask for Metro Arts to engage this expertise and hear what these experts recommend as a way forward.
- Human resource departments are not necessarily viewed by all as an unbiased broker in these conversations, especially, in this case, if a person of color has not been involved in the Fact Finding and HR report. This would warrant a third party outside resource to further investigate, craft, and ensure implementation of solutions as a response to the grievances.
- Contrition and acknowledgement from leadership for the impact this has had on the lives of those affected would be healthy for repairing harm and improving the range of possible solutions. This is the first step in necessary accountability for the situation. This is an opportunity to restore trust and build a more equitable institution, positively shaping Metro Arts as well the organizations and communities it serves.
- If there is truth to Ibram Kendi's statement that racism is about power and policy, not people; then examining the enforced or disparately enforced department and Metro policies that are a point of tension is necessary to create systems for future success. This includes exploring the administrative and reporting structures necessary to create a more supportive culture and equitable participation.





- We have worked with all parties and have found them to be highly capable and effective members of the arts commission and arts community. There should be room in an expanding Nashville for all to contribute their capabilities, especially as it relates to those who are not being included in the benefits of the changing Nashville landscape.

We look forward to hearing from Metro Arts commissioners and the Committee for Antiracism and Equity on their proposed solutions. While this is a clear setback on the road to a more equitable Nashville arts community, it is also an opportunity for Metro Arts to lead other Metro departments and Nashville organizations by envisioning more diverse, healthy, and equitable workplaces.

All the Best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Janet Walsh".

Janet Walsh  
Board Chair  
Southern Word

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Benjamin Smith".

Benjamin Smith  
Executive Director  
Southern Word

Dear Commissioners,

I know many of you from my time as a staff member at Metro Arts but for those who do not know me, I am Laurel Fisher and I served as the Grants Manager from 2015-2019. I resigned in January 2019, not because I was looking for another opportunity, but because I was coerced into resigning through the use of a performance improvement plan. I scored high marks in each of my annual reviews but it wasn't until I started questioning the favoritism and inequitable application of office policies that I was accused of creating a "toxic work environment." Instead of working through my concerns and seeking creative solutions, Metro Arts leaders chose to use constructive discharge tactics that ultimately led to my resignation. Metro Arts has egregiously done these things and more to myself and former colleagues. I ask that you consider carefully all of the allegations brought forward, including my own, before recommendations are made.

I submitted a complaint on October 12, 2021 to Keven Palmissano regarding the inappropriate use of a performance improvement plan to encourage me to resign from my position as Grants Manager. My request was to have this PIP removed from my HR record due to its retaliatory nature and use of intimidation. This tactic was not only used on me but was used to force both Olusola Tribble and Lauren Fitzgerald out of their positions shortly after my departure. In each case, well-educated, experienced professionals were pushed out of their roles for challenging the inequities we witnessed while working for Metro Arts. What follows is a summary of my experience that I am sure none of you were ever told.

I was hired in 2015 immediately following a departmental restructuring that elevated Rebecca Berrios (now Rebecca Kinslow) to a director role overseeing grants and the newly developed THRIVE program. Both myself and Olusola Tribble were hired to serve on this team. It became apparent to me early on that Rebecca did not have the skills or experience to effectively fill this director position, but it was a new role so I was hopeful that improvements would happen over time. Unfortunately, things never improved. In fact, they became worse and increasingly difficult. Olusola and I constantly carried additional work loads in order to make up for Rebecca's lacking abilities. Our work-load was ever increasing with the redesign of the grants program, the creation and launch of the REAL program and the development of the Restorative Justice and Opportunity NOW programs. We were constantly having to adapt and tried to juggle more and more things. Without any significant support from our supervisor, Olusola and I were over-worked, micro-managed and under-appreciated.

At one point during my time at Metro Arts, I even asked for clarification regarding my job description and the continual use of the words "with team," I was given a vague response followed by a workshop a week later on basic project management skills. I was also told that I should not interpret my job description literally. I was told that my job description should only be used "as a guide" and not an actual list of responsibilities. There was no way to assess my performance if my job description was simply a guide. And it is impossible to hold a single person accountable for any job responsibility prefaced by the words "with team" unless the team is being assessed collectively.

It was my love for the arts community and my city that kept me going until the unbearable workplace culture was no longer worth the extra energy. Our hard work was paving the way for the agency's national recognition as a leader in addressing inequities in arts funding yet, our office culture did not reflect any of those same principles. I repeatedly spoke with Rebecca about my exorbitant workload explaining to her that I needed assistance with several projects and instead of offering to assist herself, she volunteered other staff members time instead. In some instances, I would ask for assistance and then the project she agreed to do was left undone for several days. I ultimately ended up having to complete the project myself. In 2017 and 2018, Rebecca was less and less present in the office. There was always an excuse, "I am not feeling well today" - "A repair person is coming to my house" - "I have a meeting out of the office this afternoon so I am just going to work from home until then." The list went on and on. The team's workload remained high and we were still operating like a team of two, not three. The situation became even more pronounced when Rebecca began her Master's program at University of Pennsylvania where she would have to attend classes on-campus periodically. It was on one of those days that I learned that Rebecca's time at school was being counted as a combination of work time, comp time and vacation time. Essentially, Rebecca was able to maintain her director salary, work remotely, have unlimited flexibility and maintain her authority over all of the team's work while she pursued a personal academic goal. Ironically, the same situation was brought up in the Fact Finder report regarding Lauren Fitzgerald and in that instance, working remotely from an out-of-state location was unacceptable. Employee policies are not applied equally at Metro Arts, opportunities are given to some and not all, and honest, open communication is expected of lower level staff persons and not of those in management positions.

I continued to bring my concerns to Caroline who, in the moment, would listen intently and say something supportive then used those conversations against me in the allegations detailed in the PIP given to me on December 6, 2018. The allegations included "improper use of communication channels and lack of adherence to agency cultural agreements." Both were incredibly ambiguous and signaled to me that my concerns were not valid. The allegation of failing to uphold the agency's cultural agreements was especially interesting to me considering these were abstract ideas, at best, with no concrete examples of how they were supposed to be practiced or enforced leaving the interpretation of them completely up to the employee.

- *We value doing good work; understanding ideas so we can attend to details.*
- *Allows us to do our best work and determine best return on investment.*
- *We aspire to catalyze vision and strategy in quality, well-informed action.*
- *We recognize that each of us contributes a unique combination of strengths and knowledge.*
- *We see, appreciate, and hope to increase in value the ways in which different strengths catalyze to create desired results.*
- *We co-create our processes and use check-ins to support us in the design and implementation of our work.*
- *We have a practice of reflecting on our norms and guidelines to adapt to what emerges in our work. Our agreements are expansive to hold what emerges from our experiences.*

I believe these group agreements were intentionally designed to be vague and open to interpretation so that Metro Arts leaders could use them in whatever way they wanted to. I made the mistake of trusting Caroline to see all sides of the situation but instead, she was quick to dismiss and silence me. She calmly and confidently stood by Rebecca and presented me with that PIP knowing full well that my resignation would soon follow.

My experience was devastating and sadly, I watched my colleagues of color endure much worse. During my almost four years at Metro Arts, I watched Olusola and Lauren be used over and over for their social capital. They are both accomplished artists and respected leaders in this community so naturally, they were good at their jobs. They excelled in spite of the insufficient job training, micro-management and constant degradation they had to endure once they returned to the office. Essentially, both were told to develop exceptional programs and strong community partnerships then were reprimanded for not doing it in a way that was "satisfactory." The continual mantra in the department was to think about "how can we do things differently and more equitably?," but when new ideas were generated, supervisors were quick to shut them down, unwilling to release the power they held.

The hypocrisy then and now is blinding and should be admitted and corrected. After reading the Fact Finder reports in the instances of both Olusola Tribble and Lauren Fitzgerald, I was shocked by the complacent tone. The conclusion that Metro Arts leaders followed all policies and broke no laws is stated quite matter of factly. That is irrelevant. Metro Arts leaders actually used those same policies to get rid of people who were challenging the status quo; people who were exceptional at their jobs but were punished for it. And when these concerns were brought to Human Resources via a formal complaint process, a supposedly unbiased internal investigation revealed no foul play? Of course not. I ask that the Commission consider hiring an outside, third party firm to conduct a true investigation of HR practices within Metro Arts. Perhaps then, and only then, will my complaint even be legitimized. Stephen Cain from Metro Human Resources actually called me after the submission of my formal complaint in October 2021 to say they were unable to look into my complaint further. He shared with me that Metro HR was overwhelmed with complaints at the time and working to remove a PIP from an employee file was unnecessary since I was already labeled as rehirable in the Metro system. He assured me that hiring managers rarely review past PIP's when considering a candidate. I found this hard to believe. Mr. Cain also stated that the other complaints received from former Metro Arts staffers contained claims of racial discrimination and since mine did not, there was not a need to investigate further. He assured me that the inappropriate use of PIP's was already going to be included in their Fact Finder report. After receiving that call, I felt silenced once again. What good are reporting systems such as this if your concern is just going to be brushed off and de-legitimized?

In conclusion, I ask that you take a deep look into the office culture and power dynamics within Metro Arts. Ensure that all voices are heard without fear of retaliation. We are looking to you to lead by example. I believe that healing is possible for all those involved but there must first be acknowledgement of harm done and enough humility to evaluate these broken systems and rebuild them in a way that is supportive of all.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurel Fisher". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'L' and 'F'.

Laurel Fisher

2 February 2022

Metro Arts: Nashville Office of Arts + Culture  
1417 Murfreesboro Pike  
Nashville, TN 37217

Dear Metro Arts Commissioners,

API Middle Tennessee is thankful for your support of local artists and our community. We are submitting this comment in response to the recent release of the Metro HR Fact Finding Report. As an organization representing Asian and Pacific Islanders in Middle Tennessee, we believe that Metro Arts has failed to live up to [its own commitment to equity](#) and must work towards acknowledging and addressing the racial harm that has been done.

The places we work continue to be a place of racial harm and discrimination for Asian and Pacific Islanders. In a survey we did in 2021, we found that over 60% of our community does not feel supported in their racial identity in the workplace. To not perpetuate this harm, Metro Arts must acknowledge and address the concerns of its first and only API employee. We ask that you commit to the following:

- Engage a third-party investigator
- Complete an equity audit of organizational practices, policies, and leadership
- Acknowledge and right the racial harm that has been done

We believe that these actions would be just the first steps in addressing the racial harm that has been done and restoring the community's trust. API Middle Tennessee is open to being part of this process as we collectively work towards a more just and equitable city.

Sincerely,

Joseph Gutierrez  
Executive Director



*73 White Bridge Road  
Suite 103-328  
Nashville, TN 37205*

February 2, 2022

Dear Metro Arts Commissioners and CARE Members,

As a citizen and arts administrator, I deeply value the work Metro Arts does to support and foster Nashville's arts community, including providing leadership and framework around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Over the past eight years, I've worked in various capacities with Lauren Fitzgerald, Olusola Tribble, Laurel Fisher, and especially Janine Christiano, with whom I teamed up in developing the six week Anti-Racism writing workshop in winter 2021. The support and engagement of these individuals has bettered my organization: they've mentored, educated, challenged, and partnered with us. As Metro Arts has shepherded the arts community toward a higher standard of equity and antiracist practices, not only through grantee expectations, but also through programs like Crossroads, REAL, and Power of the Pen, the recent reports of cracks within their ranks and workplace has been disheartening. I hope Metro Arts will hold itself accountable by the standards it has set so as to rebuild trust and solidarity within the arts community. Specifically, a third-party equity consultant would provide an objective perspective on blind spots and offer direction so that Metro Arts leadership can do the work of repairing so that we can all move forward as a community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Katie McDougall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Katie McDougall

Dear Metro Nashville Arts Commission,

I am the co-founder and executive director of Girls Write Nashville, an arts nonprofit currently receiving operating support from the Commission. I wish to submit the following as public comment in reference to your 2/3/22 special meeting to discuss complaints filed by Metro Arts staffers.

I consider our organization a great victory for the city of Nashville and for the Metro Nashville Arts Commission, who was the very first funder of our organization. Since our first season of programming in 2016-2017 as a community arts project funded by a \$2,800 Metro Arts Thrive grant, we have gained national attention and served hundreds of youth in our community. This year, we were named semi-finalists for the prestigious Lewis Prize for Music and stand alongside the Nashville Opera and Nashville Symphony as one of three organizations in Nashville to receive National Endowment for the Arts American Rescue Plan funds. Next year, we will invest well over \$100,000 into young people in MNPS Title I schools through community-based, accessible, culturally responsive music education and creative development programs, and we are proud to have a former participant of our first year of programming now working in our organization as a teaching artist.

This work would not have been possible without Lauren Fitzgerald, who was the Thrive program coordinator during the 2016-2017 Thrive grant that funded the founding year of our programming. Her deep dedication to her work was obvious. In that and in following years, she was thorough and gracious in answering our almost endless questions. Like many artists, we were completely new to government grants, and she expertly guided us through the processes of fine tuning our project, connecting with community organizations, drafting our application, implementing our program, tracking our impact, and submitting our final reports. When we started down the road of continuing our program as a nonprofit, she kept track of us. When we had existed long enough to qualify for further grants, she proactively reached out to let us know about additional funding opportunities, connecting us with Janine Christiano to begin the process of seeking Operating Support, a vital lifeline for nonprofit organizations. I truly believe that if not for the Thrive program and such a dedicated public servant as Ms. Fitzgerald, our organization would not exist.

Ms. Christiano has been similarly dedicated to the success of our work with the Metro Arts Commission, getting on calls during a public health crisis to brainstorm funding opportunities for our small nonprofit during the era of Covid, a time when 1 in 3 nonprofits were in financial jeopardy, helping us navigate the process of applying for and executing an additional Thrive project in 2020-2021, and applying for and gaining operating support in 2021-2022. In working with her and her team, I feel we have a true and trusted partner in Metro Arts thanks to her authenticity, transparency, consistency, attention to detail, and dedication to our shared work.

On behalf of myself, our organization, and the young people we have the honor of serving, I want to express my deep gratitude for the work of these two individuals. They have been true allies to our organization in navigating the often brutal world of growing a nonprofit community arts organization, especially as a start-up, and I am honored to be a part of this legacy of community art.

Sincerely,  
Jen Starsinic

**Jen Starsinic**

*Co-founder & Executive director*

[jen@girlswritenashville.org](mailto:jen@girlswritenashville.org) . (615) 784-8725

Girls Write Nashville & Loudmouth Community Music

*Empowered Expression.*

[www.girlswritenashville.org](http://www.girlswritenashville.org)



February 1, 2022

Metro Arts: Nashville Office of Arts + Culture  
1417 Murfreesboro Pike  
Nashville, TN 37217

**RE: Metro HR Fact Finders Report Recommendations and Action Steps**

Dear Metro Arts Commissioners,

For many years now, Metro Arts has served as an agent for change in the Nashville landscape, forcing many predominantly (or exclusively) white-led institutions to confront problematic histories and enact policies that expand equity and inclusion. We are grateful that the organization has taken its stance, being the only Metro department with an equity statement, and we can see the growth happening, even if slowly, in the local arts and culture sector thanks to the mirror Metro Arts has asked arts organizations to hold up. Both writers of this letter have experienced personal growth thanks to this commitment from Metro Arts.

And, this history and public commitment to equity set forth by the Commission demands that Metro Arts hold that mirror up internally when considering further action regarding the repeated allegations of harm, discrimination, and retaliation being bravely brought to the forefront by former and current BIPOC Metro Arts employees.

In its thorough and eloquent [equity statement](#), Metro Arts professes the following beliefs:

- *“The ability to express, celebrate and champion cultural tradition and heritage is elemental to honest civic discourse and the well-being of democratic society.*
- *“Artists and cultural creators have a unique role in challenging inequity and imagining new and more just realities.*
- *“The health of the future cultural ecosystem is contingent on dynamic inclusionary practices that move towards cultural plurality.”*

According to the many complaints publicly filed by BIPOC staff members at Metro Arts, anyone who “challenges inequity” within the organization is experiencing retaliation and even being forced out by leadership. According to these claims, Metro Arts is not living up to its belief of upholding “dynamic inclusionary practices,” but is rather allowing exclusionary practices that are causing harm to Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latino, and other people of color on the staff – all while safeguarding the interests of those in leadership positions.

Throughout the “honest civic discourse” that these women have boldly launched, many white arts administrators have raised the question: “What if these claims aren’t racially motivated at all?” In her bestselling book *So You Want to Talk About Race*, author Ijeoma Oluo raises this question: “Is it really about race?” is the title of the very first chapter. On page 14, she outlines some “basic rules” for determining if an issue is about race:

1. *It is about race if a person of color thinks it is about race.*
2. *It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of color.*
3. *It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affect people of color.*

This book is the very first reading assigned to current members of the Racial Equity in Arts Leadership (REAL) Cohort co-hosted by Metro Arts and the Curb Center. Considering its prominent placement as a resource recommended by Metro Arts for local administrators and professionals, we would encourage the Commission to consider the allegations and subsequent actions (or, as of the writing of this letter: inactions) of Metro Arts leadership that have indeed fit into a broad pattern over the course of many years that clearly does disproportionately and differently affect people of color.

Just as Metro Arts set the example for going above and beyond in its issuance of the equity statement and just as it asks all of its grantees to consider, simply doing what is “within policy” or “legally correct” is not enough to create a culture of equity. It’s clear that change is needed. We join the calls of current and past Metro Arts employees and other concerned members of the local arts community for the following actions:

- Hire a third-party (and preferably BIPOC-led) consulting firm to conduct an external investigation into these claims
- Interrogate the use of Metro policies such as PIPs and comp time to consider how they can better align with the organization’s equity statement
- Implement recommendations from the Committee for Anti-Racism and Equity (CARE) that go beyond what is simply required by policy or law
- Amend the rules around Commission meetings so public citizens can speak to the Commission without the permission of the Chair for increased accountability

We look forward to joining with our local arts community to continue the process of creating a more equitable and inclusive cultural landscape for our city.

Sincerely,

Daniel Jones  
Producing Artistic Director  
Kindling Arts

Jessika Malone  
Founding Artistic Director  
Kindling Arts