

Monday, October 16, 2023

Stephan Jost

Michael and Sonja Koerner Director, and CEO

Art Gallery of Ontario

317 Dundas Street West

Toronto, Ontario

M5T 1G4

Dear Mr. Jost:

We have been down this road before.

As you likely heard, Wanda Nanibush has resumed posting inflammatory, inaccurate rants against Israel. Ms. Nanibush is certainly entitled to her opinions. If she was fundraising or promoting a vetted charity in aid of civilian Palestinians - we would genuinely applaud her.

Let's be clear: the Jewish community in Toronto unequivocally wants peace between Palestinians and Israelis. We also know that Hamas is a terrorist organization that needs to be dismantled and that misleading hate speech against Israel is unacceptable.

The reality is that Ms. Nanibush's stature and position at the AGO validate her hateful opinions. Her unchecked vitriol sends a message to her colleagues, the arts community, and the city that her language and viewpoint is correct and reasonable. It is not. Ms. Nanibush has been peddling these lies since 2016 (when she was published in Canadian Art magazine).

We don't accept the AGO's incapacity and refusal to contain this promotion of hateful disinformation by its employee. How would the AGO respond if a senior staff member had been spouting critical opinions and falsehoods against the Trans community for nearly a decade?

We are exhausted and disgusted by her dedication to repeating that Israel is involved with genocide and colonialism. While Ms. Nanibush is supposed to be an indigenous art expert, she perpetually denies that Jews are indigenous to Israel.

As a professional in a museum, she should know that archaeologists have unearthed hundreds of objects confirming ongoing Jewish presence in Israel dating back to the Iron Age (i.e., around 1000 years BCE). The holiest Jewish site in Israel is the Western Wall in Jerusalem - the remaining architectural fragment of the ancient Jewish temple constructed around 516 BCE.

Israel is a refugee state and not a colonizer. There was no "mother country" superpower or empire. Jews did not arrive in an armada with missionaries. Jews have never imposed the Hebrew language nor their religion on their neighbours in the Middle East. Ms. Nanibush needs some serious education on the Arab conquests of the 7th century to understand the religious hegemony of the region. This is not esoteric information.

The AGO should be a place of scholarship and diversity. Yet, a senior, public facing staff member is regularly spreading hateful misinformation, uses incendiary buzzwords and minimizes or ignores terrorism.

We ask that you make a personal commitment to the Jewish community to achieve the following:

1. adoption by the AGO of the IHRA definition of antisemitism
2. implementation by the AGO of mandatory, antisemitism sensitivity training for all members of the curatorial team

Diversity, inclusion, and community building are ideals that we share with the city of Toronto and the AGO. Ms. Nanibush could be promoting cross-cultural dialogue, peace, initiatives ... something healing and unifying. Instead, she continues to spew hateful and divisive misinformation.

Thank you for your support and for understanding.

Sincerely,

Tamara Fine and Darren Sukonick
IMAAC National Co-Chairs

Sara Angel, Lilly Fenig, and Troy Seldman
IMAAC Directors

Pearl Berman
IMAAC National Director