



Hosted by:



University College of the North

Thompson, MB

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Northern Manitoba Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy

Building Strong Communities
and Diversified Economy

An Update to the Community

Written by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge that northern Manitoba encompasses the traditional territories and homelands of many Indigenous peoples, in particular the Cree, Dene, Red River Métis, and Oji-Cree; Indigenous peoples have continuously maintained homelands in northern Manitoba since time immemorial. The First Nations in this area entered treaty relationships with the Crown which include signatories to treaties 4, 5, the treaty 5 adhesion, and treaty 6 and 10. Northern Manitoba includes lands that were and are the ancestral lands of the Inuit. The territory has also become home to other Indigenous peoples. We uphold the treaties and collaborate with all Indigenous peoples to share truth, reconciliation, and learning.

Organizers and Partners



We acknowledge the funding support of the Government of Canada, Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of Manitoba.

Organizing Committee:

- Doug Lauvstad (UCN)
- Jennifer Nabess (UCN)
- Inga Petri (Strategic Moves)
- Thom Sparling (Creative Manitoba)
- Andria Stephens (Mall of the Arts/ImagiNorthern)
- Kristi Cumming (event management)

Special appreciation and thanks to elder Jack Robinson for providing opening and closing remarks and blessing the food we ate each day; the Red Cree Singers who opened the conference each day with a drum and song circle; Andria Stephens and Steven Larocque, Arctic Gold Honey, for organizing the arts and cultural programming and Antoinette GreenOliph for emceeing and co-facilitating the gathering.

THE 2025 GATHERING: PROCEEDINGS

At its core, the Northern Arts & Food Workshop is a conference about cultivating a strong, resilient creative economy that honours the diverse traditions, cultures, and talents of Northern Manitoba. Once a year, this gathering brings together individual artists, makers, food harvesters and entrepreneurs, creatives, and organizers, as well as creative and cultural organizations from communities across Northern Manitoba, provincial arts service organizations, and First Nations, municipal, provincial and federal government representatives and funders.



Our common purpose is to learn, share and solve our challenges and connect the people active in the region's arts, creative, and food sectors so we can create better opportunities together. It is also an opportunity to review this strategy, provide updates on progress made and discuss new initiatives.

To make attending as accessible as possible, UCN covered all conference costs, so participants did not pay admission. Travel bursaries were available through Creative Manitoba's Food and Arts Project.

The gathering brought together about 80 participants including the visual arts and food market vendors.

Of note, this year's gathering was impacted by some environmental challenges. First, a washout along the Churchill railway line prevented several participants from joining the gathering. Then an out-of-control wildfire and evacuation order in The Pas/OCN resulted in attendees from those communities leaving at the end of the day on May 8. Since then, several Northern Manitoban communities impacting thousands of residents have been evacuated due to one of the earliest and most severe wildfire seasons on record. These extreme weather events, exacerbated by climate change, are becoming more frequent in Canada and the world over. These impacts are as serious as they are disruptive. They require a focussed and determined effort by all to adapt to and to mitigate. The arts and creative sectors along with the agri-food sector are as deeply impacted as any other human endeavours.



Keynote presentation by The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean. Madame Jean was accompanied by Jean-Daniel Lafond, her husband and co-founder and co-chair of the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, and Edward Matwawana, Executive Director.

The gathering was headlined by The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, former Governor General of Canada and the co-founder and co-chair of the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, with her husband, Jean-Daniel Lafond. Her inspiring keynote wove her messages together with the topics and events in Northern Manitoba and served as a profoundly moving call-to-action. Her full speech is appended to this report.



Participants speak

"Michaëlle Jean was asked, 'what did you learn from your parents?' She threw her arms wide and replied, 'I fear nothing. I fear no one!'"

Participants speak

"I love how down to earth Michaëlle Jean was, and her hope for cultures to be intertwined as we all strive for reconciliation and understanding and participation."

Elder and Knowledge Keeper Dr. Albert McLeod is a Status Indian with ancestry from Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and the Metis communities of Cross Lake and Norway House. He has over thirty years of experience as a human rights activist and was one of the founders of the 2-Spirited People of Manitoba. In his keynote, he reflected on the intersection of northern Cree artistic aesthetics and those of Scottish families who worked in the Hudson's Bay Company fur trade at the turn of the 20th century. Dr. McLeod described the influence that his grandmother, Mary Madeline Moose, had on mentoring his journey into the art field as well as the photographic record that her husband, Albert Bethune McIvor, created to preserve the history of the North. The merging of these distinct worldviews has created generations of successful artists and social activists who contribute to cultural preservation and reconciliation.



Participants speak

"Dr. McLeod's stories were very memorable."

Representatives from Northern Manitoba connected with the ImagiNorthern initiative shared highlights, accomplishments, and challenges from the past year. Those five presentations were:

- *Conducting Change: Growing ImagiNorthern* by Crystal Kolt and Fiona Rettie, ImagiNorthern
- *Remote Arts Infrastructure is Feasible: Churchill Creative Hub* by Kyle Dingwall and Claudia Grill, Churchill Creative Collective
- *Food, Culture and Community* by Lester Balfour, Norway House Cree Nation, and Dr. Asfia Kamal, Thompson, MB, and Cheryl Antonio, Northern Manitoba Food, Culture & Community Collaborative
- *Growing Pains and Gains: The Mall for the Arts Story so far* by Andria Stephens, Mall of the Arts
- *Dreaming Big and Bold: The North Central Canada Centre for Arts and Environment* by Lyn Brown, City of Flin Flon and Rachelle Kirouac, Urban Systems

Darcy Penner, a Management Consultant from Winnipeg presented on *Creating and Sustaining Strength through Networks*. Inga Petri facilitated round tables and a workshop titled *By the North, In the North, For the North – A Progress Report on the Northern Manitoba Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy*. Through the *Ask the Room Open Mic* opportunity, we also heard from Volker Beckmann, Spirit Way Inc., about the feasibility study that was undertaken about a decade ago for the creation of an Indigenous Arts Centre in Thompson. This project has not proceeded but remains a valuable potential addition to the infrastructure opportunities discussed at the conference.

Public funders and other support organizations participated in roundtable conversations to share information about their programs, funding opportunities and how to access them. The gathering provided ample space for conversations, arts and cultural programming and networking throughout.

The gathering agreed that the 2024 *Northern Manitoba Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy* included all the necessary elements and shared how their work connected to the strategy and could expand upon it.

How to Read the Report

This update to the *Northern Manitoba Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy* captures the results of these conversations as well as presentations throughout the gathering.

This document replaces the 2023 Action Plan and the 2024 version of the Strategy.

This document has three main sections:

1. The updated *Northern Manitoba Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy* for implementation by ImagiNorthern, the conference participants and the initiatives and organizations they are part.
2. Progress report on the activities that were implemented that respond to the 2024 strategy
3. The keynote address by The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean

All Northern Arts Workshop participants and anyone in any community across Northern Manitoba can use this document as a reference, an inspiration, and a plan toward concerted action.

At the next *Northern Arts and Food Workshop*, we intend to again share progress made and set priorities for action for the next year.

NORTHERN MANITOBA ARTS AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES STRATEGY

This mission, values and strategic directions were accepted by the 2025 conference participants.

A Shared Mission

To make life better in Northern Manitoba, we embrace a wholistic Indigenous worldview and are guided by our no-limits innovative spirit. We nurture inclusive arts, creative and cultural communities, so they can play a profound role in a thriving and diverse economy. Our priority is the well-being of artists, makers, producers, and communities, while honouring and making known the world over the rich tapestry of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, languages, and creative expressions across the North.

Shared Values

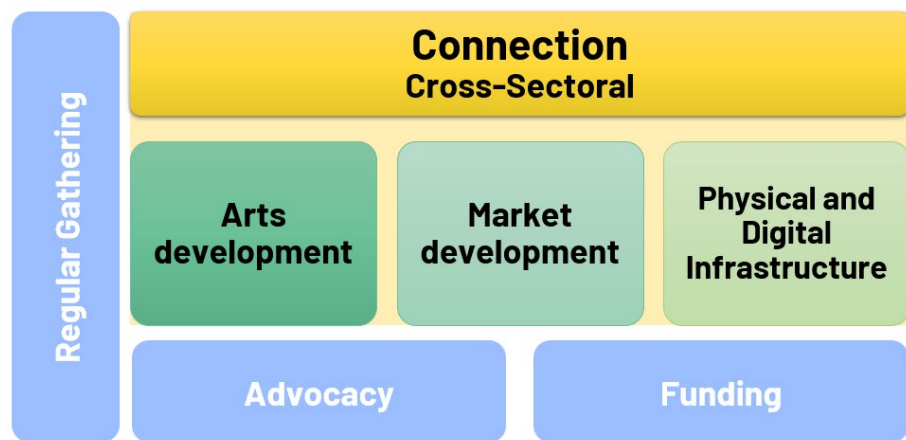
- ❖ Respect
- ❖ Reciprocity
- ❖ Responsibility
- ❖ Relevance
- ❖ Relationships
- ❖ Inclusion
- ❖ Collaboration

Strategy-at-a-Glance

Building an inclusive and thriving arts and cultural sector means we are connected to each other, we share knowledge and resources, we nurture arts development through training for artists, food and cultural workers, we develop markets that can support the livelihood of artists, makers and producers, and we gain access to or build the digital and physical infrastructure we need to pursue our work across the North.

The three underlying mechanisms required to realize this Strategy are:

1. Regular gatherings, and conferences and exchanges
2. Focused advocacy to elevate these sectors in the eyes of funders and governments.
3. Sufficient base funding for Northern Manitoban organizations and initiatives to implement this Strategy.



Organizing in Partnership

There are several groups and organizations that have been working in an *ad hoc* partnership to make life better for individuals and for communities through the arts, culture and food over these past few years. This emergent eco-system of organizations includes those with provincial mandates and located in Winnipeg and regional groups in Northern Manitoba. Together, they are offering leadership and support that are the essential activators for this *Northern Manitoba Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy*.

At the core, there is a clear understanding that this work is:

By the North • For the North • In the North

Northern Manitoba-based local arts councils, arts and cultural organizations, creative hubs, maker spaces, artists, makers, producers, and community animateurs are key to realizing this plan.



ImagiNorthern, incubated by the Flin Flon Arts Council, is an emerging Northern Manitoba initiative led by Northerners, for Northerners. ImagiNorthern secured a first round of funding for 2023-2024 from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of Manitoba. In late 2024 it received a new round of funding covering approximately two years, from the Canada Council for the Arts to continue its work of coordinating regional support for local activities. As such ImagiNorthern has been able to hire a new project manager and Champions coordinator and in the spring 2025 is further evolving its community-based approach to regional coordination empowering local action. Among its accomplishments in its first 3 years are:

- Commissioned a base line study of the arts sector in Northern Manitoba in 2022.
- Developed an initial Northern Champions network.
- Created a *Shop-in-the-Box* system including a mobile StarLink satellite internet toolkit available in the communities through the Northern Champions.
- Collaborated with the Uptown Emporium, operated by the Flin Flon Arts Council, as a physical storefront and an e-commerce website that creates market access for artists, makers and producers.
- Began a regional cultural asset mapping survey and contributed to the Creative Manitoba Arts Directory.
- Initiated exploration of regional food products within select depots.
- Participated in organizing the Northern Arts Workshops through its local champions in Flin Flon, The Pas/OCN and Thompson.
- Adopted this Strategy as a blueprint for its ongoing activities.



UCN has been taking the lead and supplying the budget for organizing the Northern Arts and Food Workshop in Flin Flon/Baker's Narrows in 2023, The Pas in 2024, and Thompson, MB in 2025.

UCN, as the North's only post-secondary institution, plays a unique role in education, training, and professional development through its campuses in Northern and Indigenous communities. It "strives to reflect the cultural diversity and Indigenous reality of Northern Manitoba."

"Recognizing that a strong Manitoba depends on a strong north, UCN will partner with industry and communities in programming, research, and economic development activities, including facilitating participation of northerners in the digital economy. UCN will play a leading role in steering the north towards greater prosperity and greater resilience in an ever-changing world."

(<https://www.ucn.ca/about-ucn/>)



Creative Manitoba is a provincial cultural human resources sector council that provides entrepreneurship training and mentorship opportunities for artists to help them sustain themselves creatively and financially.

Creative Manitoba has been an active organizer for the Northern Arts and Food Workshop as well as providing direct support and guidance to ImagiNorthern and Northern Manitoba arts and creative industries. In 2024, they initiated the *Northern Arts and Food Project* in collaboration with Food and Beverage Manitoba, to increase their capacity to support the creative arts and agri-food sectors in northern Manitoba. This project has received renewed funding for 2025 to 2027 from the province.



Manitoba Arts Network is the provincial arts service organization for visual and performing arts organizations in rural and Northern Manitoba. Manitoba Arts Network supports arts organizations by fostering a collaborative arts marketplace and ecosystem, connects artists with communities and contributes to the economic capacity, and health and social well-being of rural and Northern Manitobans.

It has been an active supporter and participant on the Advisory Group of ImagiNorthern; as well as serving its Northern members for more than 40 years.



Food and Beverage Manitoba is an industry association that helps Manitoba's food and beverage industry achieve its full creative and competitive potential.

It conducted a study of the food sector in Northern Manitoba during 2023 that found similar challenges as the arts and creative sector experiences. There was also considerable overlap already in Northern communities between people working or volunteering in the arts and cultural sector, who are also thinking about food as a cultural good, food sovereignty in the North and market access for Northern food products. Together with Creative Manitoba, they initiated the *Northern Arts and Food Project* to increase their capacity to support the creative arts and agri-food sectors in northern Manitoba.



Manitoba Legal Clinic for the Arts, operated by the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Law, provides free legal advice for artists, creatives, and arts organization. It has sent a delegation to the Northern Arts Workshop in 2024 and 2025 to make connections and provide information on its services.

Strategic Directions

Each of these major areas of activity has a number of related action items. There are several ways to achieve implementation over time. In some cases, specific community or organization can take the lead. In other cases, ImagiNorthern is the ideal group to spearhead the work, while always staying true to its grassroots nature; in other cases, local organizations or provincial service organization may be well positioned to facilitate implementation. Determining the specific implementation priorities, timelines, financial and human resources needed are in the purview of the ad hoc partners and Northern Arts and Food Workshop participants, their organizations and communities.

1. Cross-Sectoral Approach

Northern Manitoba has many individuals and organizations that work in several roles and sectors at once. Artists are also municipal administrators, arts administrators are also food entrepreneurs, videographers and film makers are also musicians, retail spaces are also places for arts workshops. Given that remoteness generates similar challenges across the arts, creative, cultural and agri-food sectors, ideally connections and solutions are shared across these sectors. That cross-sectorial approach must be inclusive of not-for-profit organizations, businesses, social enterprise, municipal and Indigenous governments.

There must be an emphasis on continuing to develop and nurture relationships with Indigenous organizations, groups and individuals from all Northern Manitoba First Nations as well as Métis and Inuit communities.

2. Connection: Build Up the ImagiNorthern Community of Practice

After a period without funding, ImagiNorthern has received a substantial grant to carry forward development of its Phase 2 in elevating the arts and creative sectors in Northern Manitoba. This has resulted in hiring both a Project Manager and a Champions Coordinator, both resident in Churchill, MB in the spring of 2025 for 18 to 24 months. As part of this next phase, ImagiNorthern will continue the work to develop governance mechanisms that suit the regional coordination and funding for local initiatives and projects.

- Develop and maintain regular regional communications mechanisms to stay connected, share information about local and regional activities, share resources, ask for and get help, identify common needs and advance this Strategy and its related activities.
- ImagiNorthern organizes a regular meet-up via online video chat or in person:
 - a. To bring together interested individuals from Northern Manitoba communities around common goals and challenges.
 - b. To strengthen connections, trust and collaboration within and across communities
- Partner with Indigenous artists, elders and knowledge keepers to reach indigenous communities more effectively and collaborate effectively.
- Partner with Creative Manitoba to continue to update the Cultural Resource Mapping project and the Northern Manitoba Artists Directory.
- Develop access to needed resources in communities across Northern Manitoba.

3. Arts Development: Knowledge Transfer, Skills Development and Celebrations

- Build capacity for sustained training and professional development of artist's practices including encouraging inter-generational teaching and learning by doing.
- Deliver or coordinate training to be delivered from qualified providers, partnering with ImagiNorthern, UCN, Creative Manitoba, Food and Beverage Manitoba, Indigenous governments and community organizations and more, including *Managing Your Arts Career*, and *Getting Export Market Ready*.
- Engage full range of local institutions, from museums to libraries and education, in arts and creative development.
 - a. Work with municipalities and First Nations government to develop arts and cultural plans and policies.
 - b. Develop multi-cultural celebrations that resonate with increasingly diverse populations and are inclusive of art, music, food.
 - c. Develop youth-engaged arts and creative programs including in schools.
- Community Theatre can be a low-barrier vehicle for creation and production, with a new initiative to be established in Churchill, and/or a regional theatre company. That Theatre group can offer low budget activities as well as full professional theatre productions including:
 - a. Play reading series (Digital and in-person).
 - b. Community-based devised theatre to tell local stories.
 - c. Creation and support of local theatre companies.

4. Market Development

- Collaborations among arts, creative, cultural organizations, and food entrepreneurs on market access and increased connectivity to Southern Manitoba, across Canada and the world – i.e. bring the North to the world – in partnership with provincial organizations such as Creative Manitoba, Food and Beverage Manitoba and the Manitoba Arts Network.
- Build a robust community-based cultural tourism program for Northern Manitoba, i.e. bring the world to the North.
- Ensure understanding of current artists rights regimes and changes needed, such as artists re-sale rights and support those legislative efforts nationally (CARFAC)
- Explore establishing a collaborative brand (e.g. *Authentic Northern Manitoba*) and marketing program to better reach export markets outside of Northern Manitoba.
- Run workshops and mentoring on pricing one's art, performances, and other creative and cultural products and marketing them effectively in various target markets.
- Collect and share legal information about exports of art and food product, Indigenous products.
- Begin implementation of the existing export marketing plan for Germany and expand to other markets as export growth permits.
- Develop a strategic partnership with Export Canada, Trade Commissioner Service to support the export market plan.

5. Infrastructure Development

- Develop mechanisms that can be shared across communities to support artist residencies, connecting communities with professional artists.
- Develop viable spaces for sustainable artist residencies programs and for creative production and dissemination.
- Actively support and promote built arts and cultural infrastructure initiatives in Flin Flon, Churchill, Thompson and The Pas, as well as other communities that come forward.
- Examine underutilized existing infrastructure in local communities across the North that may be available or suitable for artistic or creative production or community use in general; use pilot projects to develop proof of concepts as needed.
- Identify other infrastructure-related needs assessments or feasibility studies for major developments, and secure funding for this work.
- Continue to develop and vigorously market the Uptown Emporium's eCommerce website to audiences outside Northern Manitoba.
- Other types of infrastructure are needed to support artists and other independent cultural workers, such as a Healthcare Co-op/ Artists Group Plan for artists / makers / cultural workers to provide an alternative to private health plans.

6. Funding

- Update the ImagiNorthern business case to pursue longer-term federal and provincial government funding.
- Create a detailed and diversified fund development plan that supports the ongoing implementation of this Strategy and the groups implementing.
- Develop new revenue streams to maintain and grow the operations of ImagiNorthern, including considering revenue sharing agreements with the Uptown Emporium, and service delivery agreements with provincial organizations that require access to and connection in the North.
- Collaborate on funding proposals, both regionally and provincially that benefit ImagiNorthern and local communities.
- Create and update a listing of services, resources, and funding that artists or makers and arts or cultural and food entrepreneurs can access.
- Develop new arts policies for business sectors, such as mining or real estate, to encourage them to give back to the communities, like the "1% for public art" bylaws and policies that have been adopted in municipalities across Canada.
- Encourage creation of an intersectoral Northern funding table to discuss and put in place mechanisms to support the broader goals and specific initiatives in Northern Manitoba.

7. Advocacy

- Develop an advocacy plan and local implementations to champion the role of arts and culture in every community.
- Champion the creation of funded cultural plans or policies at all levels of government.
- Make the case for supporting adequately paid staff positions in arts organizations.
- Promote fair pay for artists, artists re-sale rights and intellectual property protections.
- Promote diversified economies in the region and in local communities with primary industries mixed with arts, culture, and tourism.

8. Annual Gatherings

Connecting to the outcomes of the first three annual Northern Arts Workshops in Flin Flon, The Pas and Thompson, the ad hoc partnership will and interested parties will:

- Determine the key organizing group for 2026 and budget for the next gathering.
- Ensure continuity and learnings from the initial series of gatherings are carried forward.
- Maintain free registration to the gathering including food, child-minding and elder care services, and secure travel subsidies.
- Maintain and update terms of reference for the Local Host Committee to work on local arts and cultural activities in concert with the conference organizing committee.

PROGRESS REPORT ON THE 2024 STRATEGY

Legend

Green – Strong Progress has been made, and future action is clear, and leader identified.

Yellow – Action identified is clear, but resources needed to implement.

Blue – No or little specific action has been taken yet, but the area may be important in the future.

Cross-Sectoral Approach

Northern Manitoba has many individuals and organizations that work in several roles and sectors at once. Artists are also municipal administrators, arts administrators are also food entrepreneurs, videographers and film makers are also musicians, retail spaces are also places for arts workshops. Given that remoteness generates similar challenges across the arts, creative, cultural and agri-food sectors, ideally connections and solutions are shared across these sectors. That cross-sectorial approach must be inclusive of not-for-profit organizations, businesses, social enterprise, municipal and Indigenous governments.

This approach is evident in most initiatives, from Mall of the Arts, NCCCAE feasibility and the Churchill Creative Hub feasibility study and pilot project. The Northern Arts Workshop has been including food related topics and experiences as they share many of the same issues as arts and creative endeavours. The Food and Art project is another example of working across sectors.

There continues to be strong interest in strengthening tourism connections.

The 2025 gathering reinforced the desire to ensure strong Indigenous participation and benefit for Indigenous Nations through relationship building, forging connections with elders and knowledge keepers as well as working closely with Indigenous artists, makers and producers.

The gathering also saw representation from Immigrant settlement workers which reinforced the idea that new immigrant are not merely workers, but active community members looking for connection, participation and integration.

Few formal connections exist in the form of memoranda of understanding (MOUS), formal joint ventures or partnership agreements between any of the current partners.

Connection: Build Up the ImagiNorthern Community of Practice

- ImagiNorthern group organizes a regular meet-up via Zoom:
 - a. To bring together interested individuals from Northern Manitoba communities who work in the arts, creative, cultural and food sector.
 - b. To stay connected, share information about local and regional activities, share resources, ask for and get help, identify common needs.
 - i. Content of meetups determined by the interests and needs of the participants.
 - ii. Frequency determined by participants. ImagiNorthern champions participate in these meetings to encourage cross-pollination among people and communities.
 - iii. Agendas and record of proceedings/minutes to circulate post-meeting.

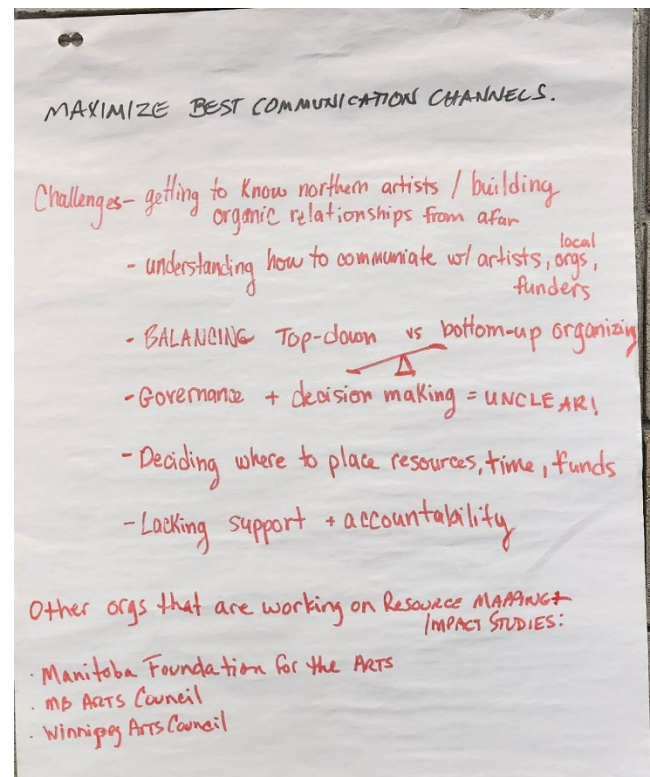
- Promote use of the existing Facebook Group
- Establish a regular, regional eNewsletter / printed Newsletter to maintain regional communications about activities, events and advancement of this Strategy and related activities.
- ImagiNorthern champions or local community members convene regular in-person meet-ups (with sharing food as an essential part of convening) in their local communities to share information and resources, share about local artistic or creative endeavours, and nurture a sense of community and support for artists and makers.
- Continue the Cultural Resource Mapping project and develop a Northern Manitoba artists directory (Creative Manitoba, ImagiNorthern)
- Identify additional Champions in more communities and grow the impact of ImagiNorthern across the entire region.

ImagiNorthern's interrupted funding means there has not been as much progress in terms of forming an effective community of practice. In March 2025, a new project manager and champions coordinator has been hired. In May 2025, ImagiNorthern reported that it is working on the governance questions to ensure that as a regional initiative it has accountable and responsible mechanisms for local community decision-making. Once that greater clarity is achieved, community-based champions will be hired.

Creative Manitoba will launch the Artists Directory in June 2025.

Manitoba Arts Network continues to work across Northern and rural Manitoba to help develop a strong visual and performing arts sector and eco-system.

Several Manitoba organizations are engaged in resource mapping with various goals: Manitoba Foundation for the Arts, Winnipeg Arts Council and Manitoba Arts Council.



Arts Development: Knowledge Transfer, Skills Development and Celebrations

- Build capacity for sustained training and development of artist's practices including encouraging inter-generational teaching and learning by doing.
- ImagiNorthern champions either deliver training or coordinate training to be delivered from qualified providers, partnering with UCN, Creative Manitoba or Food and Beverage Manitoba.

- Community Theatre can be a low-barrier vehicle for creation and production, with a new initiative to be established in Churchill, and/or a regional theatre company. That Theatre group can offer low budget activities as well as full theatre productions including:
 - Play reading series (Digital and in-person).
 - Community-based devised theatre to tell local stories.
 - Creation and support of local theatre companies.
- Develop multi-cultural celebrations that resonate with immigrant populations as well as and are inclusive of art, music, food.
- Develop youth-engaged arts and creative programs, approach Frontier Collegiate to reach youth, in-school programming.
- Work with municipalities and First Nations government to develop arts and cultural policies.
- Engage full range of local institutions, from museums to libraries and education, in arts development.

Creative Manitoba and ImagiNorthern collaborated on multi-day training for Champions in Churchill, MB in spring 2025.

There may be opportunities to deliver existing training programs for Career management for artists through UCN and other local partners.

There is a need for extensive training where people live; in municipalities, on reserve, using land-based approaches, and sharing both artistic and career development skills.

No new activities have been undertaken relative to theatre development, celebrations, new youth-engaged programs, municipalities and local institutions.

Market Development

- Work at the intersection of arts, creativity, culture, and food to build a robust tourism program, i.e. bring the world to the North.
- Collaborations among arts, creative, cultural organizations, and food entrepreneurs on market access and increased connectivity to Southern Manitoba, across Canada and the world – i.e. bring the North to the world – in partnership with provincial organizations such as Creative Manitoba, Food and Beverage Manitoba and the Manitoba Arts Network.
- Ensure understanding of current artists rights regimes and changes needed, such as artists re-sale rights and support those legislative efforts nationally (CARFAC)
- Establish a collaborative brand (e.g. *Authentic Northern Manitoba*) and marketing program to reach export markets outside of Northern Manitoba.
- Run workshops and mentoring on pricing one's art, performances, and other creative and cultural products and marketing them effectively in various target markets.
- Collect and share legal information about exports of art and food product, Indigenous products.
- Begin implementation of the existing export marketing plan for Germany and expand to other markets as export growth permits.

- Develop a strategic partnership with Export Canada, Trade Commissioner Service to support the export market plan.

The Churchill Creative Collective holds pop up markets during main tourism season. The Mall of the Arts in Thompson uses a commission system to create a market local and Northern artists, makers and producers. The Uptown Emporium has elevated the opportunities for artists through its online ecommerce site.

There are great untapped opportunities to elevate the artists, producers and makers through cultural tourism projects and experiences.

Much more work is needed across all municipalities and Indigenous governments to plan and develop markets.

Export marketing has not been a focus, yet, as the eco-system is not entirely ready for it. There needs to be a larger organization, e.g. a more mature ImagiNorthern, to spearhead export marketing and distribution. No work has been done on exploring a shared Authentic Northern Manitoba brand.

Infrastructure Development

- Develop viable spaces for sustainable artist residencies programs and for creative production.
 - a. City of Flin Flon and Flin Flon Arts Council are exploring the suitability of the Whitney House for artist residencies.
 - b. Mall of the Arts is exploring development of their new workshop and retail space in Thompson, as well as partnering with Skills Shop North (previously North Forge North).
 - c. Creative Collective in Churchill will undertake a comprehensive study during 2024 to establish feasibility of a new creative hub in Churchill.
 - d. Support the next phase of development for the Northern Central Canada Centre for Arts and the Environment (NCCCAE), spearheaded by the City of Flin Flon, to secure land and capital funding.
- Examine underutilized existing infrastructure in local communities across the North that may be available or suitable for artistic or creative production or community use in general; use pilot projects to develop proof of concepts as needed.
- Identify other needs assessment and feasibility study opportunities to enable major developments, with an emphasis on low cost to artists to use spaces, and secure funding to undertake this work.
- Develop mechanisms that can be shared across communities to support artist residencies, connecting communities with professional artists.
- Continue to develop and vigorously market the Uptown Emporium's eCommerce website to audiences outside Northern Manitoba.
- Other types of infrastructure are needed to support artists and other independent cultural workers, such as a Healthcare Co-op/ Artists Group Plan for artists / makers / cultural workers to provide an alternative to private health plans.

City of Flin Flon and Flin Flon Arts Council has purchased the Whitney House and staff house to renovate and develop for artist residencies and other activities.

Mall of the Arts has moved into a paid space after its first year of operating on a *pro bono* basis. This shift will require support to remain viable.

Creative Collective in Churchill undertook the feasibility study for a new creative hub in Churchill during 2024 and is embarking on a pilot project with the local Library starting in the spring of 2025.

The Northern Central Canada Centre for Arts and the Environment (NCCCAE) is within the project portfolio of the City of Flin Flon. It is negotiating a land purchase for Crown land and working on the next stages of planning.

The Indigenous Arts Centre complex that was studied about a decade ago by Spirit Way Inc. was brought forward at the 2025 Gathering again and there was some interest in revisiting this initiative.

Other elements, like promoting the Uptown Emporium ecommerce site, or developing other infrastructure elements have not received much attention in the past year.

In general, there is a far greater role for municipalities to fully support major arts or cultural infrastructure. Infrastructure funding may become more readily available again due to Canada's revitalization of its economy, which means 'shovel-ready' projects may be easier to get funded within the period.

In general, the high price of infrastructure in the North makes successful completion of projects and their ongoing operation much more complicated and more concerted work is needed across communities, governments and funders. No real coordination, or common vision has been developed in that regard.

Funding

- Create a business case to pursue longer-term federal and provincial government funding.
- Create a detailed fund development plan that supports the ongoing implementation of this Strategy and the groups implementing it through diversified revenue streams.
- Develop new revenue streams to maintain and grow the operations of ImagiNorthern, including considering revenue sharing agreements with the Uptown Emporium, and service delivery agreements with provincial organizations that require access to and connection in the North.
- Collaborate on proposals, both regionally and provincially:
 - a. Food and Beverage Manitoba/ Creative Manitoba are preparing a proposal for the continuation of the *Northern Arts and Food Project*.
 - b. ImagiNorthern / Flin Flon Arts Council are preparing a Canada Council for the Arts proposal to the *Cultivate* program with a deadline of June 19.
 - c. Province of Manitoba has several relevant departments to discuss support for ImagiNorthern, as well as activities in specific Northern communities: Sport, Culture, Heritage and Tourism; Economic Development, Investment and Trade; Agriculture, Indigenous Economic Development; Municipal and Northern Relations
- Create and update a listing of services, resources, and funding that artists or makers and arts or cultural and food entrepreneurs can access.

- Develop new arts policies for business sectors, such as mining or real estate, to encourage them to give back to the communities, like the “1% for public art” bylaws and policies that have been adopted in municipalities across Canada that require real estate developers to invest in public art as part of development projects.
- Encourage creation of an intersectoral Northern funding table to discuss and put in place mechanisms to support the broader goals and specific initiatives in Northern Manitoba.

ImagiNorthern and the Food and Art project both have received 2-year funding agreements in late 2024, early 2025. There are significant resources available through those agreements.

All other elements have not been actioned in the past year.

Advocacy

- Develop an advocacy plan and local implementations to champion the role of arts and culture in every community.
- Champion the creation of funded cultural plans or policies at all levels of government.
- Promote fair pay for artists, artists re-sale rights and intellectual property protections.
- Promote diversified economies in the region and in local communities with primary industries mixed with arts, culture, and tourism.

The ImagiNorthern initiative was recognized and celebrated at the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba at a dinner at Government House on March 25, 2025. This celebration was attended by dignitaries including the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba, Anita Neville the Grand Chief Garrison Settee representing Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) Inc as well as provincial ministers.



The specific advocacy goals have not been actioned so far.

Third Annual Gathering in Thompson, MB in May 2025

- Promote the value of attending future gatherings in the arts, creative, cultural and food sectors.
- Share delegate lists with delegates to help in promoting the gatherings.
- Encourage participants to share their positive experience with others in their community.
- Ensure child minding, elder care, travel bursaries and local transportation support is available throughout the conference.
- Maintain free registration to the gathering including food and child-minding services.
- Set up terms of reference for a Local Host Committee to work in concert with UCN’s organizing committee on local activities and activations.

The gathering took place as per the summary at the beginning of this report.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
MICHAËLLE JEAN

2025-05-07

**Keynote Address at the
Northern Arts Workshop, Thompson Manitoba
by The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean**

[Check against delivery]

Tānisi.

Boozhoo

Edlánet'é

Dahneh Dha'

Greetings expressing my utmost respect for the languages spoken by the descendants of the first peoples whose land this is...

Madame Mayor, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, artists, creators, visionaries, leaders from across this magnificent North—what a profound joy, what an honour it is to be with you here today at the invitation of the University College of the North.

Chers amis,
Dear friends,

Before I begin, I want to share something that struck me deeply as I arrived in Winnipeg on Monday. My travelling companions—please meet my husband Jean-Daniel Lafond, who is a philosopher, filmmaker, a writer, and please meet Edward Matwawana who is the Executive Director of the Michaëlle Jean Foundation—they were like me profoundly moved to see the streets downtown filled with a sea of people, all marching for justice and recognition for missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited people.

It was Red Dress Day, marking the one-year anniversary of the landfill search that finally brought some answers for the family and relations of Morgan Harris.

We saw a testament to the strength and heart of a people. If we hadn't had a meeting waiting for us, we would have joined that march without hesitation.

I want to say from the bottom of my heart: to Cambria Harris, and to everyone keeping the flame of justice alive—you have my deepest admiration.

Your voices, your determination, your unwavering push for dignity and truth—all your efforts are changing the system for the better, for greater humanity.

You remind us all : what true courage and solidarity look like.

Each time I come to Manitoba, I realize how much Manitoba holds within it : the beating heart ... the true promise of this country.

And so, as I stand before you today, I am overcome with emotion...

Also, as we arrived on campus, I had the chance—while sitting in the library—to admire the sculpture at the main entrance. I was struck by the words it bears and the message they convey:

Courage. Honesty. Humility. Wisdom. Love. Truth. Respect.

These are values that stand as pillars of integrity and respect.

And I am filled with gratitude, deep admiration, and a profound sense of kinship to be welcomed into this space—your space—under the auspices of such wisdom and openness.

To be here, on the traditional lands of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, to gather in this circle of creativity, solidarity, and shared purpose, fills me with hope.

Because what you are doing here is rare.

It is powerful.

It is beautiful.

It is, in fact, visionary.

You are coming together—across communities, across identities, across histories marked by both hardship and endurance.

You are choosing partnership over isolation... hope over despair...

And I say to you, with all my heart: in these difficult, uncertain times, this is not just encouraging—it is extraordinary.

Je dois vous dire combien ce que vous faites est réjouissant, à quel point vos projets sont formidables et vos objectifs, sont porteurs d'espoir.

Let me tell you how wonderful the things you are doing, how wonderful your projects, and how heartening your goals.

I've also been told that you believe in the power of the arts as an important component for development.

You are actually proving that the arts are not a luxury—they are a necessity.

That the arts are not ornamental—they are foundational.

That the arts are not simply a reflection of development—they are development.

You are showing what it means to imagine sustainable growth.

Dans le Nord, pour le Nord, avec les peuples du Nord, vous créez du vrai, du vivant et de nouveaux possibles.

In the north, for the north, with the people of the north, you create what is real, what is alive and what is possible.

And so I am here—not only as a guest... not simply as the 27th Governor General of Canada—but also as your ally, your accomplice, your fellow believer in the unstoppable power of the arts.

Throughout my life, I have met many artists who have told me—sometimes softly, sometimes urgently—“The arts saved my life.”

It is not a metaphor. It is a profound truth.

I think of Elisapee Ishulutaq, the remarkable Inuit elder from Pangnirtung.

She created the monumental drawing titled *In His Memory* to break the silence around youth suicide in her community.

“I drew it,” she said, “so that young people would not choose suicide as a solution.”

Her art was not entertainment—it was an act of protection, a calling back to life, a refusal to lose another child.

I think of Jeremy Dutcher, the brilliant Wolastoqiyik musician who, listening to the ghostly voices of his ancestors on wax cylinders from a century ago, could not bear to leave them silent.

He sang with them, alongside them, weaving their voices into his own.

His music is not simply performance—it is resistance, reclamation, revival.

I think of Lindsay Adams, a Black artist with Cerebral Palsy, who says: *“My art is both my peace and my protest... It is my grounding and my uplift... It is my voice and my vice...”*

I think of Jaime Black, whose REDress Project draped haunting red dresses across public spaces, compelling us to witness the absence... the loss... the ongoing violence against missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

I think of Tiko Kerr, who, living with HIV since the 1980s, turned to painting as a way to defy despair... to claim life... to transform stigma into strength.

My husband Jean-Daniel Lafond, dit lui-même : « Les arts m'ont sauvé la vie. » he never stops talking about how the arts saved his life...

Born and raised in France, Jean-Daniel found his voice in poetry, philosophy, theatre, radio, and documentary film.

Through art, he built bridges, opened dialogues, challenged silences.

He continues to do so.

When he chose Quebec as his home, he brought a profound commitment to using art as a means to explore the human condition, to question injustice, to imagine other possibilities.

And when I became the 27th Governor General of Canada, it was Jean-Daniel who stood beside me—not simply as my partner, but as co-creator of a mandate that placed culture, creativity, people and the arts at the very heart of citizenship, democracy, and reconciliation.

Together, we travelled—not only along official routes, but to the margins ... to places often unseen ... to communities whose voices are too often unheard ...

And it is here, in Manitoba, in the North, that we find some of the most powerful expressions of art as a tool for healing, for justice, for transformation.

This vision of art as a vector of mass construction became the legacy project of our mandate: the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, devoted to supporting youth, the arts, and social change across Canada.

Ed Matwawana shares the same passion as a creator, musician, and ART-ivist in his own right. From his native Congo to his arrival in Nova Scotia, on to Ottawa, has devoted his life to community empowerment and development, through music and the arts. We are very fortunate to benefit from his many talents and extensive skill set.

We knew then, as we know now: every time we invest in the arts, we offer lifelines.

We invest in dignity. In belonging. In possibility.

And you, here in Northern Manitoba, you are proving this truth every day. You are showing Canada—and the world—that the North is not a deficit zone.

The North, a land of stunning beauty is also a wellspring of talent, innovation, strength, and cultural richness.

As one leader here told me: *“We are not waiting for others to define us... We know who we are... We know what we carry... We want to be seen and heard...”*

Seen and heard as art lovers but art enablers... artists and makers... performers and storytellers... sculptors and musicians... teachers and organizers... elders and youth... each weaving threads of creativity into the very fabric of your communities.

In Flin Flon : a town that has earned a national profile through the arts : the Arts council’s work has turned isolation into connection ... turned mining’s decline into culture’s rise.

In Churchill : artists are imagining new ways to welcome visitors—beyond the polar bear tours, they are creating experiences of learning, tasting, witnessing, and merging the arts and food of the North, rooted in community ... not exploitation.

In Thompson : the Mall for the Arts is making space—literally and symbolically—for artists to claim visibility, to build audience, to find home.

Across Brochet, Snow Lake, The Pas, The Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN), and so many more communities,

champions are stepping up: acting as mentors, talent scouts, connectors, trainers...

They are proving that leadership does not have to come from outside... It is already here... It lives in the North, for the North...

And this leadership is not waiting for permission.

It is building networks of solidarity and support ... weaving together artists ... food producers, educators, entrepreneurs, tourism operators.

Because as you have told me: food sovereignty and art sovereignty are intertwined.

As one elder said: *"We need art like we need food... Art nourishes the soul... Food nourishes the body... We cannot live without either."*

This vision is so bold, holistic, and generative. It sees the arts not as a side project—but as a vital infrastructure, a pillar of sustainability, of reconciliation, of community well-being.

It recognizes that in order for art to thrive, artists need space, resources, markets, mentorship, and recognition.

Just as food sovereignty requires land, knowledge, tools, and access : art sovereignty requires cultural space, teaching, sharing, and economies that honour creativity as work.

And so, from monthly Zoom calls during the isolation of the pandemic, to securing an environmental scan with Inga Petri... to launching ImagiNorthern... to winning support from the Canada Council's Innovation Fund : you have built

this network of champions—a decentralized, community-embedded leadership model that is drawing attention across Canada.

You are showing us a way forward: a way that centres the North... that centres Indigenous knowledge... that centres collective leadership... that centres the creative spirit as a force of persistence and resurgence.

And as we celebrate these incredible accomplishments, we must also acknowledge : the forces working against them.

Because we are living in times where the very engine of creative endeavours—empathy itself, along with curiosity for different experiences—are under attack.

We watch, with grave concern, as under the Trump regime in the United States, public observances of Black History, Indigenous heritage, Asian heritage, Pride, Women's History, Juneteenth, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, even Holocaust Remembrance Day are struck from calendars, erased from public life.

We watch as history itself becomes a battlefield.

As rights are rolled back... protections dismantled ... solidarities attacked.

And we understand: this is not confined to one country's soil... This is a global contagion.

It is a deliberate strategy of authoritarianism: divide, exclude, isolate, conquer.

It is no accident.

It is a deliberate attack on creative empathy—because creative empathy is the gateway to solidarity.

And solidarity is the foundation of any resistance to oppression.

Some try to convince us that empathy is dangerous. This is what President Trump says with deep contempt under the qualifier WOKE.

You will hear him and his representatives say that empathy leads us into weakness ... into what they call suicidal empathy.

What a distortion.

It is not empathy that leads us to ruin.

It is the absence of empathy that makes injustice possible.

It is the silencing of empathy that allows dehumanization to flourish.

And at a time when the very ideas of justice, equity, the recognition of diversity as cultural and economic wealth, the choice to include rather than exclude are themselves under attack...

Let us remain vigilant.

Let us remain mobilized.

Because we are not immune.

It remains clear, in Canada, that : full recognition of diversity as a human asset ... full recognition of equity as a condition of justice... full recognition of inclusion as a shared

responsibility, are still seen as essential components of human and economic development.

For the time being, Canada is going against the grain of what's happening there, without being totally immune.

Nevertheless some Canadian companies have already begun to abolish programs designed to counter decades of exclusion, and systems that keep injustice and discrimination in place.

how many other companies, universities and institutions are preparing to slash these programs and follow the ill wind blowing from the South?

This is why we must stay vigilant. We must hold the line. We must expand the space of empathy, equity, and inclusion—with even greater energy than we have before.

And so I say to you, artists, creators, community builders, visionaries: now more than ever, we need you.

We need you to open hearts and minds.

We need you to create spaces where empathy can breathe, where solidarity can take root, where humanity can flourish.

We need you to build a force of empathy so luminous, so undeniable, that it cannot be silenced.

Because empathy is not weakness.

Empathy is not folly.

Empathy is the heart of justice.

It is the engine of reconciliation.

It is the soil in which a more beautiful, more just world can grow.

Every mural, every song, every poem, every dance, every gathering like this one is an act of defiance... An act of resistance... An act of profound, transformative hope.

Let us be that hope. Let us be that light. Let us be that force.

The North is claiming its rightful place as a leader in Canada's cultural, economic, and social future.

It is precisely because we must stay vigilant...because we cannot take progress for granted, that we at the Michaëlle Jean foundation launched the National Black Canadians Summit—a national platform for solidarity and action, which I will return to in a moment.

This same vigilance, this same responsibility to make space for the truths of this land, guided me in my role as Governor General. Hence the priority we gave to the arts also as a conduit for innovative forms of diplomacy... Diplomacy at a human scale...

When I became the 27th Governor General of Canada, one of the first things Jean-Daniel and I knew was that we wanted to make visible, in every space we could, the truths, the histories, the living presence of the First Peoples of this land.

At Rideau Hall, at the very heart of officialdom and protocol, we chose to install a monumental work by Norval

Morrisseau, the great Anishinaabe artist, visionary, spiritual leader—a work entitled *Androgynie*.

We placed it where all would have to see it: heads of state, politicians, dignitaries, journalists, and citizens from every corner of the country and the world.

And I will never forget what happened. Everything began to unfold in front of that painting. Every official visit. Every ceremony. Every moment of reflection. Every oath. They all took on different (hues) HIYOUZ, greater sensitivity, as if under a very special light, a new spirit shone on everything we did.

Because *Androgynie* is not just a painting. It is a statement. It is a cosmology. It is a reminder, bold and unmistakable, that all things are interconnected—that the human, the animal, the plant, the spirit, the earth, the water, the sky are one.

Norval Morrisseau himself said:

“My art speaks and will continue to speak, transcending barriers of nationality, language and other forces that may be divisive, fortifying the greatness of the spirit that has always been the foundation of the Ojibwa people.”

And indeed, *Androgynie* spoke... Boldly... Unmistakably...

It spoke on the day that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada held a landmark ceremony at Rideau Hall.

On October 15, 2009, I had the profound honour of being named the first Honorary Witness of the TRC. It was there, beneath *Androgynie*, that I pledged to carry the truths of survivors, to never turn away from their stories, to make their voices heard.

On this day, I said:

“When the present doesn’t recognize the wrongs of the past, the future takes its revenge. For that reason, we must never, never turn away from the opportunity of confronting history together—the opportunity to right a historical wrong.”

Because the past does not disappear when we refuse to see it. It waits. It haunts. It claims its due.

But through truth-telling, through witnessing, through art, we begin the work of healing... We begin the work of transformation.

That is what *Androgynie* embodied. It stood there—not as a decoration, but as a disruption.

As a restoration. As a rebalancing of a space that for too long had erased Indigenous presence.

It was a reminder that every time we gather to witness, to listen, to create, to speak hard truths, we are not simply commemorating history—we are changing its course.

There it is, the power of the arts. Powerful, beautiful as truth and absolutely inescapable.

And this brings us to a deeper truth.

I want to take a moment to salute and acknowledge the work of Niigaan Sinclair, whose powerful book *Wînipêk*

dares us to see beneath the myths we have been told about this place.

Has anyone here read this important book?

Niigaan Sinclair reminds us that Jacques Cartier did not “discover” a new world—he intruded into a thriving, ancient world. A world already named Kanata by its people. A world built on relationships, reciprocity, care for land, water, animals, spirits, humans—all interconnected.

But Cartier could not see this. He could only see wealth, spices, gold, land to conquer. He marked his map “Canada”, believing he had found riches. He could not see the wealth already present in the relationships, the knowledge, the stewardship.

Niigaan Sinclair writes:

“Canada is a place of fantasy, a place of desire; a place ripe for what he could take, turn into profit, and sell.”

That delusion continues—from the fur trade to oil, from slavery to forced labour in residential schools, Canada’s wealth was built on extraction, exploitation, displacement.

And yet, as he reminds us:

“The riches of Canada lie not in imaginations of gold and spices—but in strong, healthy, and equal relationships with people, the land, and the world around us.”

This is the truth. And this is the story we must tell.

And as we tell the story of Canada—not the story of fantasy, but the story of reality—we must tell the truth about slavery.

Niigaan Sinclair reminds us that while Canadians love to point south, distancing themselves from slavery's horrors, slavery is Canada's history, too.

In *Wînipêk*, he traces how Manitoba's economy—indeed, Winnipeg itself—was built on the slave trade. From the Hudson's Bay Company's role in trafficking enslaved people and goods, to the profits of the fur trade built on the exploitation of Indigenous labour, to the unpaid, forced child labour that kept residential schools running well into the 20th century.

He writes:

“Before wagging (OUA GUING) a righteous finger at our southern neighbours, everyone should know that Manitoba's economy—and indeed Winnipeg as a city itself—was built on the slave trade.”

We must tell this truth.

In 2021, researchers Anne Lindsay and Karlee Sapoznik Evans uncovered archival evidence proving that children in Manitoba's residential schools were forced to perform so much unpaid labour to keep the schools afloat, it constituted slavery.

They wrote:

“Forced child labour and slavery, framed as ‘educational training,’ was foundational and central to the residential schools system operated by the Canadian government and churches.”

This is part of our history. It is not distant. It is not abstract. It is lived, embodied, carried in the memory of survivors, of families, of communities still healing today.

And so, when we gather to talk about the arts, about culture, about development, we cannot separate this conversation from the structures, the systems, the histories that have tried to erase, silence, and exploit.

But as Niigaan teaches us, Kanata endures.

Every inch, every policy, every word of this country is built on an Indigenous foundation.

Despite the erasures, despite the silences, Indigenous fingerprints are everywhere—in our languages, our stories, our land, our place names, our ways of knowing.

And it is in reclaiming these stories, these truths, these arts, that we begin to rebuild—not a Canada of fantasy, but a Canada of reality.

A Canada of relationship, reciprocity, and respect.

And you, here in the North, are showing the way.

Through the Northern Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy, through ImagiNorthern, through the Mall for the Arts, the Churchill Creative Hub, the North Central Canada Centre for Arts and Environment—you are showing what it means to build a creative economy rooted in your realities, your relationships, your histories, your futures.

You are proving that culture is not an accessory to development. Culture is development.

You are proving that the arts are not a cost—they are an investment.

And you are proving that reconciliation is not a project to be managed from the outside—it is a living practice, woven through every drum beat, every mural, every poem, every carving, every theatre workshop, every round dance.

And I want you to know: what you are doing here is being watched.

Not as spectacle. But as example. As inspiration.

The world needs more of what you are creating.

What you are building here, through all these initiatives and projects, through your collective vision, is not simply a plan—it is a declaration of interdependence.

You are building shared cultural infrastructure—in Thompson, in Flin Flon, in The Pas, in Snow Lake.

You are nurturing youth.

Reclaiming languages.

Connecting food sovereignty with cultural sovereignty.

You are weaving art, food, culture, identity, and economy into one finely crafted, multicoloured wampum.

You are showing what it means to harness the arts as a driver of health, of education, of economic development, of community cohesion, of sovereignty.

Your ImagiNorthern initiative is not just a network—it is a movement.

You are proving that we can build creative economies from the North—not by imposing models from the outside, but by nurturing the brilliance, the endurance, the knowledge that already lives here.

Tomorrow and the next day, you will deepen this work.

You will gather with the Red Cree Singers, grounding yourselves in song and drum.

You will listen to Elder Dr. Albert McLeod weave histories of Cree aesthetics and Scottish heritage.

You will witness presentations from Crystal Kolt and Fiona Rettie sharing the growth and vision of ImagiNorthern; from the Churchill Creative Hub team; from Andria Stephens and the Mall for the Arts; from Lyn Brown and the vision for the North Central Canada Centre for Arts and Environment.

You will open the mic... You will ask hard questions... You will dream bold dreams... You will map next steps... You will create and sustain.

AMAZING Program!

And in this way, you will remind the world:

The North is not a frontier to be extracted.

The North is a cultural force.

A creative powerhouse.

As I stand with you, I cannot help but think of the deep parallels between Indigenous and Black communities in this country.

We have both endured dispossession, displacement, systemic racism, exclusion.

We have both fought for our languages, our cultures, our rights to be seen... to be heard... to belong.

And yet we have always created.

We have danced.

We have sung.

We have written.

We have filmed.

We have dreamed.

I think of Primary Colours / Couleurs primaires, where Indigenous and Black artists work together to reshape the art system in Canada.

I think of the Black Indigenous Solidarity Program, forging kinship through creativity.

I think of CultureBrew.Art, amplifying the voices of Indigenous and racialized artists.

This is the work of solidarity. Of mutual recognition. Of shared liberation.

These artistic collaborations reveal a deeper truth: that solidarity must also be organized, mobilized, and translated into collective action and political change.

This is why we set out in 2026 to organize a series of National Black Canadians Summits —a clarion call for Black communities across Canada to organize, to mobilize, to gather in solidarity as part of the United Nations' International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024).

The Summit was envisioned as a space to amplify voices, affirm identities, build alliances, and demand action. A space to make visible the realities, the histories, the contributions, and the ongoing struggles of Black Canadians.

At our last summit in Montreal, over 1,500 participants—including more than 600 young people—stood together under the banner of dignity, recognition, development, and justice. And one word echoed again and again: vigilance.

As we move into the recently declared Second International Decade for People of African Descent (2025-2034), the work must not only continue—it must intensify.

And so I invite you to join us as we prepare for the 5th National Black Canadians Summit, to be held in Winnipeg in September 2026, at the invitation of Premier Wab Kinew and Deputy Premier Uzoma Asagwara.

This historic summit will be a critical opportunity—a gathering not only of Black Canadians, but of Indigenous communities, and of all citizens of conscience who understand that the main pillar of domination is exclusion.

And that the antidote—our most powerful resistance—is solidarity.

It will be a space to unite our struggles, to weave together the shared histories of Black and Indigenous communities marked by dispossession, displacement, and systemic racism.

It will be a space to affirm, together: we will not be divided. We will not be erased. We will not be silenced.

Let this be part of our call to action today. Let us weave the North into this national and international movement. Let us make our voices, our arts, our truths part of a collective force for justice, dignity, and hope.

And so I want to say this, from the depths of my heart:

To create is sacred work.

Every act of creation—whether it is a song, a poem, a mural, a dance, a sculpture, a garden, a gathering—draws us closer to the light of the Creator.

In creating, we are not simply producing objects or performances. We are touching the very force that brought the world into being.

We are participating in a divine gesture.

It allows us, for a brief and precious moment, to brush against transcendence. To feel the ultimate meaning of our existence shimmering just beyond our reach.

And in those moments, the creative hand is not just crafting—it is serving.

Serving what is beautiful.

Serving what is just.

Serving what is good.

Serving the hope that a better world is possible.

This is why we create. This is why we gather. This is why we must keep going.

Because every time you create, you refuse despair.

Every time you create, you make room for hope.

Every time you create, you make the world more beautiful, more just, more humane.

And that, my friends, is holy work.

So let us go forward, with courage.

Let us go forward, with joy.

Let us go forward, with the fierce, luminous conviction that our art, our words, our actions, our solidarity, can—and will—change the world.

And so I say to you: keep going.

Build your cultural spaces.

Grow your networks.

Mentor your youth.

Demand your rightful place—not at the margins, but at the very heart of this country’s story.

The arts are not an afterthought.

They are the beating heart of a just, inclusive, vibrant Canada.

And it is with this conviction, this understanding of the centrality of the arts, that we turn our gaze forward.

And as we look ahead to the Summit in September next year—gathering voices from across the country—I hope your stories, your art, your leadership will help shape that conversation. I believe it will!

Because what you are building here is not just for the North. It is for all of us.

Together, let us write a new story.

A story anchored in beauty, in justice, in courage, and in the unstoppable power of the arts.

Merci. Tānisi. Miigwetch. Ekosi, Mahsi cho
Thank you.