

TRANSCRIPT – NOW & NEXT PODCAST SEASON 3 EPISODE 2

Leora Kornfeld ([00:09](#)):

Welcome to Now & Next. It's a podcast about innovation in the media and entertainment industries. I'm Leora Kornfeld. Canada is a lot of things. And one of the most notable is that we're an extremely diverse country. But whether it's Toronto or Halifax or Montreal or Regina or Vancouver or any other city in the country, the question arises, is our cultural diversity, and more specifically, our racial diversity, showing up on the screen?

Tonya Williams ([00:41](#)):

"Data collection sounds like it's a simple thing, but you understand that data collection actually drives everything. I don't know how we could possibly be creating interesting shows if we don't know exactly who the audience is. And remember, the audience is no longer just white people."

Leora Kornfeld ([00:58](#)):

That's Tonya Williams. She's best known for her two decade role as Dr. Olivia Barber on The Young and the Restless. And she's made it her mission to make what we see on screen better reflect what we see on the streets. To do this, she founded the Reelworld Film Festival in 2001. Initially, it was to showcase Black actors, writers, producers, and directors in Canada. And now it's been expanded to include indigenous Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latinx talent. The festival's 20th anniversary is coming up, October 14th to 19th of this year. It's all online, of course. And we'll hear about that and about Tonya's ongoing commitment to make onscreen and offscreen talent as diverse and representative as possible in just a second.

Rachel Lui ([01:50](#)):

"It has been very hard for me to find anything. I think there already is a barrier for me as an Asian actor."

Leora Kornfeld ([01:58](#)):

That's Rachel Lui. She's a Toronto-based actor.

Rachel Lui ([02:01](#)):

"I have been setting up auditions, emails, and have honestly gotten nothing back, which is very discouraging. It becomes very obvious, when you have a POC character just there for the points, and they get very low development, the trope of the Black best friend who just supports the white main character, or the Asian nerd who does something funny once in a while. Sure we're there, we're on screen, but we're still reduced to these stereotypes that aren't very helpful to the diaspora, the people who are watching this."

Leora Kornfeld ([02:41](#)):

So I want to congratulate you. This is 20 years of the festival, and I was watching another interview with you, and I think it was for the 15th. And the interviewer said to you, "Did you still think you'd be here for 15?" And you said, "Yeah, I did, but I didn't know it would be successful. However, I knew that I would still be doing this." Do you remember saying that?

Tonya Williams ([02:59](#)):

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No, but I believe that, because every project I start, I start it with the concept that I'm in this till I die. That's just how my mind works. Whether it's successful or not is not the relevant part for me. And I always get frustrated with young people because they give themselves six months or a year, and if they haven't made it, if they're not a billionaire by then, then they close it down. But I think it's the last man standing always. So you have to just pick a course, and then you have to stay with it, and just stay. It doesn't matter if you're finding the success you are or not, you just have to keep moving forward in that one direction. And I believe it will find you. Success finds you in time.

Leora Kornfeld ([03:39](#)):

So is that to say that your motivations for doing Reelworld have or haven't shifted over the years?

Tonya Williams ([03:46](#)):

I would say definitely they have shifted, because I wanted to create a platform... So that part never shifted. I wanted to create a platform that was specifically for Canadians, who are Black, indigenous, and other people of color, who were in screen-based industries or the creative industries. That is key to what I started.

Tonya Williams ([04:04](#)):

And what's happened is it's evolved into other things, meaning the first year I started the festival, I did not know that I would not be able to find programmers, arts administrators, people who could write grants, who were people of color also, who were Black and indigenous. So then we had to be a training ground. And over the 20 years, something I never thought would happen, is those arts administrators that we trained, and those programmers we trained, went on and they've worked at TIFF and worked at Hot Docs and worked in other festivals across Canada. We built that into our whole thing. So that was not something I was thinking about.

Tonya Williams ([04:41](#)):

And then I also wasn't thinking about the fact that I would run the organization. I really tried to hire people to run the organization, but it just wasn't working, because it's so strange to run a film festival. You're a nonprofit, but you have to think like an entrepreneur. So it's very different. And I find it either I find someone who's very strong in the nonprofit sector in understanding how nonprofit works... But it's nonprofit, but yeah, we're also the entertainment industry.

Tonya Williams ([05:08](#)):

So it's kind of a different way to think about things. And so that learning curve is something that was... It was in my wheelhouse already, because I'm kind of an entrepreneurial spirit. And I think most actors or producers or directors are already that way. That's how we create work out of nothing. That's how we get hired. I mean, you just have to be very aggressive and you have to just chart out a really strong course for yourself, but you're your own manager. And so I had to think about Reelworld in that way as well.

Leora Kornfeld ([05:39](#)):

What are the differences that you see between diversity initiatives in the TV and film industries in the US versus in Canada?

Tonya Williams ([05:47](#)):

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I'll actually include not just the US but the UK and Australia.

Leora Kornfeld ([05:51](#)):

Okay.

Tonya Williams ([05:52](#)):

Between the US and the UK and Australia, they're doing really aggressive things, which include data collection. Data collection sounds like it's a simple thing, but you understand that data collection actually drives everything. Like, when you think about the United States, they have a Nielsen rating. They can literally pinpoint a neighborhood and they know what everybody in that neighborhood watches. They know what they watch. They know what they like. They know what they eat for breakfast. They know the cereal. They know everything.

Tonya Williams ([06:19](#)):

And I don't think we have enough specific data collection in Canada. One, data collection is important for us to understand how our Black and indigenous and Asian and South Asian and Middle Eastern and Latin American Canadians, how are they doing in the industry in Canada? That's one, but more importantly, too, what is the audience watching and what do they want to watch?

Tonya Williams ([06:42](#)):

I don't know how we could possibly be creating interesting shows if we don't know exactly who the audience is. And remember, the audience is no longer just white people. The audiences are filled with diversity. They're coming from the African continent. They're coming from India. They're coming from all around the world, and they have very specific tastes. And I don't know yet if we have data collections set up in a way to understand that audience, because only by understanding that audience will we know what kind of shows we want to create for that audience.

Tonya Williams ([07:14](#)):

And then, the thing that we talk about, which I think they've been doing very well with in the US, and especially in the UK, is they're putting more of that diversity in leadership positions. So we need executives who can greenlight and have the power to greenlight, who are Black, indigenous, and also people of color.

Tonya Williams ([07:32](#)):

And we can't just hire one person. You have to remember, it's not enough to hire one South Asian person, for instance, and expect them to do the job of all these different ethnicities. I'd love that the companies, especially broadcast companies and production companies, start thinking about, we need to make sure our staff and the executives here reflect every bit of this diversity we're talking about so that they can bring their knowledge and their expertise to that.

Tonya Williams ([08:01](#)):

I think people need to get into the weeds now, because I know I started my career in the late '70s. And I've been hearing about creating diversity and inclusion since the late '70s. I've sat at more roundtable discussions about increased diversity and inclusion than most people have. And the needle is moving very slowly.

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Tonya Williams ([08:20](#)):

I mean, it's still hard to believe that we can go to some of our major funding agencies... And we all know who they are. We don't have to point fingers or throw anyone under the bus because they're all the same. Just go to their websites and look on their board of directors and count how many Black people are on those boards. Count how many South Asian people are there, and then look at their executive team and count that. And I think if we're still talking about that in 2020, when we started the conversation in 1978, then what can possibly be the problem?

Leora Kornfeld ([08:50](#)):

There was the recent announcement. I think it was just this week. And this is Bell Media together with Reelworld that produce this program.

Tonya Williams ([08:58](#)):

Yes, yes.

Leora Kornfeld ([08:58](#)):

Now I'm guessing you were driving that or a big part of that.

Tonya Williams ([09:01](#)):

Yeah. Well, Bell Media certainly has opened the door to saying, "Come on in and tell us your ideas. We want to drive this." And I feel other broadcasters are doing the same thing. CBC's been doing the same thing as well. And even Telefilm and CMF, I think they've really opened... There's been a sort of a awakening this year in a way that I would have thought the awakening would have been 40 years ago, but it's really happening more this year. And now I think they're looking for people to come with strong ideas.

Tonya Williams ([09:30](#)):

I have a shoebox of ideas that I've been collecting since the late '70s. So I just put my hand in and pull them out. But creative producers, especially television producers, who are Black, indigenous, and people of color, are very few and far between. So we've got a lot of racially diverse writers who become producers just out of necessity.

Tonya Williams ([09:52](#)):

We have actors who become producers out of necessity, and we have directors who become producers. But we need to be nurturing and creating producers who can guide these artists, who can build these relationships with these writers, who can take these projects, who can move them to the next level, who can work with the directors and build relationships with actors. So that's definitely one project, and it was great. I had a great conversation with Bell Media. They were very excited. And I also didn't want to create a program that was going to be four weeks or six weeks. I wanted it to be a year. We know it takes 10 years to get a project off the ground.

Leora Kornfeld ([10:29](#)):

Exactly. Yeah.

Tonya Williams ([10:30](#)):

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You need a full year, at least, of working with really senior mentors. These producers are going to have to pick a project, and it's a project that they've not written, or they're not directing, or they're not acting in. And then they have to go through the whole process of, how do you get that to a broadcaster? How do you get in the development process of that? So, that's definitely one project.

Tonya Williams ([10:53](#)):

Some other projects, in case people are listening, I'm still looking for partners for other projects, is in the areas of casting directors, in the areas of agents, in the areas of managers. It's almost embarrassing how little representation we have in those areas.

Leora Kornfeld ([11:09](#)):

Yeah, the stat that I read was less than 1%, or something around 1%.

Tonya Williams ([11:13](#)):

Oh, it's so embarrassing. And by the way, it's probably at 1% because they included all Black, indigenous, and people of color together is less than 1%. But there are areas... You could say there might be zero Black casting directors in Canada. There might be zero indigenous agents. So it's because they put everyone together. That's why this data is so important. We can't keep grouping people together saying this word BIPOC, which I do not like, or saying racially diverse, which I don't mind. But we can't put them in one basket and count everybody together and then say the numbers are strong, because we don't know if one ethnic group could be faring better than another.

Leora Kornfeld ([11:58](#)):

Is that why you don't like the term BIPOC?

Tonya Williams ([12:00](#)):

I don't like the term BIPOC because, well, in the States we don't really like to use it. Also, it's an acronym that's not used internationally. So UK does not have that term. And I want us to be able to start collecting data and using terms that the world can use. Everybody knows what a Black person is. Let's stick with that. Everybody knows what indigenous people are. Let's just stick with that. And even within those ethnicities, by the way, there's a breakdown, because Black people are not a monolithic group. African-Americans think very differently than Caribbean people, think very differently than the different African countries. So at least we can start with just respecting the different larger group of ethnicities.

Tonya Williams ([12:36](#)):

But when I hear the word BIPOC, the next thing I hear, usually, from someone white is, "Oh, I just hired a BIPOC person." And that drives me crazy, because what does a BIPOC person look like? They don't look like anything. And what's frustrating, with the Black community in particular, is we like to say a BIPOC person is usually not a Black person because, remember, we're still dealing with colonialism.

Tonya Williams ([13:02](#)):

And remember, if we go back... And people like to try and erase the fact that Canada had slavery for over 200 years. You had slaves. First written statement of a slave in Canada was in 1643, I think it was. A five-year-old boy was bought from a ship. So you've been buying slaves and you had slavery. So over 200 years, white Canadians had enslaved indigenous people and enslaved Black people. So we are the

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first original slaves in Canada or indigenous people or Black people. Indigenous people have... For some reason, people talk about that. And there have been reconciliation about that. And there have been the government trying to give reparations for that, but not to the Black community.

Tonya Williams ([13:49](#)):

The Black community has had no reconciliation about the slavery that happens. And in fact, I think it was Doug Ford... Just recently someone sent me the link where he literally got up and said, "We're so fortunate we're not like the States. We never had slavery here." So our own politicians don't seem to be aware that slavery was in Canada.

Tonya Williams ([14:09](#)):

I think there's a group of people that have been trying to get a national emancipation day for when slavery ended in Canada. They can't even get the government to approve to a national day. So that's how far and backwards I still think we are about these things. But going back to when I say the whole BIPOC thing, because of the colonialism, shadeism... Now you remember back when they talk about slavery, the darker skin you were, you were kept in the fields. And the fairer you were, they would bring you into the house.

Tonya Williams ([14:40](#)):

They wouldn't have people working inside the house who were dark-skinned. And that colonialism, that shadeism, permeates India. It permeates Africa, the continent. It permeates even places, Korea to China, where people are scared to be tanned. In Malaysia, people in other countries, they bleach their skin. These things are happening. So when someone just says they're hiring someone BIPOC, it's usually not a dark-skinned Black person.

Tonya Williams ([15:08](#)):

And I want to make sure that as we continue to talk about inclusion and diversity, as I said to someone I was speaking to a couple of months ago, think of it as a garden. You don't just throw seeds willy-nilly. You're very particular in your garden. You have certain plants of certain colors growing in one area, and you complement them with these other flowers growing beside it.

Tonya Williams ([15:31](#)):

I want us to take that kind of care, and I want us to be that kind of diligent when we're looking at our companies and the makeup of our companies. And I think, as one US reporter had said, she did an article about how she hated the word BIPOC is, she said, "It's just for lazy people to use that term. They're too lazy to recognize that it's taken us hundreds of years to create these problems. And we're not going to solve these issues by slapping a one-word on it, and thinking that the hiring of a BIPOC person is going to solve things."

Tonya Williams ([16:05](#)):

It's just not going to solve things. And we're going to have to get very painstakingly going through, like, let's say, looking for ticks. We're going to have to go through and be myopic about and microscopic about how we are including all the different shades of all the different cultures until it becomes so normal that we don't have to think about it anymore. But right now we have to think about it a lot.

Leora Kornfeld ([16:33](#)):

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And that brings me to the Reelworld Access database, which is very, very interesting, because I understand... Well, first of all, I understand it's something that you've been wanting to do for a while-

Tonya Williams ([16:44](#)):

Yes.

Leora Kornfeld ([16:44](#)):

...but it was too complicated. It was too-

Tonya Williams ([16:47](#)):

Expensive.

Leora Kornfeld ([16:48](#)):

And one of the things I find really interesting is that you didn't expect there to meet as many categories as you had to create inside the database.

Tonya Williams ([17:00](#)):

Now, you know what? The categories I did... And in fact, there's 78 categories now, and we're going to be adding 100 more. So having worked in the industry now for 45 years, I know of all kinds of categories that people don't even think about as being in the industry. So I wanted them all there. There are a lot of really lucrative jobs in construction that people don't think about in the entertainment industry, from set medic to tutor. If your hands touch it in the entertainment industry, then we want you up there, because we forget, the entertainment industry is kind of a country. That's how you should think of it, a country with every single profession that exists on the planet exists there too, including wrangling chickens, everything-

Leora Kornfeld ([17:45](#)):

Wrangling chickens, okay.

Tonya Williams ([17:46](#)):

Wrangling chickens is an area that people probably are expertise in. So we want to have a lot of categories. But you're right. Back in 2001, when I started Reelworld, and everyone was talking about inclusion and diversity and how can we do it, I thought it didn't seem like brain surgery to me to go, "The number one thing we should be doing is creating a database." But I couldn't get any of the funders, any of the grants, to help or want to support putting a database together.

Tonya Williams ([18:13](#)):

And yet I think that's the easiest thing that would have helped, because if people are looking to hire people and they don't know where people are, you have to have a database so that they can find people. It's almost become funny. Every year I write a grant. For the last 19 year I write a grant for this, and every year I get denied. And finally, last year, I was able to get some seed money, not through a grant, but through one of our corporate sponsors, where I then found a developer. And technology has changed. I mean, that's the wonderful thing about technology. I mean, I may not know how to work it, but I love the fact that it's getting cheaper to do.

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Leora Kornfeld ([18:46](#)):

And you can hire literally one person to build your backend database. Right?

Tonya Williams ([18:50](#)):

Which is exactly what we did. We wanted people to be able to search by ethnicity. I mean, that's the whole point of the database. And then people had to be able to search by province and what profession people were in. So it's almost like the simplest thing that anyone could have done. And now that it's done, people can't believe it hasn't always been there, even though I've been begging for it to be done for 20 years, it finally is. And people now get it.

Leora Kornfeld ([19:17](#)):

And for years, you heard people saying to you, when probably even early on in Reelworld, or even before that, people saying, "Well, I'd like to hire more diverse talent, but I don't know how to find them," or, "I can't find them."

Tonya Williams ([19:28](#)):

All the time, all the time. And you know what they do, because everyone's lazy, by the way? They call our office and go, "We're looking for a cinematographer. Can you help us?" And we're like, "Oh, my God. We have to go through our database and try and find somebody for you." It was so much work. And we're not a huge organization. We're five or six staff people, and we get more contract people as we get close to the festival.

Tonya Williams ([19:53](#)):

But we just did not have the time to go searching through our database to try and find people. It was just getting to be too much. Oh, we also made it a job post. So now that's another thing. People would send us the job post and say, "Can you put it in your newsletter? Can you circulate in your social media?" And now we just point them to post it on our job post on Access Reelworld. So we've made our lives easier.

Leora Kornfeld ([20:15](#)):

And congratulations again. 20 years, incredible.

Tonya Williams ([20:18](#)):

Oh, thank you so much. Thank you.

Leora Kornfeld ([20:24](#)):

And that's it for this episode of Now & Next, a podcast produced by the Canada Media Fund in collaboration with Content Canada. And thanks, of course, to our guest, Tonya Williams. For production notes and a transcript of this episode, please visit the CMF Trends website. A quick google should get you there more easily than me giving you this really long URL. So just google CMF Trends.

Leora Kornfeld ([20:50](#)):

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