

Visions for Justice and Critiquing Consent: On Taking Performativity Out of Performance

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Outside of the field of intimacy, xe has an extensive background in film, television, theater, dance and circus including a Bachelor's Degree in Media Arts Production from Emerson College and they are currently pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in Film and Television Production from Loyola Marymount University with a specialization in directing fiction (as of 2022). As a creative, they strive to use their background and knowledge to tell stories of historically dehumanized communities that represent Global Majority communities in their rawness, in their vulnerability, in their strength and in their pride. If you'd like to learn more about Chelsey, please visit their website at www.mxcmorgan.com or follow them on Instagram at MxCMorgan.

The Question of Consent

What do we do when consent fails? No, I don't mean when consent is violated or when boundaries are misunderstood. I don't mean when we fail to ask the right questions or when we fail to give the right answers. I mean: what happens when consent, as a standalone concept, unravels? When consent is given, freely, enthusiastically or otherwise, and harm still occurs?

Here is where I lose people. Understandably so. We live in a society built on a foundation of oppressive systems and upheld by the vilification of boundaries. Consent is our answer to that. It's the reclamation of power for the powerless and the notion of its failure, in any context, is activating and, at times, it can even be re-traumatizing. Intimacy specializations in live performance, film, and television were born to prevent re-traumatization and to facilitate the end of the collective experience of dehumanization in our industry. Artists all over our industry called out for a solution to emotionally unsafe work conditions, and the answer to that call for accountability was consent. Intimacy professionals all over the world came forward with opportunities for consent-based performance practices, but with them came questions. How should consent be communicated? How can consent be ensured? What if consent changes? And, yes: can consent fail?

In her book "Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography" (2016), Kink scholar and Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies educator Ariane Cruz wrote that "consent is not a universal principle; it does not have the same valence for everyone" (45-46). In context, Cruz was referring to the complex role consent plays in BDSM sexuality, where consent often lives ambiguously within dynamics of dominance, submission and total power exchange. In her analysis, Cruz highlights that current definitions of consent often "[operate] as a mode of validating, legitimizing, and hierarchizing sexuality" (45). While Cruz was specifically analyzing the role that the legal origins of consent play in alternative sexuality communities, the analysis applies to the concept as a whole, especially as it relates to intimate performance. Currently, explicit, verbal consent is treated as if it is the only tool for a process to be considered valid, legitimate, or 'proper'. However, there are often moments in creative

processes where the more ‘Black and white’ definitions of consent as freely communicated, retractable and informed fail to acknowledge moments where past trauma, power dynamics, and a lifetime of systemically ingrained silence create ambiguity.

Okay, so, obvious question: isn’t that the whole point? Aren’t intimacy directors, choreographers and coordinators literally brought into processes specifically to manage and to hold space for that ambiguity? Short answer: Yes... and no. Intimacy professionals come with a rolodex of tools and methods for encouraging performers to speak up about their boundaries and to feel safer in their process. And when performers do not feel safe? We educate ourselves on common responses to trauma, hold space for their experiences, and advocate for alternatives. Problem solved... right? Most of the time, yes. But here is where the question of consent lives, in the *most of the time*. There cannot be a world in which any one person can guarantee the safety of another. As intimacy professionals, we can’t guarantee that we’ll address every potential harm or speak on every ‘elephant in the room,’ because one person cannot fully understand the full scope of trauma that may or may not exist in a space. That’s simply an unrealistic request. However, that doesn’t mean that our practices don’t work or that consent isn’t a viable response to the lack of truly safe spaces.

Many of us have adopted different language including “brave space” and “safer space” to describe how consent-based practices simply aim to curate spaces that don’t guarantee, but that more closely align with our ideas of safety. Even so, ‘safer’ to one person is not and cannot be guaranteed as ‘safer’ for another. In the same way, tools for consent that work for one person or one community cannot be guaranteed to yield the same results for those of us who live with compounded trauma and who are members of communities that thrive in their ambiguity. So, yeah. I get why the question “What do we do when consent fails?” can look a bit terrifying. I get why we avoid it. But in the end, critiquing the framework of consent, highlighting where it fails us and, more specifically, highlighting which communities it tends to fail most often is how we create a vision for justice that has the opportunity to include genuine safety for all.

Okay, that was inspiring and all, and I'd love to say that next I'll be sharing a "how-to" list for solving my critiques for consent but, unfortunately, this is not that essay. Instead, the purpose of this essay is to highlight the expansive and revolutionary opportunities that exist when we move away from treating any word, framework or methodology as absolute truth. It's an invitation to re-examine the best of solutions, to identify the gaps, and to find new methods of filling them. In order to do that, we need to identify the language of the industry, align our definitions, and dissect them.

So, in the interest of shared language, below are my definitions for a few of the more popular "buzzwords" in our industry. They are words that find their way onto posters, in titles of courses, on headlines, in articles and that are treated as if they are beyond critique. These definitions may be different than those you've seen, as they were dissected, re-imagined and curated with the intention of shifting our language toward justice. This is by no means an exhaustive list of all the words and frameworks that impact consent. It's not even an exhaustive list of the frameworks that will be discussed in this essay alone. However, as language becomes more relevant to this conversation, further explanation and definitions will be provided.

First things first...

The following definitions are my own, but are grounded in the frameworks of Racial Justice, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, Disability Justice, and Healing Justice, and were developed following conversations and explorations with my closest collaborators in the field of Justice & Liberation Education—Bianca Laureano, Ph.D., Nadia Maynard, and Gillian Betz.

- **Justice**—A vision for the future. One where we deconstruct the systems that dehumanize the Global Majority and one that re-imagines a world that promotes inclusion in a way that de-centers white supremacy culture and that takes sustainable action to curate equitable access for all.

- **Equity**—Fair treatment that provides care and information on the basis of need.
- **Equality**—Fair treatment that ignores need.
- **Trauma**—Experiences, circumstances and / or situations which overwhelm our ability to cope, including those which are passed onto us generationally, instilled in us systemically, and those which occur interpersonally.
- **Diversity**—A practice. Actionable and accountable steps toward listening, valuing and engaging with a variety of human experiences.
- **Inclusion**—A practice. Taking sustainable action to provide equitable access to your space. The collective action of curating “belonging” within your space for all represented human experiences.
- **Consent**—A practice. A tool for safeguarding body autonomy so that individuals can make informed decisions about their involvement in any experience.

A practice. A tool. An exercise. A skill. A vision. Something to be worked on, maintained, applied, and improved. A place to start. Consent is a practice. More specifically, it's a practice that thrives on a foundation of information. One that takes an understanding of any and all factors that could contribute to whether an experience exists in a space of growth and of expansion, or whether it exists in a space of activation and of trauma. With every enthusiastic 'yes' and every freely communicated 'no', there is risk. For People of Color and other dehumanized communities, the ability to make a truly informed decision requires considerations of history, of livelihood, of reputation and of safety. As intimacy professionals, and as anyone who holds space for that matter, we need to understand that risk. We need to understand the impact that our identities and that the structures we work under can have on those decisions and we cannot simply lean on the Global Majority members of our communities to take on that risk. The community as a whole needs to expand their visions for justice, and yes, to do so, we need to look beyond consent.

We See You, White American Theater.

Look beyond consent. More inspirational and philosophical language that sounds so good on its own that I'd love to leave it as a button, but, alas, that's still not what this essay is. What does it mean to 'look beyond consent'? Well, honestly it can mean a lot of things, but for the purposes of brevity we're going to focus on one concept that exists beyond and impacts the efficacy consent-based models: Power. For the purposes of this essay, we are using the Oxford dictionary's definition of power, which is "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events."

There are many types of power dynamics that impact an individual's ability to give and receive informed consent and that complicate the effectiveness of consent as a standalone tool for community safety. Understanding the different types of power that can exist in a space and analyzing our personal relationship to those power dynamics are crucial components of filling the gaps that consent leaves. In their book, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, the feminist collective Just Associates identified and analyzed the many ways in which power can show up and interact in collectives, systems, and other social spaces. These included both types of "Dominating" power, or power that "often perpetuates inequality, injustice, and poverty" and types of "Positive and Transformational Power" which "can come through collaboration and collective action for liberation and transformation" (VeneKlasen & Miller 2007).

The following are my own definitions for *some* of the types of power that can exist in a space, as identified by Just Associates in their power analysis framework, re-written for the purposes of specifically curating their application to the spaces that I personally occupy:

- **Power To**—the power held by an individual or collective that gifts them the ability to take, or not to take, specific action. ie: power to *do*, power to *be*, power to *say*, etc.
- **Power With**—the power of individuals or collectives to increase their influence in order to achieve similar outcomes and / or experiences.

- **Power Over**—the power that is created when an individual or collective is placed above another individual or collective in hierarchical structures.
- **Power Within**—a measurement of power that can be identified by analyzing the relationship between two empowered entities. ie: individual power within a collective, collective power within a system, etc.
- **Personal Power**—a measurement an individual’s capacity for influence that considers all factors that alter or increase that capacity, including but not limited to race, age, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

Power exists everywhere, in everything and everyone, and at all times. Intimacy directors, choreographers & coordinators, especially are not new to that concept. After all, the field was born and is currently operating under the umbrella of ‘consent-based methodology’ which has been designed to manage the complex power dynamics that can put performers at risk. While that has placed the industry miles further than it was in terms of protecting actors during performances of simulated sex, nudity and other forms of intimacy, the call for solutions from the industry at large did not end with sexual content. In early 2020, a group of Global Majority theatre professionals reacted to the civil unrest and anti-racist protesting occurring in our streets by calling out racial power dynamics in an open letter to the U.S. theatrical community. On June 8th, 2020, at 7:00 pm EST, a collective called We See You, White American Theater (WSYWAT) released a call to action entitled “Dear White American Theater” that identified a gap in proposed buzzword-based methodologies by highlighting systemic issues stretching far beyond conversations of consent. Their message was simple. “We see you. We have always seen you. And now you will see us.” (“Dear White American Theatre” 2020).

We see you.

Take that in for a moment. As in now, in this moment. We see the claims that solutions are here and that problems are disappearing.

We have always seen you.

As in always, through movements like #OscarsSoWhite which called out the academy for its anti-Blackness in 2015 (Ugwu 2020) and the media's #MeToo movement in 2017 which used the incredible language of Tarana Burke's Me Too Movement to highlight the sexual harassment and unethical working conditions in Hollywood ("Get to Know Us: History & Inception" 2020). Through all of that, the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) members of the theater community have seen those who hold power place bandages on systemic issues. They watched as phrases like "trauma-informed" and "consent based" entered theatrical communities with the best of intentions but transitioned from crucial tools to buzzwords, unable to be critiqued or expanded. They watched as their words, meant as stepping stones toward justice, were used as final destinations. And they watched, as so many of us were left behind.

And now you will see us.

We will not be left behind.

So, what does this mean for the industry? For starters, it means that it is no longer acceptable to work under a definition of inclusion that simply asks Global Majority individuals to 'consent' to entering spaces built for white people. It means an acknowledgment of all of the complex layers of systemic power that inform and alter the ability for consent to be an effective tool in curating community safety. It means a call for mutuality, collaboration and connection within our industry that pulls away from dictating one methodology or one

individual framework as a ‘best practice’, ‘core pillar’, or ‘most effective approach’ to the work. It means a recognition of the power that each and every one of us holds in our industry and in our communities at large. It means acknowledging our power to make sustainable change, to lift up underrepresented voices and to grant opportunities to those who are not often brought to the head of the table. It means a rejection of performative, unsustainable, and unsupported action under the guise of ‘allyship’ that exists without methods of accountability and without a foundation of radical justice, equity, inclusion and expansion. And most importantly, it means admitting to our industry and to ourselves that in our recent history, for the dehumanized and disempowered members of our communities, consent has already failed us.

From Performative Allyship to Collective Justice.

So, I’m asking you again. What do we do when consent fails? Well, to even begin to answer that, let’s turn back to our example. When consent-based and trauma-informed practices did not prove to be an effective enough tool to ensure the safety of Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, MENA, and other Global Majority theatre professionals, We See You, W.A.T. responded first with their open letter, and then followed up about a month later with a 29-page manifesto outlining actionable demands for the reconstruction of the U.S. theatre industry. Their manifesto, entitled “BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre” was a self-proclaimed “omnibus declaration of interlinked strategies” aimed at curating sustainable change in response to past performative action by those who hold power. (“BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre”, We See You, W.A.T.)

However, despite the detail and specificity of the manifesto, the initial responses from predominately white theaters, many of whom who had already adopted ‘consent-based’ and ‘trauma-informed’ language, were dismal. In her article recanting the history of the collective, Brittani Samuel of The Brooklyn Rail wrote, “Once again, institutions were “showing support” without sacrificing much more than a page on their website” confirming skepticism from the community who predicted that the response would be treated with the “same carelessness and

performative allyship that rampaged social media after the compounded murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd” (Samuel 2021). Once again, consent had failed us. Dehumanized communities were presented with statements from theatrical institutions that, on paper, consented to following the demands of the collective. However, behind the scenes, no sustainable action was taken.

So now what? What other methods can we employ to fill in the gaps that have been left by performative consent? Well, before we move forward in attempting to answer that question, I’d like to take us back a few steps and re-align our definitions of a few key terms.

The following definitions are cited from author and activist Dr. Tema Okun’s online resources “Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks)” and “(divorcing) White Supremacy Culture”:

- **Prejudice**—An attitude based on limited information, often on stereotypes. Prejudice is usually, but not always, negative. No one is free of prejudice.
- **Racism**—race prejudice + social and institutional power; a system of advantage based on race; a system of oppression based on race; a white supremacist system.
- **Anti-Racism**—active opposition to racism and the promotion of racial equity.
- **white supremacy**—a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level. (“Racism Defined”, DismantlingRacism.org)
- **white supremacy culture**—the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups, our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly not only that whiteness holds value, but that whiteness *is* value. (“What is it?”, WhiteSupremacyCulture.info)

The following definitions are my own, but are grounded in Critical Race Theory, in the frameworks for Racial Justice and Intersectionality and are a direct result of the revolutionary

anti-racism work of generations of Black & Indigenous scholars, of queer and trans ancestors and of survivors that have been erased in our history due to performativity. I encourage you to hold me accountable to this language.

- **Performative Allyship**—the act of staging or the presentation of activism to be consumed for the purpose of optics or declaration without the intention of taking sustainable action in service of sustainable change.
- **Racial Justice**—Acknowledgement of the racial hierarchy and imbalance of human rights built on the dehumanization of people on the basis of race. Recognition that this hierarchy is based in anti-Black and anti-Indigenous eugenics. A vision for a future that abolishes the systems of white supremacy that support and maintain the dehumanization of Black bodies.

So, now that we've established some further shared language, how do all of these words and their definitions interact with each other? And, how do they work together to fill the gaps that racial power dynamics leave in consent based practices? Well for starters, having a shared understanding of the systems of oppression that create power dynamics also means having a shared understanding of one of the factors that could contribute to the failure of consent.

We've now been able to identify a weak point, one that would not have been possible to identify without the rejection of consent as an infallible truth. Now, fortunately, there is a precedent for our next steps. In order to understand how to stand up against white supremacy culture, we simply follow the guideposts left for us by the Global Majority scholars, activists and survivors that have been doing this work for generations.

Step 1. We identify the methods that white supremacy culture uses in order to spread its ideology and analyze what work has already been done in our industry to dismantle them.

Step 2. We identify the metrics of racial justice that can be used to understand where racial hierarchy exists in order to employ solutions that work to abolish that power dynamic in our performance spaces.

Step 3. We use that newfound knowledge to reinforce and to ensure the success of consent-based models as they work to move us toward community safety.

Precedents for Dismantling Racism in Consent-Based Performance.

I think by now, we understand the structure and logic of the work that's being done here, so I'll save you the extended explanation. In 1999, racial justice scholar and grassroots organizer Dr. Tema Okun published an article called "White Supremacy Culture", which she built on a foundation laid out for her by a long list of Global Majority educators and activists that she'd had the pleasure of learning from. Her article, which outlined what she named "the characteristics of White Supremacy Culture" named a series of attitudes, norms and standards that have engrained themselves in our culture due to the abundance of white supremacist thinking. The article was aimed at all people, as she stated, "[b]ecause we all live in a white supremacy culture, these characteristics show up in the attitudes and behaviors of all of us—people of color and white people" (Okun 1999).

Since releasing the article, Dr. Okun has expanded upon her research, brought in more Black and Indigenous racial justice scholars, and has created multiple online resources, including the aforementioned websites "Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks)" and "(divorcing) White Supremacy Culture", to further illustrate how white supremacy Culture impacts us all. Her new online resource included updated characteristics of white supremacy culture, statements denouncing those who choose to weaponize them and a statement by Cristina Rivera Chapman of the Earthseed Land Collective which outlined the following three methods of control that white supremacy culture uses in order to re-enforce and maintain its

systems:

- **Scarcity**—white supremacy needs me to question whether I am enough and whether there is enough.
- **Loss of Self**—white supremacy needs me to have an identity crisis without and within it.
- **Fear**—white supremacy needs me to be afraid that I have everything to lose if I interrupt it; that if I speak truth to power, or fail to sufficiently revere the status quo, then I could lose my job, my life, my relationships. (“Wisdom from Cristina River Chapman”, WhiteSupremacyCulture.info)

These are the methods. This is the “how”. So, next part of step one asks the question: where have these methods shown up in our industry? How do these methods impact consent? How has the industry responded to them in the past? And what can we learn from those responses?

Method 1: SCARCITY

The field of entertainment is no stranger to scarcity. In fact, some would argue that the scarcity mindset is the basis of what it means to work in entertainment in any position, whether you’re a performer, writer, director, or any other crew position. Yes, that includes intimacy professionals. In fact, since the inception of this field (which makes it sound like it was much longer ago than it actually was), individuals within the field of intimacy have been fighting against the scarcity mindset. In context of our field, that mindset finds its way into our thinking by telling us lies like “there is not enough work for everyone” or “if I don’t take this job, there won’t be any more for me”. It’s created gatekeeping and imposter syndrome from the most frequently working and highest paid of intimacy professionals to those who find themselves newly attracted to consent-based performance.

Again, look back at our example. In the demands listed by We See You, White American Theater, the collective advocated in favor of intimacy professionals, clearly stating “We demand the presence of a contracted intimacy director for every production” (“BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre”, We See You, W.A.T.). Here, we see a clear action advocating for an end to any literal or perceived scarcity in the field of intimacy and a clear indication of the ways in which the consent framework is tantamount to the success of anti-racist theater movements. However, this came after a long list of cultural competency requirements for hiring practices in a production. So, let’s say you are a non-BIPOC intimacy director. You finally are offered an incredible opportunity to work on a production, but that production happens to center BIPOC experiences that you’re not fully educated on or that you do not have experience with. A scarcity model would say to take it, because if you don’t prove your worth now, there will be no more oppourtinites. However, an anti-white supremacist model that rejects scarcity would say to seek out another professional whose identity, experience or education more closely aligns with the project, knowing that you are good enough and that opportunity will continue to present itself.

Seems simple, right? Well, in theory, yes. However, intimacy professionals don’t live in a magical world immune from the precedents of the industry. Time and time again, playwrights, directors, performers, and the like have taken this route, and scarcity has proven to find its way back into the conversation. And time and time again, people have found themselves in a forced position of ‘consent’ where saying ‘no’ meant risking their personal or community safety. However, what white supremacy does not want you to see are the moments when pioneers of justice have successfully taken risks against scarcity, refusing to let the influences of power impact their ability to withdraw their ‘consent’ when those very consent-based models were failing them.

On November 24th, 2021, in an open letter posted on her personal Facebook page, Black American playwright Dominique Morisseau addressed the theatrical community and announced that her “play Paradise Blue will no longer continue its run at the Geffen Theatre”

citing that “harm was allowed to fester. Grow. And go un-checked” (Morisseau 2021). The reaction to this action against the race-based harm that was occurring during this play’s production process was naturally divided. Many rallied at her side both publicly and privately, including a wealth of intimacy professionals who accepted her statement with empathy and compassion. However, many questioned her choice to call out the Geffin Theatre so openly and on such a public forum. The Geffin Theatre is known and markets itself as a renowned LA theatre. Its stage holds power in our industry; it has showcased talents at the Tony, Emmy and Oscar award winning levels. However, the threat of scarcity, the threat of not being perceived as “good enough” for that stage, was not one that aligned with demands for racial justice in our industry.

Morisseau’s words were a clear action against the scarcity method that white supremacy culture uses to control and negate consent-based performance practices. If we, as an industry, want to move forward and to ensure the success of consent-based methodologies, we must take a number from Morisseau’s statement: “I am not taking the normalization of abuse against ANYONE into the future of this field” (Morisseau 2021). Treating consent as a final destination without acknowledging the impact of scarcity on our ability to consent and to advocate for the consent of others does just that. We, collectively, cannot take that into the future of our field.

Method 2: LOSS OF SELF

The following is a definition sourced from the work of educator, curriculum writer, facilitator, and sexologist Bianca Laureano, Ph.D., MA², CSES and sexual literacy educator Natasha Singh, M.Ed. presented as part of a lecture for the Ante Up! Virtual Freedom Professional Development School for Justice Workers.

- **Dehumanization**—A process that includes: creating categories of human/un-human; denying dignity, subjectivity, and self-determination; Subjugating, isolating, or marginalizing individuals/groups/ways of knowing and being; Identifying individuals

and groups as negative, wrong, inferior, void of humanness and humanity; Using language, practices, and policies to negate, distort, exploit, exclude; Creating distorted images of a people as fearful, disgusting, inferior, hypersexual, criminal, etc (Laureano and Singh, 2021).

In our field and in our culture at large, we are told to first identify as our position within our society, and then as human. However, as our position within society moves further and further away from that which is deemed 'valuable,' our humanity finds itself lost as we search for adjectives and titles that redeem our value. In theatrical communities, we're placed into categories of 'performer,' 'director,' 'producer,' 'writer,' and so on and so forth until we find ourselves so lost in the politics of power that we forget that fundamentally what we are is 'human.' Consent-based performance asks us to make decisions based on that humanity. It asks us to consider our wants, needs, and to take up space that our trauma and conditioning has spent lifetimes restricting us from. It's a solution, for those who have the personal power to understand their own access needs. It's an answer for those whose proximity to their societally perceived value allows them to recognize when their humanity is being threatened. But for those of us who have existed in a space of dehumanization for generations, it often takes much more than simply the opportunity to consent or to withdraw consent to understand the weight and impact of our silence. In fact, often, it takes a lifetime to even realize that we have been silenced in the first place.

"White supremacy needs me to have an identity crisis without and within it" ("Wisdom from Cristina River Chapman", [WhitesupremacyCulture.info](http://Whitesupremacyculture.info)). It needs me to lose sight of my own humanity, to rely on its definitions of my adjectives in order to determine my consent. Here, is where the best of solutions fail us. When our models for consent do not acknowledge or include conversations of dehumanization and the extensive impact it has on our sense of self, we lose the opportunity to set and to communicate boundaries that are authentic to us.

Instead, we present the world with boundaries that have been projected onto us without the tools to recognize where our own limits truly lie.

Global Majority individuals often are left in the position of finding those limits and having their own humanity dawn on them after extensive harm has already occurred. Often, this realization is met with gaslighting and performative action by structures upholding white supremacy culture and we find ourselves questioning whether our experiences are valid or if they are somehow unique to us, as if unique experiences somehow hold lesser value. However, there are moments where we find power with one another as collective experiences are brought to light and we realize that there is opportunity to be heard. In April of 2021, an instance of action against loss of self was brought into the public space as Tony award winning performer Karen Olivo announced that they would be leaving Broadway and refusing to reprise their role of Satine in *Moulin Rouge!* after the Covid-19 shutdown. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Olivo said “Something really shifted in me” (qtd. In Lee 2021). Olivo spoke on that shift being motivated by a sense of empowerment that they felt as others in the industry began to speak up and speak out against sexual harassment and racial power dynamics. “In the year of community organizing during the shutdown, I realized I can actually help my industry in a different way, by caring about the people who are suffering in silence, because we can’t go back to the way it was” (Lee 2021).

Olivo’s experience exists in a space of privilege, which they admitted in the *LA Times* interview, but within that privilege, a strong statement exists about how deeply the method of loss of self can embed itself in our culture. Even from the top of the industry, there are those who are finding themselves outwardly consenting and staying silent as empowered people continue to cross boundaries and test the limits of their humanity. Consent-based practices help, yes, but they do not and cannot solve the problem of dehumanization in our industry alone. We need to move toward sustainable change, change that is constantly re-imagining itself and expanding upon its own practices. Consent is crucial to that change but it is not

enough to ensure it. That, naturally, brings us to our third method as our bodies move us into a space designed to protect us.

Method 3: FEAR

“Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.” This is a quote by Audre Lorde from her essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” which was originally published as part of a series of essays written by feminist freedom fighters in the Summer 1978 issue of *Sinister Wisdom 6: A Journal of Words and Pictures for the Lesbian Imagination in All Women* (Lorde 1984). *Of course, I am afraid*, she says. Fear is the number one method that white supremacy culture employs in order to dehumanize us. Fear is the number one enemy to consent. It drives us to give an enthusiastic ‘yes’ to an action that distorts our boundaries. It allows us to be manipulated by false promises of safety and security. It keeps us silent.

In her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” Audre Lorde wrote that when “we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society” (Lorde 1984). Fear is in direct conflict with consent. It forces us into a position where we begin to renegotiate our boundaries, where we begin to consent to actions that equate to our suffering and where we find ourselves numb. As ICs or IDs, our role is designed to deconstruct power dynamics and, sometimes that means standing up against the empowered in support of those without. But, what if that means risking our jobs? What if that means risking those in power not wanting us in the room? What if there won’t be a next time? Without addressing the nature of fear as a tool of white supremacy culture and identifying where it lives within our industry, consent-based practices are inherently a performance. They exist in a space that cannot be separated from the very problems they were meant to solve.

Global Majority performers in our field stand up, despite their fear, all the time and, in doing so, risk the erasure of their history, of their livelihood, of their reputation, and of their safety. In an essay published to Medium entitled “Why I am Fed Up with Performative Activism from White and Black Theater Makers,” Tony Award winning actress and filmmaker Tonya Pinkins took action against fear. “Speaking up and out about the racism, misogyny and oppression at ‘Mother Courage’ and ‘Rasheeda Speaking,’ while people branded me difficult, crazy, evil cemented in me that truth polarizes. ... There is no reward without risk” (Pinkins 2020). Here, Pinkins is referring to her decisions to leave the cast of two major productions due to the mistreatment of Black women and the lack of accountability by the predominantly white theater companies that were producing them. She’s highlighting the ways in which our culture vilifies those who push past their fear in order to speak out against white supremacy culture and who are not validated in any way until civil unrest and collective protests force institutions to release statements riddled with buzzwords like ‘allyship,’ ‘support,’ and, yes, ‘consent.’

From DEI to Anti-Racist Theatre

So, what can we learn from this? How can our consent-based performance methodologies live in a space beyond the buzzwords? In each of these examples, predominantly white theaters put on shows that showcased the experience of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color under the guise of ‘inclusion’ without doing the work to ensure their definitions of inclusion aligned with that of justice. They preached diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging while allowing their consent-based practices to exist only under caveats of scarcity of opportunity, loss of self in favor of the collective and fear. Fear of losing the short bits of progress which Global Majority artists have worked for generations to attain and fear of losing the ‘best of solutions’ should we speak up and speak out about the ways in which they’ve failed us.

Dominique Morisseau's actions against scarcity, Karen Olivo's actions against loss of self, and Tonya Pinkins' actions against fear are examples of women of color finding gaps in frameworks built with the best of solutions in mind. They're examples of how diversity, equity, inclusion, and consent practices can fail us should they be treated as absolutes rather than as tools for navigating the road to community safety. However, they are also examples of moments that highlight the limitations that exist when the only active steps taken away from performative allyship and toward change are taken by those disempowered by the system after harm has already occurred. Though, this is not an original thought. I am not the first person to recognize that calling on the industry for change by stepping down or stepping back, while brave, does not often (or ever) result in full systemic overhaul. Yes, it opens up the eyes and ears of the collective as they raise their voices and search for solutions, but it is not a solution in itself to simply ask Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color in our communities to endure until the abuse they have faced becomes too much for them to consent to. It is not enough to simply speak out against the roots that white supremacy culture has laid in our industry, we have to identify, dissect and dismantle the power dynamics that enforce it, that threaten the efficacy of consent-based models, and build a new industry on its ashes.

In her 2018 essay published in *American Theatre*, "Training with a Difference", Nicole Brewer wrote that "rather than just address the symptom, whitewashing, it's clear that we also need to confront the cause: training institutions that enforce prejudices and center whiteness" (Brewer, 2018). In this article, Brewer was providing context for and introducing the US theatrical community to what would be one of the most impactful contributions toward dismantling those roots and ending performative allyship in theatrical spaces, Conscientious Theatre Training, which would lead her to the development of the Anti-Racist Theatre (A.R.T.) movement. Nicole Brewer's trainings center bringing sustainable tools for inclusion to theatrical education spaces that move far beyond DEI and affirmative action. They center bringing bodymind awareness to performance spaces that allow for performers and educators to understand the nuanced intersections in identity that contribute to the failure of consent-

based models. In a follow up article written in *American Theatre* just over a year later entitled “Why ‘Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion’ Is Obsolete,” Brewer wrote “...anti-racist theatre is not just about racism; it’s about eliminating all forms of oppression and creating authentic belonging” (Brewer, 2019).

Brewer’s work is an example of what happens when you question “the best of solutions” and take action toward improving them. At the time, DEI trainings and committees were treated as if they were the magical new answer to all of our questions about justice and change, and Anti-Racist Theatre was, and is still, highlighting all of the ways in which those programs have failed us. Instead, Nicole Brewer’s trainings have offered opportunities for action using “anti-racist theory, social justice, collectivism, healing justice and theatre exercises for an embodied understanding of racism and our agency to become anti-racist” (Brewer 2017).

While so many theatre makers continue to have their practices transformed by Nicole Brewer’s work, just as they have been by the work of consent-based performance practitioners, there are still productions and institutions that use her language as a show of good faith for communities of color rather than as stepping stones for sustainable change. More and more theatrical education spaces have brought Anti-Racist Theatre trainings to their institutions only to continue to put on productions where Global Majority individuals are asked to draw on their identities without support. With every training and every course that institutions welcome into their spaces, there is only but so much that can be done to ensure that those institutions will hold themselves accountable to the tools they have been given.

We need to recognize that action without accountability is empty. We need to push past our fears and ask ourselves questions that challenge us. Questions like, how can we integrate the core ideals of Anti-Racist Theatre and similar pedagogies into each and every one of our performance processes? How can we take trainings and courses and call-outs, call-ins and call-ons and turn them into active infrastructure for a new theatrical industry? We need to take the best of our solutions and search for gaps within them, strengthen them, and we need to recognize those who have been doing this work, knowingly or unknowingly, for

generations and highlight that their intention is and has always been continued critique and sustainable change. Because just in case it has not yet been made abundantly clear: This is not the first time that a justice minded framework, like consent, has failed us.

Intersectionality vs. What You Think It Is.

In fact, many institutions, theatrical or otherwise, actively promote a framework that developed when scholars came together to identify a gap in the racial justice models that proceeded them.

- **Intersectionality**—A theoretical model for understanding the relationship between power and oppression. A practice of examining and shifting power and oppression. A practice of building and examining relationships. A highly academic framework with roots in academia and law, including Critical Race Theory, Critical Legal Theory, and Black Feminist Thought.
 - Multiple Identities + Systems + Power = Where Oppression May Exist (Laureano 2021).

Intersectionality developed as an answer to a failure in racial justice and feminist frameworks that left those with multiple marginalized identities, specifically Black women, left out of conversations of race and gender equality. It's an equation, one that asks us to identify power dynamics that exist within a space, the systems of oppression within that space and how people with multiple identities may experience additional oppression in those spaces. The entirety of its history exists because scholars took the risk of questioning what, at the time, looked like the best of solutions, giving them the space to expand upon them and to find methods of ensuring their success without having to leave anyone behind. The very nature of the Intersectionality framework is a celebration of allowing critique and finding where our current solutions fail us so as to take another step forward into progress.

However, in spite of those origins, Intersectionality is currently one of the most misused and misunderstood social justice frameworks in the public space. The word is simplified and appropriated by institutions and educators who claim to understand its complexities while applying it to spaces where it, too, fails us. The word is used as, you guessed it, a buzzword, and treated as if the mere mention of it will solve issues of injustice that stretch far beyond singular instances of oppression. Many institutions cite Intersectionality as a core principle, attributing it entirely to one use of the framework by American Civil Rights activist and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who applied it to capitalistic structures through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). While Crenshaw's analysis was an incredible contribution to the work, attributing its entire history to her erases the work of the Black scholars that form the true origins of the framework. The following is a list of racial and gender justice frameworks and their theorists that make up the origins of Intersectionality:

- **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**—An academic and legal framework that denotes that systemic racism is part of American society and that recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice (“Critical Race Theory FAQ”, NAACP).
 - **Theorists:** Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams
- **Critical Legal Theory**—A theory which states that the law is necessarily intertwined with social issues, particularly stating that the law has inherent social biases (“Critical Legal Theory”, Legal Information Institute).
 - **Theorists:** Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Duncan Kennedy
- **Feminist Legal Theory**—A theory which states that the law has been fundamental in women's historical subordination (Fineman 2012).
 - **Theorists:** Ann Scales, Martha Fineman
- **Black Feminist Thought**—A school of thought that demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge due to the ways in which they encounter institutional discrimination based upon their race and gender (Collins 1990).

- **Theorist:** Patricia Hill Collins

Okay, so we've erased some names. We've simplified the framework from its academic origins and we've used it to highlight acceptance of those with multiple marginalized identities in our spaces. What harm has really been done? The answer is, the same harm that is done when words like 'consent,' 'anti-racist,' and 'trauma-informed' are used without considerations of the gaps they were designed to fill and the structures that impact their efficacy. By erasing the experiences of those whose trauma and whose ability to consent are impacted by power dynamics and by systems of oppression, we are effectively sending a clear message of performative allyship that centers white bodies. We are erasing the parts of the equation that help us to find those gaps and losing out on opportunities for expansion, critique & exploration.

When you misuse the words Intersectionality or Intersectional, using them as a replacement for the term "multiple identities" rather than as a method of analysis or as an academic theory, you erase the history and experience of those who called for justice in the first place. You contribute to the performativity that also is found in the of bringing in of experts for trainings and conferences and talk backs only to use their words as absolutes and endings and, yes, as solutions, as if any singular framework for justice could ever exist as the singular solution for oppression. As an alternative, we should be working to lift up the history of these words, to emphasize their original goals and where those goals leave space for expansion. Rather than using phrases like "intersectionalities in a space" which misrepresent the full history of the word, gain specificity with your language and use phrases like "intersecting identities in spaces" or "compounding oppressions."

The language exists. The precedents are out there. Tools are made to be improved and frameworks are made to be critiqued. In the field of consent-based performance, treating any framework, as infallible infringes on the consent of scholars like Nicole Brewer, on Intimacy Professionals and consent educators, and on the many founders of justice frameworks, like Intersectionality, who all called for a cultural shift, not for more workshops and Ted Talks. But

even more so, it infringes on the consent of each and every member of all of the dehumanized communities in our industry, including those who do not identify as People of Color.

Collaboration and Cultural Competency.

So... now what? We've identified some factors that can contribute to the failure of consent. (ie: Power and Systems of Oppression). We've explored the methods that uphold and support those factors (ie: the methods of white supremacy culture). We've found our precedents in the industry for breaking down those methods and we've analyzed examples of metrics that can help us to fill those gaps (ie: Anti-Racist Theatre, Intersectionality and the history of BIWOC protest in theatrical spaces). So, where do we go from here? Well, consent-based performance is a methodology. One that is reinforced by the inclusion of Intimacy Professionals in performance spaces. However, as we shared, one person cannot guarantee the safety of a collective or be fully responsible for maintaining and ensuring consent in a space impacted by other complex systems of oppression. So, just as Intersectionality was born as a support system for Racial Justice frameworks, Cultural Competency Professionals and other justice-based methodologies need to be brought into our performance communities as a support system for consent and for the foundational work of artists and performers calling for anti-racism in our performance spaces.

The work is already being done. Racial Justice scholars like Tavia Riveé, Kaja Dunn, Ann James, Chelsey Morgan (that one's me) and many more have dawned the role of the Cultural Competency Professional, each sharing their own Afro-centric methodology and coining their own titles such as the Cultural Coordinator, trademarked to Tavia Riveé, or the Cultural Sensitivity Specialist, trademarked to Ann James for herself and for the members of her collective, Intimacy Coordinators of Color. They've entered performance spaces all over the country, at all levels of production, and have supported Intimacy Directors, Choreographers and Coordinators by helping them to integrate justice into their consent-based practices. The birth of the Cultural Competency Professional as a support system for Consent-

based Performance methodologies is an example of the expansive and revolutionary possibilities that exist when we allow ourselves to critique the best of our solutions. It's in direct opposition to fear, to loss of self and to scarcity, as it acknowledges that there is infinite work to be done in order to dismantle white supremacy culture and that within that infinity is opportunity.

The Cultural Competency Professional as an addition to performance processes is just the beginning of the potential that exists within our industry. The role is one that both supports performers and other artists in performance processes by combining tools of dramaturgy in pre-production and conceptualization with consent-based models and tools for active and accountable anti-racism during rehearsal and production processes. The role supports the curation of content warnings and works alongside intimacy professionals, directors, writers, designers and other members of the creative team to put on productions that consider the full breadth of what we are asking Global Majority artists to consent to when we choose to tell the stories of their experiences. They are an opportunity to move us closer to our goal of sustainability and to reject performative action should they be utilized to the fullness of their potential, meant to be brought on as an initial and integral member of creative teams rather than as fail-safes after harm as already occurred. And if harm has already occurred? There is an opportunity to question the best of solutions again as accountability professionals trained in transformative justice and restoration can be ready with tools to support cultural competency professionals in their quest to rebuild trust in a space where it has been broken.

Spoiler: *This is what we do when consent fails.*

Critiquing Consent.

For my final remarks, I'd like to continue our pattern and take us back to language, clarifying what I've meant throughout this essay when I've used the word *failure*. I've used this term over and over again, acknowledging its ability to activate fear responses within us

but refused to shy away, rejecting the ability that fear has to control us under a white supremacy culture. To define it, I'd like to turn us away from the subtext that associates failure with self-worth and away from the capitalistic view of failure as final. Instead, I'd simply like to define failure according to its Oxford dictionary definition:

- **Failure**—the lack of achievement of one's goal.

The goal of the tool of consent within “consent-based performance” was to ensure body autonomy and to curate safety in our creative communities. However, we have recognized that consent is not foolproof and that the answer is not vilifying Global Majority people or treating anyone as overly precious. After all, the systems of power and oppression that impact and weaken consent-based frameworks don't only threaten the safety of Black, Indigenous and People of Color in our community. All dehumanized communities have found themselves in a position where consent was not enough to curate their safety. Disabled communities, religious minorities, youth (and the elderly), the queer and trans communities, women, and many other minority communities have found themselves in situations that bring up the question of consent. They've found themselves failed by definitions that stop at 'yes' and 'no' and that don't consider the risk associated with speaking up and speaking out against those who hold power. The answer is not to further erase and dehumanize those communities. The answer is compassion. It's in allowing our goals to sometimes not be achieved and in learning from those failures.

So, my challenge to you is simple. Like justice, treat consent as a vision, as a practice. Move away from using it as a buzzword or as an absolute and toward using it as a tool for understanding where trauma may exist in a space. Acknowledge that treating consent as if it exists in a state of perfection is a white supremacist notion. Allow yourself to fail. Don't shy away from questions related to consent and don't assume the role of the intimacy professional is a role grounded in the pursuit of perfection. The role is grounded in justice. It's the re-

imagining of an industry that dehumanized those who built it. It's a role that is based in radical empathy and in imagination. It's the best of solutions. And so, as other frameworks for justice emphasize, it must also be based in compassion. Compassion for those of who dedicate their career to the pursuit of radical humanity. Compassion for work that will never be finished, and goals that will never be reached. Compassion for the performers who dare to speak up about their boundaries and compassion for those who cannot. Compassion for those of us who coin our own titles and who create our own adjectives for the purpose of filling the gaps left by the question of consent. Compassion that allows us to look beyond what is, to expand our visions for justice and to take the performativity out of performance.

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