

# Only Staging Whiteness: What We Lose<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This commentary has been revised from a guest talk, with the same title, that the author delivered at the opening session of the Children and Youth Performance Conference III, presented by Young People's Theatre and York University, online on June 25, 2021. The attendees were theatre practitioners, performers, community organizers, educators, and researchers working in the area of children and youth performance. This commentary attempts to demonstrate in practice “what we lose” when we only stage whiteness by focusing on the insights gained from centering the intellectual and artistic contributions of Black educators and Black theatre practitioners.

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Good morning. I am writing today from the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. It is land that is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and that is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

On May 27, 2021, the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation released a press statement saying that the remains of 215 children were found at the Kamloops Residential School run by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate from 1890-1969 and the Federal government until 1978. In the days that followed the discovery of the children's remains, Bonnie Devine, an Anishinaabe/Ojibwa artist and Associate Professor at Ontario College of Arts and Design, posted the following on Facebook (O'Kaadenigan Wiingashk, 2021):

I want that place treated like what it is – a crime scene. I want the police and the courts and the international human rights tribunal involved. I want criminal charges laid and the institutions and individuals responsible to face legal consequences. I don't want pity. I want justice.

On June 6, 2021, a white man intentionally rammed a truck into five members of the Afzaal family as they were out for an evening walk in London, Ontario. Four members of this Muslim family were killed. The following day, the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM, 2021) posted a statement on Twitter that included a quote from Mustafa Farooq, CEO of the Council:

Muslims in Canada have become all too familiar with the violence of Islamophobia. . .[b]ut this loss of a family, the loss of a child in our community because of Islamophobia – this is a sorrow that will run deep for a long time. But let that sorrow be the ground where we stand for justice, and stand for change.

I invite you to join me now in a moment of silence to bear witness to the many people who have been killed on these lands from the violence of white supremacist beliefs.

It is a tremendous honour to be in the presence of so many practitioners, performers, community organizers, educators, and researchers working in the area of children and youth performance. I began with Divine and Farooq's calls for justice because artistic and academic work can amplify, echo, and distill urgent public calls and this premise informs my talk today entitled "Only Staging Whiteness: What We Lose." Throughout it I will demonstrate "what we lose" when we only stage whiteness by focusing on the insights we gain from the intellectual and artistic contributions of historically marginalized peoples. For the rest of the talk, I will focus on the perspectives of Black educators, Black theatre practitioners, and Black performers. I will, at times, quote people at length in place of adding my own authorial voice in order to bring their perspectives onto this stage space and into deeper conversation with each other. I invite you, throughout my talk, to think through and experience if and how the centering of Black people's perspectives affects you and, as I centre Black people's perspectives, I invite you to consider if and how whiteness figures in your own artistic and academic work.

In her essay on Black teaching in the South from 1940-1960, Siddle Walker (2001) synthesized a variety of perspectives on Black teachers and identified five principles that capture the beliefs they held about their roles: teachers should develop a relationship with the community, teachers should be committed to professional ideals, teachers should care about their students, teachers should relate the curriculum to students' needs, and teachers [should] receive community and school forms of support" (Tillman, 2004, p. 283).

As a Black educator and performer, I call my teaching practice a "pedagogy of justice" and it uses divergent source material to challenge students to interrogate the historical, political, and cultural components of their frameworks of analysis and those at play in the material at hand (Keleta-Mae, 2011). I pay attention to these things because my formal educators were rarely attentive to that for me as a Black student in public elementary and high schools in Ontario and universities in Ontario and Quebec. One of the things I learned in all of the courses where whiteness was constantly staged and centred is that there is a deficit of learning when artists, teachers, and students foreclose areas of inquiry, tout intellectual blind spots, and suspend complex material realities of everyday life. Those creative processes and pedagogical modes of teaching left me out as a Black, female, bisexual student. And so, my artistic and teaching philosophies stem from what I did not experience and what I hope the classroom and stage can be.

An ongoing frustration for some Black artists and educators, however, is the constant refusal by white-led institutions and institutions with majority white audiences to engage meaningfully with Black artists and Black audiences. In the article "Non-Traditional Casting (an Open Letter)," Clinton Turner Davis (1997) writes,

Why do artistic and managing directors, educators, producers, and other decision makers love to talk about the changes they are making in their theaters and institutions? Isn't it action that we have come to accept as the driving force of good theatre—action, not talk? Why has it taken so long for these so-called artistic leaders to identify and implement the actions they should take? Stubbornness? Lack of creativity? Unconscious racism? Lack of dedication to their public expressions of commitment to change? Fear? (p. 591)

Why is it certain theater companies can only identify one or two ethnic directors and designers to work in their theaters? Usually one per season! Why does the hiring of this ethnic director preclude the hiring of others? Why is s/he hired to direct or design only the ethnically specific work? Is it a question of willful ignorance of the talent pool or finding one's level of comfort with an ethnic artist? Is it a belief that ethnic artists are not capable of creating beyond their own ethnicity? Is the black artist, the ethnic artist still being perceived monolithically—under the assumption that the one that is hired knows, and can express, the desires and urges of and for the entire race? Or are we being blacklisted because we continue to ask difficult, uncomfortable questions, to name names? (p. 591)

Davis' questions, in 1997, about the state of theatre in the United States, are relevant questions to ask, in 2021, about the state of theatre in Canada where I reside as evidenced by the document "The Black Pledge." The Black Pledge was initially conceived by a collective of Black women artists led by Sedina Fiati in 2020 that developed into The Black Pledge Collective made up of the following members: Alicia Richardson, Chiamaka Glory, Diane Roberts, Jajube Mandiela, Janelle Cooper, Joella Crichton, Rita Shelton-Deverell, Samantha Walkes, and Sedina Fiati. So when I speak the following quote, I invite you to imagine it performed by a nine-person chorus.

The Black Pledge was drafted in response to the long-standing systemic injustices against Black people, of which we witnessed an insurgence and global response to in 2020. . . The goal of the Black Pledge is to address and dismantle anti-Black racism within the structure of live-performance organizations in order to support, affirm and advance Black artists and arts workers across Canada. By focusing on equity and inclusion at the structural level, we can create spaces where Black people feel safe, supported, and empowered to self-advocate within the more nuanced interpersonal experiences of anti-Blackness. (The Black Pledge, 2020, p. 2)

The Pledge asks theatre (p. 8), dance and opera organizations to make a three-year commitment to the following:

1. Creating and/or updating policy & Addressing Past Harms
2. Increasing Black representation beyond tokenization
3. Prioritizing historically marginalized groups within Black communities
4. Make an annual monetary commitment to the Collective which will cover operating costs, as well as the establishment of an arts-service organization and mutual aid funds that will support mental health services, professional development, and entrepreneurial aid for Black artists and arts workers.
5. Work at building and repairing community relationships with Black people. (p. 1)

In my own work, centring blackness has extended to thinking about centering the experiences of Black audiences. I wrote the play *stuck* in 2001 as a meeting place between performance poetry and theatre. I revised it in 2020 as part of my Black And Free project influenced by the work of Ntozake Shange and Christina Sharpe. *stuck's* new three-act structure reflects Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*,

which is divided into three sections each told from a different character's perspective. The play's new focus on imagining its primary audience as Black reflects the influence of the social media post by Sharpe some years ago that I read (and can no longer find) where she called on Black writers to write as though our audience is Black.

*stuck*'s 2020 revisions were informed by Sharpe's tweet insofar as I reread the original script while asking questions including: Is this scene meant for a Black audience? If not, what purpose does it serve? Does it need to stay in? How else can I tell this story? In practical terms, it meant understanding that I originally wrote *stuck*, in part, for white audiences as evidenced by all the text I found—then deleted or revised—that conjured and dramatized some of the horrors of chattel slavery, white supremacy, and anti-Black racism. My interest and experimentations with centering Black audiences is part of my research project Black And Free that researches and creates art and scholarship about how Black artists and scholars envision and express freedom through various modes of Black expressive culture (such as theatre, performance, literature, music, visual art, and film). As a result of this research, my plays are no longer solely about Black life, but they now also intentionally centre Black audiences and Black characters that are free.

I know that each of us has a story, a reason, an explanation for why we are drawn to performance focused on and by children and youth. What brings each of us to this work also informs the materials we select, the tasks we assign,<sup>3</sup> and the ways we use our skills as theatre practitioners and researchers to organize in our communities beyond work. And so, in conclusion, I offer this reminder that the stakes are high for the perspectives we choose to teach in rehearsal halls, classrooms, and community centres precisely because performance can address our urgent social needs by facilitating participants' and audiences' ability to better understand the world, forge their place in it, and imagine their dreams for it. Thank you.

## Notes

1. Edited from a paper with the same title, delivered at the Children and Youth Performance Conference III, presented by Young People's Theatre and York University, online, June 25, 2021.

2. Italics are sung, a capella.

3. In "Staging Race," Sharrell D. Lockett (2017) offers a series of practical tips for teachers leading drama classes for K-12 students. Lockett writes, "If the play involves students playing animals or inanimate objects, one should ask, "Does this animal or object have negative historical racial significance that should preclude me from casting a minority actor in this role?" "Is my student of color the only actor portraying a non-human?" I recommend not casting an actor of color to play an animal or inanimate object at all. However, if all the actors are playing non-human characters, cast minority actors in roles that are heroic, positive, and smart, while excluding them from roles that are antagonistic, intellectually inferior, or mute" (p. 157). Furthermore, Lockett advises that students should not be consulted about casting choices and instead that it is the instructor who should be tasked with being aware of the potential tropes, stereotypes and other incumbrances that could accompany casting choices (p. 157).

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