

Q2Q Conference  
Vancouver, July 2016  
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Proudly Welcoming:  
Is Diversity in the Queer Theatre Community by Invitation Only?

*Diversity can take the form of a welcome. People of color in being welcomed are treated as guests, as temporary residents in someone else's home.*

- Sara Ahmed

Toronto's queer and LGBT communities have certainly acquired general visibility and specific rights since the 1960's. However, accepted homonormative activities are only viewed as acceptable when they conform to particular ideological expectations. In the context of the performance and theatre community, while white cisgender gay men's works may have increased visibility and popularity on Canadian stages, the underrepresentation and lack of acknowledgement of marginalized queer artists in Canada complicates the vision of acceptance and inclusivity Canada purports to possess. Indeed, as recent statistics collected by Equity in Theatre (EIT) demonstrate, Canada is far from achieving equity on its professional stages. Indigenous peoples, trans folk, People of Colour, those with diverse abilities, and/or women are consistently underrepresented in the theatre and performance community. As lead researcher Michelle MacArthur explains little has improved for women and marginalized artists in Canadian performance since Rebecca Burton's 2006 national study (MacArthur 4). She writes, "The situation is worse for racialized, immigrant, aboriginal, and disabled women, who have limited access to artistic opportunities despite Canada's celebration of diversity as a cornerstone of its identity" (29). The 2011 Hill Study also indicates that indigenous artists, as well as visible minorities and immigrant artists, all earn less than artists outside of these

categories (40). Though the queer community is certainly still a marginalized group whose works may also be underrepresented in mainstream programming, historically and currently minoritized groups and performers, particularly works by disabled artists, indigenous artists and women and trans folk of colour, remain under researched in queer theatre (Halferty). This paper considers how the false notion of a monolithic “queer theatre” community erases the privileges many queer folks possess due to their race, class, ability, gender or settler identity. Throughout this discussion, I hold myself and other white academics and practitioners accountable and consider how queer theatre is implicated in the erasure of multiple identities and experiences through the universalization and neutralization of patriarchy, whiteness, and settler colonialism.

As a white Jewish queer woman, my objective in this paper is three-fold: To interrogate how whiteness is strategically unnamed and positioned as neutral; to examine how the universal queer subject is often used as a means of both “diversifying” work, and representing queer history, resulting in a lack of recognition and further erasure of more marginalized queer artists’ contributions and achievements in performance historically and currently; and to recognize and confront the necessity for new forms of leadership in order to establish long-lasting systemic change.

When I began writing this paper, I struggled with the notion that a focus and consideration on difference has the capacity to perpetuate the constructed inequitable categories of identities that I am seeking to denaturalize and confront. How does a spotlight on difference assume unified identitarian experiences and binaries, which universalize “the Other” as a singular entity? How does a focus on difference maintain and propagate categorical and systemic oppression? As Madhavi Menon notes:

Identity is the demand made by power – tell us who you are so we can tell you what you can do. And by complying with that demand, by parsing endlessly the particulars that make identity different from one another's, we are slotting into a power structure, not dismantling it... Critiquing identity politics, then, is not a dismissal of lived reality, but, rather, a response to the oppressive demands that identity itself make under the guise of progressive politics. (2-3)

The very impetus to focus on identity through difference might thus reinstate the hierarchical systems of power and oppression that many performance scholars and creators attempt to problematize and contest. The simple notion of “diversity,” establishes a binary between whiteness (as an invisible and neutral norm) and “diverse” (a universalized and violently unified category of Other). Using an intersectional approach might seem to compel us to move beyond an essentialized view of binaried difference. However, intersectionality still necessitates categorization and emphasis of difference, which as Lynn Huffer notes, “runs the risk of perpetuating precisely the problems intersectionality had hoped to alleviate” (18). And yet, while I recognize these obstacles, the lived reality of categorization and resulting oppressions and hierarchies are undeniable. To refuse difference, in practice, might be to ignore the intersections of oppression and privilege. Therefore, I opt nonetheless to use an intersectional approach to theatre equity here, in order to critically analyze and explode the limitations of boundaries, while persistently considering the disparate and messy oppressions and privileges queer artists experience simultaneously.

I begin this analysis with a discussion on the vocabulary utilized to describe productions and the ways in which they are marketed. I argue that the language used (or avoided) in performance demonstrates universalizing and normalizing tactics, which erase whiteness and situate marginalized bodies as distinct and Other. What does it mean to remain unnamed and outside of the expectations of classification? Difference necessitates a label, but with privilege comes the assumption of a universal and the avoidance of classification. As a

white theatre academic and practitioner, I am rarely expected to identify my race and my work is rarely seen as representative of my race. In this sense, I have the privilege to remain unspecialized, neutralized and invisible. I can remain neutrally “queer” without the need to fit my work into more specific categories of difference. Therefore, following Valerie Sing Turner and legal scholar Constance Backhouse, I note the need to declare whiteness and label white practitioners as white. As Backhouse asserts “‘The transparency of ‘whiteness’ is misleading and contributes to an erasure of the privileges that attach to membership in the dominant race (9)’” (qtd. in Sing Turner 25).

The erasure of whiteness becomes apparent in the words used to describe people of colour, diversely abled people, and gender variant folks on stage. Whereas reviewers and audiences will often refer to “cross-gender” or “color blind” casting when a director casts a body deemed racialized or gender-variant in a predominant role, such verbalization is seldom used to refer to the *choice* to cast a white or perceived gender-normative actor. As Carrie Sandahl explains:

Rarely is an actor of color, a woman, or a disabled person cast against type to play a character from a more dominant social position. Actors from marginalized groups must battle on two fronts, then: to be cast in roles that resemble their own identities and to be cast in roles that do not. (236)

The language used to express particular artists’ inclusion (or exclusion) in a performance functions to normalize and universalize white and privileged identities. It is not seen as necessary to name privileged bodies in performance, because whiteness, able-bodiedness, and hetero/homonormativity become the standard expectation to which all else is compared – it is only when someone opts to introduce a racialized, dis/differently abled, or gender-variant body that it is deemed a choice at all. As Meera Sethi further explains:

The visual production of women artists of colour in Canada is received within a hegemonic framework that takes as its starting place the centrality of white male

artists, thus building onto that a discourse that situates women artists of colour outside its normalizing boundaries. (3)

By universalizing whiteness, able-bodiedness, and straightness as the absence of artistic choices, the racialized, crip, indigenous, and queer body is perpetuated as the visitor or outsider in a queer space. In this way, queer women of colour and those who are diversely Othered may be welcomed onto conventional or queer stages, but it is rarely as insiders to the experience. Their presence on stage is through extended invitation, not equitable inclusion. The absence of a label and refusal to name white work as white work illustrates Ahmed's notion of welcoming an "Other," wherein marginalized groups are invited as temporary outsiders and guests in the privileged practitioners home (*Willful Subjects*, 148). It is clear that this issue is not one limited to queer theatre, but I intentionally highlight it in relation to queer performance practice, because of the capacity for marginalized theatre companies to create radical change. Queer theatres can lead the charge in denaturalizing whiteness by naming it as such. In making this claim, I do not intend to devalue or trivialize the accomplishments of marginalized theatre practitioners, nor do I intend to erase their achievements. We should indeed be celebrating and supporting this work. However, considering mainstream and commercial theatre programming, we might note the ways in which works and practitioners are Othered in the very ways in which they are included.

As Paul Halferty notes, while there are many works that explore and exist at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race, limited research in Canada focuses on this work, "The performance histories of queers of colour, an area that has generated some of the most vital interventions in queer performance studies in the US, are meager in the Canadian scholarly context." The scholarly investment in charting and analyzing these works would have the capacity to change not only our current conception of the theatrical landscape, but

also what is remembered, archived and historicized. We might consider here the way that queer and LGBT histories are enacted on stage – what is valued as historically relevant? What is brought to our stages as integral to the construction of communities, legacies, and cultures? Here, one example we might consider is the development and production of *Buddies in Bad Times*' *The Gay Heritage Project*, a work that, while acknowledging whiteness, continues to memorialize and glorify a singular universalized gay narrative. Though the characters acknowledge whiteness, recognition does not excuse one from critically addressing and dismantling privilege. I borrow, here, from Lynn Huffer's discussion of feminism and apply it to queer theory. Huffer argues that "liberal feminist successes have been achieved at the expense of other, less privileged women. [...] [T]his deeper admission puts forward the challenging claim that increasing inequality between women is a result of the gains of liberal feminism" (147). With this in mind we may ask how the erasure of particular histories and the continual propagation of dominant white narratives continues to benefit the white queer community in Canada. In addition to audience reception and historicization, we may consider funding and economic gains associated with producing this kind of production. Who is reaping the benefits of this single story of queer history and whose stories are not being told? With development and production support from *Buddies in Bad Times* and BMO Financial Group (*Buddies*, "Gay Heritage Project"), allocated resources and funding is streamlined into already privileged sectors of queer communities.

Though, arguably there is increasing acknowledgement of white privilege in the arts community, and perhaps more so in arts communities that cater to marginalized and oppressed artists and audiences, the issues around inclusion and representation are still evident in valuations of artistic excellence through awards and programming. Although artists of colour created incredibly strong work in Canada in the 2014/2015 season, the Jessie

awards, which celebrate professional theatre artists in Vancouver, BC, were, as Sing Turner aptly notes in her article, dominated by white artists' work. She explains that this outcome is anything but surprising because all of the members of the ten-person jury were white, as were those on the six-member jury for Original Script (22). While queer or gender non-conforming practitioners were nominated for awards, these works have the capacity to perpetuate white supremacy by erasing more marginalized and oppressed groups from Canadian stages and theatrical archives. Similarly, in Toronto, Ontario on Tuesday January 26, 2016, Canadian Stage in Toronto announced their upcoming season. Out of the 13 shows they are producing this season, all of the directions, choreographers, and playwrights are white. Despite this glaring and oppressive exclusion of marginalized artists of colour, prior to the season announcement, Artistic and Managing Director, Matthew Jocelyn announced "the diversity" of the season's casting. The question is not simply about how an artistic director in Toronto can make such a gravely oppressive statement, but also about what he believes "passes" under the umbrella term "diverse." Though roles might have been cast with minoritized or racialized performers, white theatre practitioners occupy all of the major production roles. "Diversity" is used strategically here to produce a particular kind of artistic image and reception. In *On Being Included*, Ahmed suggests that the term "diversity" is a means of "accruing value"; a hollow place-holder, aesthetic or speech convention wherein "what is named as diverse becomes less significant than the name 'diversity'" (*On Being Included*, 58). Perhaps, for Jocelyn, it is the white gay men in the season that are assumed to diversify the seasons programming choices. Indeed, artists such as Daniel McIvor and Jordan Tanahill are among those being produced this season at the theatre. In this instance, the universalized white gay man may come to represent inclusion, radical progress, and diversity in these programs. In so doing, racial privilege that comes alongside whiteness is further neutralized and naturalized

and the absence of queer artists of colour, queer women artists of colour, trans artists of colour and other racialized queer theatre practitioners is invisibilized.

The problem of “invitation” and “diversity” is deeply rooted in distribution of power and control. Though major queer theatres in the country have programmed multiple works by and with people of colour, much of the time the artistic directors and those doing the programming for the season are white. As Sethi argues the “mainstreaming of dissent” (6) enables major artistic institutions to actively construct categories of racialized outsiders, employing discursive practices that establish and solidify a white Canadian sense of belonging through the categorization and isolation of “culturally diverse” artists (Sethi 7). As Sethi explains though Canadian cultural institutions appear to provide support and visibility to communities of color, they refuse to provide decision-making power to these communities (5). Thus while Canada claims to produce multi-cultural work, it is primarily the white theatre spaces which manage and regulate such productions. Ensuring such supervision and restriction is a means of maintaining a consistent power relation, in which primarily white male artistic directors and institutions control and program spaces for predominately white audiences. As Sethi further explains, these institutions position marginalized women of colour artists as “both the beneficiaries and burden of the state” (Sethi 2-3). A lack of operational funding also ensures that these companies, festivals, and projects are financially unable to secure ongoing spaces and thus are dependent on theatre owners, predominantly run by white men (Burton 40) to approve and program their projects.

Companies that do cater to “culturally specific” communities are also often ghettoized or tokenized. With a designated company in place to program a particular culture’s works, mainstream theatres can evade accountability for programming diverse works – a “queer” theatre can remain “queer” – with a monolithic and universal queer subject as the centre of

the programming. As Deborah Leslie and John Paul Catungal argue, rather than being portrayed as members of the city, “Immigrant and First Nations artists frequently find their work ghettoized in ethnic-based artistic communities, and subject to Orientalist representations that construct it as ‘exotic’ and ‘other’ (Said 1979)” (117). Over the last ten years the city of Toronto has seemingly emphasized and promoted a reputation of inclusivity and diversity in their approach and priorities through support of ethnic and queer festivals and cultural productions (such as Caribana and Pride) (Leslie & Catungal 113). Theoretically, such an investment is seen as a potential source of economic growth through tourism – yet according to Leslie and Catungal, such improvement ultimately caters to and benefits only an elite creative class (114). The works produced are valuable and provide opportunities for many creative practitioners to showcase their productions, but at the same time they solidify difference and may limit funding available to projects planned and implemented by folks who are part of the communities represented.

Throughout this paper, I have worked to identify some of the ways in which privilege functions and hold white theatre practitioners and scholars accountable in the queer community. Moreover, I have begun to consider how queer “diversity” and equity are presented on mainstream and commercialized stages and asked if such productions are, as Sara Ahmed aptly notes, by invitation only. I do so in order to dismantle a monolithic queer theatre industry and demonstrate the ways in which certain privilege is afforded to white theatre practitioners who inhabit or identify with queerness. I end by asking how we might complicate the very umbrella term “queer theatre.” In a recent article Jack Halberstam questioned who “we” are after Orlando. Halberstam writes, “It might be time to break up the fantasy of the LGBT monolith [...]” Even within the performance industry, there is a need to recognize that different practitioners experience identity, labour, and performance differently—

with vastly different access to funding, resources, support, and leadership roles. In no way is this call an attempt to ignore or erase the performance achievements of many queer communities throughout the country or the strides made by theatre companies in the last few years. On the contrary, these radical works and theatres are integral to the changing performance culture and aesthetic in the country. Yet, we are still far from equity. Recognizing the ways in which the very term “queer theatre” assumes a unified theatrical experience, I assert here the need to expose the naturalization of whiteness in queer performance and name white work as white work in order to step back, learn how to be better allies and support the changes needed in the theatre and performance industry.

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