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Sunday, October 22, 2017

Race Forward: Reflections and Open Questions

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Last month, JComm members participated in an anti-racism training session facilitated by [Race Forward](#), dedicated to developing awareness, language, and conversation surrounding issues of racial justice, as they intersect with issues of class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Though most of us had experience discussing these issues in our personal and professional lives, it was valuable to develop a common understanding as a group. Additionally, the facilitated setting allowed us to more candidly discuss personal experiences without the pressure of taking on an 'educator' role.

We also used our time together to identify cases in which we have experienced or witnessed interpersonal, institutional, and systemic discrimination play out in the dance field, and brainstorm possible plans of action in response. Among the topics raised:

Representation beyond Tokenization:

How can we move beyond "checking boxes" when it comes to representation of race, gender, sexuality, or ability--with effects often limited to the lowest authority and lowest paid ranks of an organization--and make genuine change in the makeup of arts leadership? Efforts to get underrepresented groups "in the door" are incomplete without equal efforts to make their voices heard, accommodation needs met, and career advancement supported within the organization.

Financial Gatekeeping to Paid Positions:

From tuition-based trainee positions as prerequisites to dance company contracts to unpaid internships as prerequisites for paid administrative work, many people are cut off from the dance field because they cannot afford to give away their time and money for the possibility of future careers.

Eurocentricity in Dance Training and Education:

Even amongst dance institutions which aim to offer a diverse array of dance forms, most continue to prioritize European-rooted aesthetics as the most important or fundamental. What are the implicit biases in what we consider "technique" and "contemporary dance?" What would dance training look like outside of the assumptions of white cultural superiority?

Reductive Language:

The language that presenters and reviewers use to describe artists of color, queer artists, and/or disabled artists, particularly those who center identity in their work, is often reductive or exoticizing, failing to capture the artists' individuality. For instance, we noted that two choreographers with very different processes and aesthetic sensibilities--but who both make work dealing with the African diaspora--are often described in very similar terms and treated as interchangeable by presenters. How can we develop our language for describing and categorizing dance with enough nuance to recognize both individual artistic voices and the identities they represent?

Sustainable Funding:

There has been a promising increase in initiatives to fund projects that promote equity, diversity, and accessibility in dance, most notably, NYC's recent cultural plan. However, it is crucial to follow through on the implementation and sustainability of these programs. If outwardly progressive funding initiatives are to fulfill their professed values, we must ensure that these programs are creating long-term, financially stable programs that will outlive the initial enthusiasm and publicity.

Productive, but far from conclusive, our conversations left us with more questions, problems, and seeds for further brainstorming. One overarching question was how we can hold the people and organizations in power accountable for actions that perpetuate systemic inequality. How can we hold people accountable when they are our "superiors" in an organization's hierarchy? When they are established and respected players in the field? When they control our access to opportunities and funding? How can we encourage others to respond with openness to change, rather than defensiveness, when their behavior is called out as harmful?

For many JComm members who are involved in arts administration, this raises questions of how they can shape the organizations they are a part of to challenge institutional biases. However, as a freelance performer and choreographer, with perhaps less direct access to institutional power, I am challenged to find ways in which I have power and responsibility in my professional choices. What is my responsibility in selecting which organizations I affiliate with and which messages my body can be used to tell? How can I challenge exploitative racial or sexual dynamics in rehearsal settings? How much ability do I have to do so as an early-career artist in a competitive field? And how might we freelance artists find greater power and voice through collective action?

Personally, I took this workshop as a call to reflect upon my own privileges, marginalizations, and responsibilities in the context of my dance career: on the economic and educational privileges that have made this career path a possibility for me; on the ways in which the dance world has seen me and made me see myself as the Other; on the instances along the way in which I have internalized, endorsed, and tried to assimilate into the standards of white supremacy and heteronormativity; on my responsibility for helping change this landscape moving forward.