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**Not Your Daddy's Theatre Criticism:
Countering White Supremacy Culture with Inclusive Possibility Models**

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Dedication

for past, present, and future critics
may we root our writing in rigor and love

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Abstract

Not Your Daddy's Theatre Criticism: Countering White Supremacy Culture with Inclusive Possibility Models

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This thesis unveils Western theatre criticism's alignment with white supremacy culture and offers possibility models to counter it on personal and institutional levels. I take an autoethnographic approach to my experiences working as an early-career critic to showcase steep barriers to entry, industry constraints, and present pathways forward. On an individual level, I advocate for critics to exercise cultural competency and develop a reflexive practice. I apply Donald Schön's concepts of *knowledge-in-action*, *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection-on-action* to a critic's process in order to demonstrate the harm that emerges in a critical practice that is not asset-based. I utilize close reading/listening and comparative analysis of written reviews, essays, podcasts, and web series to showcase how a diversity in critical form and thought productively serve artists, audiences, and archives. I offer four possibility models that aim to make the field more inclusive and sustainable: mentorship and expanding the form; cohort and contract model; culturally competent approach; and a reflexive practice. This thesis carries with it implications for the whole of journalism and its aspirations to due diligence and, impossibly, do no harm.

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Introduction: Locating Self and Practice

“This clown really thinks I wrote a play about the abolition of SeaWorld lol. The refusal to intellectually engage with work by artists of color is more racist than making offcolor [sic] comments about race in your shallow engagement.” (Colón)

In June of 2018, after a theatre review of the play *Tilikum* was published in the *Chicago Tribune*, playwright Kristiana Rae Colón took to Facebook. Her play is based on the true events of a killer whale caged in quarters too small, living as a captive for the entertainment of SeaWorld audiences. If approached superficially, this piece could be considered a docudrama on the controversial orca—controversial because of his treatment as well as his killings of trainers. To engage critically with Colón’s piece is to consider it within her larger abolitionist canon, to take up her embedded phrasings of “whale-on-whale violence” or “I can’t breathe” as critiques of a system larger than SeaWorld. Here she called out what had been a piece of criticism that failed to take up her play’s critiques against the prison industrial complex, the murder of Black people, and the culpability of whiteness. Colón demands the critic to be rigorous in his critique, to work harder to draw meaning for a future audience that speaks to the symbolic work, if not its significance.

For a critic to disengage from these crucial aspects of the play, our world, and the systems that perpetuate harm raises some questions regarding the role of theatre criticism and the critic. Online outrage followed in the publishing of the “*Tilikum*” review. I remember posts and threads posturing what the critic did and didn’t know, what he maybe purposefully withheld. Did he miss the play’s meaning? Was he in opposition of its message? Was he aware his newspaper subscriber base would not attend a show

dealing with police brutality? At the time, I was a recently graduated dramaturg with limited personal connections to the artistic players in this controversy. But I watched as everybody's business spilled across Facebook. Artists were upset, implicating the critic, the publication, and the theatre criticism field at large:

I think he absolutely understood the metaphor and purposely did this to try and devalue yet another artist of color's work. I fully believe it was intentional. (Ali)

Chicago Tribune needs to hire theater reviewers that have the critical frame to review work by people of color. Kristiana's vision of freedom is comprehensive and includes liberation of land and animals, but she is not a devout whale activist and I think Chris Jones knows this. (Gamboa)

Yet another critic completely clueless, who is incapable of even reading the playwright's notes that explain how the play is a metaphor on mass incarceration of Black men not about actual orcas at Sea World!!!!!! The need for critics of color who will invest in the understanding of our work is CRUCIAL! Enough is enough! (Sicre)

These individuals, who blur the lines of artists and scholars and critics of color, saw the critic's race as a barrier to recognition, understanding, and genuine engagement with Colón's work. Notably, the critic did not wade into the discourse, leaving these questions on intentions and knowledge base up for debate. These conflicts between critics and artists are historically tense and are made more evident now by social media forms. Resolution, however, will not come solely from the dialogs generated in this digital space, and it takes work on the part of the critic. What could serve these moments and the field is a process that invites accountability through reflection on knowledge gaps. These Facebook posts illuminate the dynamics of a white critic not "getting" the work of artists of color, and it is not an isolated incident. Such calls question the critic's propensity to demonstrate knowledge that is inclusive and productive for their artist peers.

With these words and calls to action swimming around in my head, I felt compelled to write publicly on theatre for the first time. I had so many questions here regarding intention and impact, the knowledge gaps of critics, and the harms that would persist if this coverage were not countered. I aimed to review *Tilikum* and inspire a dialogue around the due diligence of critics. In my essay, “Tilikum and Wading into Better Criticism,” I named a critic’s job as an urgent one, one demanding of earnest, bravery—especially in the face of theatre that diverts from our lived experience or understandings of the systemic infrastructures undergirding criticism in the United States (Mikhael “Tilikum”).

Dramaturg and/or Critic

My debut “Tilikum” essay also centers my training as a dramaturg, setting me upon a path similar to dramaturgs and critics before me, one that blurs the lines between disciplines and invites further theorizing upon the already debated role of the critic. At the heart of my training as a dramaturg was a centering of a “questioning spirit,” a phrasing coined by American dramaturgy field-shaper Mark Bly. In my formal study as a dramaturg in a conservatory BFA program, we were trained to be deft collaborators in a traditional theatre production process. Although our classroom spaces troubled the framing of dramaturg as the resident expert, rehearsal spaces demanded a breadth of knowledge that leaned on dramaturgs as researchers. Since research is a skill that fellow designers and creative teams utilize in their artistic practices, dramaturgs are often sidelined as luxuries rather than integral designers in their own right. Crucially, a

dramaturg's role extends beyond a step one of doing research--dramaturgs function as *information designers* of this research.¹ They are responsible for synthesizing research and shaping understanding of knowledge for their teams and the production's audience. Such an approach demands rigorous attention to a multiplicity of perspectives. It demands being able to pull from a breadth of knowledge and deliver it in a variety of modes depending on the purpose of the information and the audience. Dramaturgs as facilitators of knowledge-sharing extend and show up beyond the written text of an actor packet, program notes, or lobby displays, but also shows up in how they hold space for post-show discussions. Interestingly enough, despite the evident necessity and benefit of dramaturgs as information designers, they still battle massive pay inequity and are often viewed as luxuries to the production process (LMDA, "Employment Guidelines"). Some practitioners view dramaturgs as disruptive to the creative process, but proponents of the field and their allies contend the productivity of a dramaturg relies on the invited curiosity of their collaborators.

¹ During undergrad, Mark Bly's *Production Notebooks* served as the backbone of my dramaturgy training, but the case studies presented mostly deals with dramaturg as a text sleuth. In classes with TYA director and playwright Ernest Nolan, he termed dramaturgs "play detectives." Both orientations felt quite isolating, though I appreciated the attention given to analysis. What was lacking here was the interrogation of interpersonal relationships in and beyond the rehearsal room. In taking DePaul's first Civic Dramaturgy class with Isaac Gomez, my understanding of what I now consider facilitating a culture of care emerged. Gomez introduced to us the concept of Brave Space agreements, which he adapted from playwright/activist Kristiana Rae Colon. Once entering the artistic field as a professional dramaturg, I thrived in the opportunity to develop my personal dramaturgical practice. I credit much of my current dramaturgical practice to self-named "cranky" dramaturg Tanuja Jagernauth, who has acted as a fierce friend and mentor, forever questioning how we can center people over product. She inspires and pushes me to interrogate where/how power dynamics, care, reciprocity, resources, and so much more show up in our artistic processes.

As the history of Western dramatic criticism demonstrates, critics, like dramaturgs, benefit from holding their range of readers or interlocutors in mind while centering a breadth of perspectives. Like dramaturgs, critics should be moving with a similar questioning spirit and orientation towards the productive. In some critical sleuthing, Scottish theatre critic and arts commentator Mark Fisher traces the lineage of critics forefronting such curiosity and productivity. He turns to archives housing British journals and reviews, inadvertently making a case both for the efficacy and gaps of arts writing in capturing of the ephemeral. I am most taken with Fisher's examination of "critic as insider" because it forefronts an approach that I find aligns with a trajectory of criticism that resists white supremacy culture. The writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was "dismissive of dogmatic rules-based criticism" and asserted that a "destructive" criticism was born out of preconceived benchmarks based on "some exemplary model" (Fisher 20). Fisher asserts the iconic three question framing of arts criticism was adapted from playwright and novelist Alessandro Manzoni, and Fisher simplifies them further as, "what were the theatremakers trying to do; how well did they do it; and was it worth it?" (Fisher 29).

Western theatre critics pair these questions with dramaturgical research like production history, theatrical classifications, history, artist biography, and beyond. Fisher acknowledges that how a critic handles these questions is based upon their personal approach to the craft. What elements they focus on and how much room such elements are given on the page vary. Fisher outlines possible approaches, further demonstrating the sheer range of angles a critic can center and pull from. He notes there are an infinite

number of approaches including reporter, judge, consumer guide, theatrical analyst, champion, educator, arbiter of taste, reformer, cultural commentator, social commentator, insider, ego, visionary, which he names throughout his chapter “How to Take On Different Critical styles.” In this list lies some of the roles of a dramaturg, and it is no surprise that there is a legacy of dramaturgs turned critics and vice versa.

Approaches to dramaturgy are usually attached to an expertise in a knowledge topic or preferred discipline. Some dramaturgs consider themselves generalists while others focus on specific genres like Shakespeare, musical, new play, and beyond. Some dramaturgs also claim labels like “feminist” (Dolan), “civic” (Isaac Gomez), or even “cranky” (Tanuja Jagernauth) as signifiers of their methodology and sensibilities. In characterizing dramaturgs and their dramaturgy, the ways they move and practice might be more legible to their production team rather than the general public or readership. In looking to Fisher’s outlined approaches to criticism, there is much more crossover present than one might anticipate.

The earliest evidence of dramaturg to critic pipeline coincides with the founding figure of dramaturgy himself: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Fisher 44). Lessing was hired by the Hamburg National Theatre in 1767 as an in-house critic, and his essays both served the theatre as dramaturgical materials and as the founding of a field that has potential to push discourse. Criticism and dramaturgy function hand-in-hand, providing a compelling model for spurring conversation that impacts the field and society. Fisher labels Lessing critic-as-insider but there is room to broadly consider the matrix of approaches that are amplified through dramaturgical underpinnings.

What Fisher leaves out as a variable for a critic's approach is how the platform for which critics are writing may influence their approach. Platforms ranging from print newspapers to online journals, and web series to podcasts, influences a critic's audience, in part due to accessibility. Thus, a critic's dramaturgical leanings may ebb and flow. For criticism found in legacy newspapers, there may not be as much consideration for a play's historical underpinnings or propensity to push social discourse. Some scholars even wonder how much dramaturgy should be centered by critics. Performance studies scholar and applied theatre practitioner Dani Snyder-Young poses these questions:

If newspaper criticism's primary function is as a consumer guide, should it operate within the frameworks that imagined readers already hold, or should it educate readers to be better prepared to meet artistic works within the frameworks held by their creators? Where are—and should be—the lines between newspaper criticism and dramaturgy? (Snyder-Young 82)

In wondering on the lines between criticism and dramaturgy, Snyder-Young nods to potential divisions in ideology that may exist between a critic and their readership. Here “frameworks held by their creators” can also be understood as worldviews or experiential knowledge. What emerges from here is a conversation regarding the responsibility of critics to facilitate points of knowledge expansion.

As a budding critic seeking approaches to criticism that facilitate such knowledge expansion, I found myself drawn to practitioners that were artists themselves because I found their love for their work and communities infectious. I remember many of my mentors centering love as a value in so many parts of my dramaturgy practice that it seeped into my criticism. In writing my “Tilikum” essay, even with a vague centering of love in approach, artistic doors opened for me as publishing cemented a part of who I am

and how I work onto the page. I joined The Key: Young Critics Mentorship Program that allowed me access to theatre I could not have afforded on my own. Here I developed a writing practice alongside Regina Victor who co-founded the Key with its original mission partly professing to “critique with love” (Tran “Critiquing with Love”). In graduate school, I was introduced to the writing of performance studies scholar and cultural critic Jill Dolan wherein love is also a value uplifted. She encourages folks to lead with love “in academic work, in activism, and in artistry” (Dolan “Geographies” 91). In joining the Key, students needed to answer the following question as a part of their publicly listed bio: “What “lenses” do you bring to a show (what influences how you perceive art)?” (*Rescripted* “Meet the Artists”). This workshop process instilled in me the importance of naming what personal experiences, identities, preferences I carry with me. I also became curious about the silos that sometimes exist between artists and scholars and activists. A previous professor and, later, colleague of mine, Coya Paz, encouraged the same reflection on self and personal interests while teaching a section of History of Dramatic Literature at DePaul University. For Paz, her personal interests range from *Sharknado 2* to race and racial violence to lip gloss. I remember Paz sharing her interests as a means of modeling how her various frameworks broadly inform her interpretation. Such pedagogy from Victor and Paz run parallel to what Dolan urges as “demystifying the author and particularizing—instead of idealizing—the reader” (Dolan “Feminist Spectator” x). Dolan herself models transparency in self well throughout her scholarship and popular writing, first naming who she is and for whom she writes. Drawing from this

breadth of queer and lesbian, femme thought, I endeavor to model the same transparency and implication of self.

I write as a biracial queerdo, one used to making and taking space as a fat femme where bodies like mine are constantly fighting for visibility and accessibility. I grew up under a single mom with an immigrant dad fighting a handful of cancers, both informing and troubling my ideas around the American Dream and care work. In attending DePaul University for undergrad, I fell in love with a theatre scene known for its grit, its sweat. But in later researching, writing, and living in Chicago, I found a more nourishing community with practitioners dreaming and demanding a centering of people, especially those historically disinvested and marginalized, over product.

My work as a dramaturg mentored by harm reductionists and abolitionists like Tanuja Jagernauth and Kristiana Rae Colón infused my practice with the tenants of mutual aid and community care. Dramaturgy exists in the questions, begging, “why here? why now?” However, as dramaturg/playwright Tanuja Jagernauth emboldens me to inwardly question: “why *you*?” Generally, she asks this question of those aligning with dominant culture, the cis-men white makers of theatre. Marginalized folks are in a constant fight to validate our existence, and the question “why you?” can provide another layer of labor to our already overextended work list. Even so, in turning this question on myself, on my capacity to take up this thesis work offering possibility models for a field I am still considered emerging, I find “why *you*?” affirming. My background in oral history and museum studies colors how I view ephemerality and what interventions can be made to secure narratives that would otherwise go lost, stolen, or forgotten. I found

parallels between my practices in dramaturgy and oral history. Both pair best with deep intentionality, diligent research, understandings/curiosities of systemic power, and engaged listening. These lived experiences and practitioner-based perspectives inform my approach to theatrical criticism, but I am not immune from making mistakes or perpetuating harm in my writing. But, in my commitment to utilize a reflexive approach to filling my knowledge gaps, I have adapted strategies aiming for a more inclusive and equitable practice of criticism.

My primary research questions investigate how critics can put reflection into practice in aims of reducing harm and increasing inclusivity in their writing. I use auto/ethnography to demonstrate where and how white supremacy culture shows up in theatre criticism and the theatre arts field. Through comparative analyses of reviews, essays, web series, and resulting social media discourse, I assess both a critic's and institution's propensity to integrate more inclusive approaches and infrastructures. I also utilize interviews with current artists and cultural workers to capture sentiments and histories that may not be a part of formally recorded scholarship. I demonstrate the necessity of developing a culturally competent and reflexive practice to counter the white supremacy culture that undergirds the American theatre and the United States.

A Critical Chapter Breakdown

My first chapter demonstrates the necessity for a multi-disciplinary approach to designing a possibility model for the future of theatre criticism that centers cultural wealth (Yosso) alongside a diversity of thought and lived experiences (Mayfield). I use

the term “possibility model” in the same vein as poet, educator, and disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, wherein she uplifts this framing as “not a one-size-fits-all solution” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 46). In her seminal text *Care Work*, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes on collective power and coalition-building in cross-disability solidarity (50). Possibility models of collective care are expansive and individuals receiving and giving care mold to the needs and capacities of each other. Criticism can benefit from steeping in the intentionalities of care work as individuals are emboldened to advocate for each other and share and partner resources.

I present my research and critical offerings with recognition that the constraints of the arts journalism field land differently depending not only on one’s identity but also one’s position in the industry. Even so, there is a system that impacts both individuals and the institutions they write for. I turn to pedagogist of racial and social justice Tema Okun whose scholarship interrogates white supremacy culture. I align a selection of her tenants including perfectionism, urgency, worship of the written word, I’m the only one, either/or thinking, and objectivity alongside my personal experiences as a young critic working in Chicago (Okun “White Supremacy Culture”). Each experience demonstrates my struggles and wonderings with the state of the theatre criticism field. What emerges from here is a field-wide need for critics to be reflecting on their writing and the conversations that emerge from entering a public discourse. We must name white supremacy culture as a system that continues to plague our society, holding tight to tenets of working that do not make space for moving slow and in community—which may feel both contradictory to and embracing of the “job” of a critic. I aim to expand the ways in

which a feminist criticism à la Jill Dolan invites a widened framework of viewing and writing about theatre. Applying culturally competent pedagogies and reflexive drama/theatre practices upon theatre criticism and critics allows for the development of more inclusive and intentional practice (Dawson and Kelin). My scholarship utilizes frameworks and strategies that encourage reflexive thought, which proves a dire necessity to the field of criticism. It is no longer sufficient for critics to take an “objective” approach or mask their identities in their writing. In exploring the strengths of specificity and resisting harm, I will argue for part of a critic’s practice to expand beyond the page in which they write.

Contending with these histories, legacies, and tensions, I turn to developing a reflexive practice/praxis as an active strategy building off seminal concepts put forth by scholar Donald Schön. One of the most heralded functions of theatre is it opens us up to different ways of being and knowing. In applying Schön’s frameworks on reflection-in-action alongside drama/theatre artists and scholars Kathryn Dawson and Dan Kelin’s calls for reflexivity, I demonstrate the necessity of a comparable process for theatre critics in aims of developing a more inclusive, productive theatre criticism.

Theatre largely functions to exercise empathy through expanding knowledge on experiences that are different from our own (Cummings 20). In writing theatre criticism, critics are taking a step beyond this empathy. They are putting themselves in conversation with the artist, the audience, and the archive. A critic's role and purpose shifts for each reader of their writing, but a critic broadly functions as a potential tour guide and commentator in worlds they may not know. Critics are writing alongside people and

places and ideas that may have never crossed their path or minds. But this is not to say fresh eyes and limited lived experience are not of value in writing criticism. Rather, these limitations in knowing and being mean they—I, we—are prone to making mistakes. Sometimes, these mistakes illuminate implicit or explicit bias with varying levels of harm. In discussing the knowledge gaps present in coverage of theatre by critics, transgressions usually manifest in the form of microaggressions or silence.

If a critic leaves questions of race or gender uninterrogated, for example, this can contribute to further erasure by unjustly simplifying the urgency or nuance present in plays that move among societal intersections. A reflexive framework could function as a sort of checklist to examine thinking (Dawson and Kelin 30). More specifically, it is a self-referential process of reflection upon one's own writing. A reflexive practice aims to integrate a critic's first thoughts and impulses (knowledge-in-action) with a purposeful examination (reflection-in-action) of social locations not immediately considered. Every critic has knowledge gaps, and this reflexive framework makes space to acknowledge and address them. Core questions for holistic critical engagement can be thought through in a describe, analyze, interpret model to more intentionally interrogate personal knowledge gaps alongside the execution of the performance.

My second chapter will take up pieces of theatre criticism as case studies to demonstrate knowledge gaps through close readings of the text as well as social media conversations surrounding the piece's publication. What also emerges is a narrative around the function of accountability and apology when considering how a critic and their publication respond in these moments of call-ins/outs. Here it is necessary to resist a

scarcity-mindset, wherein critics and/or their editors argue there is not enough time for such reflexivity. Imposed deadlines with quick turnaround are inherent to the job of a theatre critic. But developing a reflexive practice is a cumulative strategy, as in knowledge gaps lessen over time as critics interrogate themselves. Critics must bring the same energy in critiquing their past writing as they do to critiquing a current work on stage. Even with papers of record slashing arts coverage and laying-off those writing it, critics must be dedicated to contemplating their own practice. Quick turnarounds, low pay, and itinerant schedules do not excuse perpetuated harms. Without interrogating the impact of elements like racist logics or ableist language, critics will continue to uphold ideologies that are unproductive and derail conversation from the theatre at hand.

Though there are ample guides for writing on the arts, the primary focus has been split among history, aesthetics, and mechanics. Within this range, bias is broadly acknowledged as a problem to be dealt with rather than a point of transparency to be embraced. What is missing is more concrete strategies that reject objectivity and embrace reflexivity. It is not enough to call for a more diverse pool of critics as a means to widen approaches to writing on criticism. Current critics of all social locations must exercise a self-interrogating practice. When writing on experiences and people that are different from one's own, there is a necessity for rigor and transparency in coverage. Bettering criticism and lessening its perpetuated harms becomes a question regarding priorities and accountability. Not only must critics commit to being culturally aware and competent, they must put their knowledge in service of their skills.

Since criticism provides a timestamp of how theatre functions within the current moment, much is lost if these writings consistently include the same mistakes and knowledge gaps. Misgendering artists, fat-shaming, upholding ableist practices all serve as harmful distractors. In analyzing how such harms are perpetuated, a striking commonality emerges when considering the social locations of critics and the arts they write on—both criticism and theatre are predominately created by white cis-men. When considering reviews as one of the few artifacts of the theatre field, this means that how history has been constructed on and off stage suffers from the same gaps. To combat knowledge gaps, I argue critics must utilize reflexive criticism. Originally put forth in their book *The Reflexive Teaching Artist*, artist-scholars Kathryn Dawson and Daniel A. Kelin define reflexivity as demanding “a more intense scrutiny than reflection, as well as willingness to revise, update or even upend personal beliefs or assumptions” (Dawson and Kelin 30-31). Here they put forth a framework that offers a model for self-interrogation and actionable steps toward integrating new knowledge or beliefs into one’s practice.

In Chapter 3, I assess possibility models for the future and sustainability of theatre criticism. The first comes in expanding the field and form of criticism. Mentorship programs like *Rescripted*’s the Key and Jose Solís’s BIPOC Critics Lab serve as compelling models for making the field more accessible to a new generation of writers by giving them training and resources. The BIPOC Critics Lab also decenters writing as the primary form of theatre criticism, notably embracing multimedia like podcasts and web series. What also emerges as a productive path for theatre criticism is fostering a

cohort model within publications. A cohort model allows for a plethora of perspectives to be represented and decentralizes the power usually ascribed to a chief critic position. Such decentralizing could take the shape of having a regularly contracted staff of freelancers that functions as a material investment in securing a diversity of voices. In reimagining the role of the critic and the relationships they have with their readers, theatre criticism has the potential to become more productive and inclusive. The last two possibility models I offer come in embracing a culturally competent approach and a reflexive practice. In expanding awareness beyond personal social locations, critics mitigate harm by rendering writings that are more holistic. Such acknowledgement and reflection-on-action contribute to the field by resisting the notion of objectivity in criticism and instead exercise a reflexive practice that is prone to changes in ideology and behavior. Reflexivity fosters specificity in writing while acknowledging the totality of people's identity on and off stage. Developing reflexive criticism provides a model by which to train the next generation of critics in aims of diversifying criticism. Herein also lies the potentiality to soothe the historically tense relationship between critics and artists while leaving behind a more robust and just archive of writings.

The future of theatre criticism and the future of the arts are intertwined, and critics must recognize their positions of power are also positions of responsibility. In my thesis I make the case for an inclusive criticism that values a breadth of cultural wealth. The amount of time a critic spends as a critic does not correlate to rigor and strengthened ethic. Rather, critics must be responsive to the demands of an asset-minded approach to writing in service of audiences, artists, and archives. Developing and exercising a

personal practice of reflexivity becomes a major step in countering white supremacy culture as both the form and function of theatre criticism expand to welcome more sustainable and productive approaches.

Chapter 1: Towards A Reflexive Practice

Criticism is largely considered a practice of informed opinion writing, a practice that pulls from accumulated expertise rooted in witnessing and writing about hundreds or thousands of productions over the course of one's career. As a potential byproduct of the job, critics may be more primed to be reflecting on the work of others rather than their own. But it is imperative that critics turn this witnessing to their own writing in order to exercise a practice that truly serves artists, audiences, and archives. Scholars and practitioners across fields have designed frameworks that theorize on the necessity of self-reflection as a means of moving in ways that are more inclusive and culturally competent. Reflection can aid in building self-awareness through interrogating knowledge gaps.

Philosopher and urban planning scholar Donald Schön offers a method for developing a practice of reflection I call for among theatre critics. In this thesis, I apply Schön's core concepts to theatre critics to demonstrate a need for critics to engage in reflection-in-action as a step to develop a *reflexive* practice. Schön's conceptualizes a "reflective practice" as becoming aware of implicit knowledge and learning from experience (Dawson and Kelin 29). Schön's primary inquiries of work include: "learning and its cognitive tools, and the role of reflection (or lack of it) in learning processes in general" (Kotinsky "Donald Schon"). Although his scholarship initially emerged within an organizational design realm, Schön's research became popular in educational spaces. Schön notes that practitioners can get "locked into a view of themselves as technical

experts,” which ultimately does a disservice to their capacity to contend with change (Schön 69). In applying Schön’s thinking on an “expert’s” static nature to theatre criticism, it becomes clear that a more flexible approach is needed, one that engages discomfort or uncertainty instead of rejecting it. Schön maintains *reflection-in-action*, one of his core concepts, offers a potential balm to rigidity that “may be rigorous in its own right,” as he asserts it “links the art of practice in uncertainty and uniqueness” to the work of the practitioner (Schön 69). What is needed, then, is a method by which practitioners can grow a propensity to expand their knowledge. It is in Schön’s outlining of his three core concepts that he investigates how people demonstrate knowledge and grow such a propensity. From here, I map Schön’s concepts of *knowing-in-action*, *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection-on-action* upon theatre criticism.

On Knowing

First Schön terms “knowing-in-action,” which is considered what knowledge is demonstrated in the completion of a task. For critics, knowing-in-action might look like what ends up on their published page. Their published criticism is contending with external factors like word counts, turnarounds, and editing on top of personal interpretations. Thus, what is left on the page showcases what a critic centered as important, as necessary to write about. What gets cut by an editor, unaddressed through drafts, or misinterpreted by the critic is usually an unknown to the reader. I remember a roundup review I wrote for the arts magazine *Sightlines* covering the international acclaimed festival of new performance Fusebox Festival in April 2020. This review

roundup had an error that brought an artist to my Twitter replies (Mikhael “Fusebox Festival”). In my piece covering the first virtual version of Fusebox Festival, performance artist Dickie Beau wondered if I missed a core component of his work regarding audio overlay: “How lovely. Thank you! But you know it’s a lip sync and not my real voice, right? I’ll take it as a compliment if not 🗑️” (@DickieBeau). Beau is known for what he terms “playback performances,” and the knowledge-in-action demonstrated per my review made it seem I was unaware of the extent to which he was lip-synching. In my review, my lack of specificity around who the voice belonged to caused confusion. It got cleared up on Twitter but not in my review. Since *Sightlines* is an online-only publication, I could have reached out to my editor to provide more clarity around the sentences in question. I remember being so tapped after witnessing hours of back-to-back performances with a day’s turnaround that I was more inclined to keep it moving than to offer a clarification. Here Schön’s knowing-in-action signals a distance between what we know as critics and what can be demonstrated on the pages we write. Knowledge-in-action only renders a partial knowledge, and misunderstandings or worse may emerge in the gaps.

Sometimes, we are aware of this distance between demonstrated knowledge and the page, and Schön terms it “reflection-in-action,” which is the process of thinking about what we are doing. Reflection-in-action signals a metacognition, an awareness of what knowledge we are demonstrating. I remember being stuck in my writing tracks after I pitched a feature to *Sightlines* covering a radio play that took up housing justice in Austin, Texas. Gathering Ground Theatre and BASTA Tenants Speak Up! partnered to

create “A Tale of Two Citizens,” a radio play devised by folks facing houselessness and housing insecurity (Mikhael “Housing is a Human Right”). The play, made up of ten scenes, features the lived experiences of the artists and members navigating houselessness amid relentless camp sweeps, expensive rent, and harsh property managers. Until this radio play, I had not been familiar with the specific hardships folks face while living on the streets or the urgent organizing efforts combatting unjust and inhumane policies exacerbated by a pandemic. Although I characterize the piece I wrote for *Sightlines* as a feature, I did not formally interview the artists.

As I wrote my piece, I was super concerned about how I was covering housing issues and felt myself tripping over the language to differentiate interventions on the ground. For instance, “cleanups” of camp areas can be good for residents as tents, carts, and trash have a tendency to pile up. The more insidious side of these cleanups, however, can result in residents’ own belongings being thrown away. In “Two Citizens,” a scene depicted the latter, and the first draft of my review initially demonized cleanups. There were a few more instances wherein I did not fully frame the intentions of services and programs offered to houseless folks. Even before submitting my review to my editor, my writing felt off. I decided to send my draft to a colleague and friend who was a part of the production. I knew she would be able to catch the lines that were not as fully fleshed or sound. My reflection-in-action led me to reaching out for support as I was aware of the potential gaps in my feature that even my editor may not have caught. In asking a peer and insider to the production to have eyes on my feature, I was centering an ethos of care and collegiality. After I sent the draft to my editor and received no content notes, I sent it

back to my peer for a final check. The radio play was programmed to kick off a Week of Action wherein folks (hopefully the audience) could volunteer or donate towards mutual aid and organizing opportunities. Uplifting this programming in the future could impact who shows up on the ground. My final feature was more inclusive and rigorous because of the reflection-in-action I carried through my writing.

Third, and most crucially, Schön suggests a need for “reflection-on-action,” a process of taking stock of what has transpired based on completed actions, especially in the face of undesirable outcomes. In a sense, what I have done thus far in my thesis is make space for my own reflection-on-action. In writing through my own experiences, I am examining the constraints of the theatre criticism field and interrogating how my knowledge-in-action is demonstrated. Of course, writing a thesis is not the most immediate or repeatable method of reflecting-on-action. Critics must develop their own reflexive practice, one that suits them and their capacity, that makes their reflection actionable. In some cases, this looks like a follow-up essay to a review. In others, it can look like a podcast. There are a multitude of methods to intentionally interrogate one’s ways of working and if/how they are inclusive. Operationally, Schön’s concepts provide for a compelling framework by which to foster more inclusive and competent approaches to theatre criticism through the utilization of a self-reflection process that incorporates perspective from three positions.

In developing a more inclusive and competent model of theatre criticism, one must contend with the constraints of the legacies of exclusion that underpin our institutions and our personal ideologies. In this thesis, I embed an autoethnographic

approach to demonstrate the impact of white supremacy culture upon the field of criticism and critics. I take to heart ethnographer Dwight Conquergood's naming of ethnography's extractive legacy. In his seminal piece "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards A Critical Cultural Politics," he cites ethnography as a "method of social science research and a genre of social science text" (179). Conquergood centers critical theory as a puzzle piece capable of re-situating ethnography as a practice that values and names the tensions that arise in the politicizing of science and knowledge. Integral to ethnography is recognizing the body as a site of knowing. I see connections between ethnographers and critics, and I wonder how both practitioners can resist legacies that historically sit in divisions of "us" versus "them." Although critics are observers to the work of artists, not usually co-creators in the piece, critics should write as if they too have a stake in the performance. I enjoy performance studies scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones's explorations of performance ethnography that is made alongside community. She emphasizes ethnographers should remain "accountable to [their] fieldwork community," and must "determine how they will situate themselves in the work" (Jones 8). Critics as writers on and in artist communities can only benefit from centering a similar due diligence in their practice. Jones also contends that "participation differentiates performance ethnography from other forms of documentation and representation" (Jones 10). Critics as live audience members are participants in performance and, thus, must contend with the ethics of representation as any ethnographer.

If we consider criticism as the chief opportunity to document theatre as it was made in its societal context, evident implicit bias and knowledge gaps render a skewed

cultural memory. Critics wield much power in combating the ephemerality of theatre. Writing on how theatre landed on a stage and an audience in a specific moment is crucial to the development of the field and artists. I take to heart performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan's acknowledgement that part of the complexity of writing about performance is how it inadvertently "alters the event itself" (Phelan 148). Here Phelan challenges the thought that one of writing's more objective pursuits is to preserve, in essence, "writing towards disappearance." Such an approach centers the future over the present moment of performance. Phelan is steadfast in considering "performance [as] the attempt to value that which is nonreproductive, non-metaphorical" (Phelan 152). Even so, critics are inherently charged with honoring and combating a performance's ephemerality.

In rendering performance to the page, critics have a responsibility to do due diligence just as rigorously as journalists reporting on issues that may be new to them. In acknowledging criticism's role in contributing to a narrative of theatre, what is lost or ignored can have dire consequences when considering the legacies of theatre and theatremakers. If criticism is not written with a rigor and rootedness that combats knowledge gaps in our present world, the field will be left with skewed and often harmful interpretations of past productions and the artists laboring on them. Although language is malleable and some toxic patterns are only clear after decades, there is value in intercepting the harms of the current moment.

I outline my personal experience working in the field as an emerging critic in order to reveal the need for field-wide possibilities that center abundance and

sustainability. In writing criticism, critics put pieces of themselves upon the page, sometimes demonstrating the need for a rigorous reflection-on-action process when their writing proves harmful or unproductive. In this thesis, I turn to criticism as case studies which serve as opportunities for intervention. Each case study also carries a history of artists taking to social media to call in/out language and ideologies wherein critics were digitally confronted as a means of accountability. Sometimes call-ins/outs result in a retraction, an apology, a follow-up piece, town halls—and other times, silence and repeat offenses. Public discourse via social media demonstrates a desire amongst artists for critics to acknowledge their writing has consequences that extend beyond a production's profitability. When critic's double down on their writing as purely objective or point to quick turnarounds as justifications in these moments of tension, it potentially signals to readers a lack of propensity to change one's point of view or methods of working. It demonstrates a resistance to unlearning bias and reinforces toxic power dynamics.

On Cultural Competency

This thesis offers theatre critics a reflexive model of practice by which to acknowledge and interrogate personal social locations while exercising a propensity to fill in knowledge gaps. Social locations are identity markers that impact how a person moves and is perceived by their environment (National Council on Family Relations "Inclusion and Diversity Committee Report"). The way we look, speak, love, eat, etcetera, is based on variables in and beyond our control. Social locations show up both overtly and covertly, existing on a spectrum easily identified or not. There is no definitive

list or categorical breakdown of social locations, but this thesis recognizes the following as a place to start:

race, ethnicity, nationality/citizenship, language, dialect, religion/spirituality, gender, sexuality, disability, ability, age, class, family, marriage status, parent/child-free, size, geography/environment, political affiliation ...

Each social location influences who we are as individuals and shapes personal ideologies.

Social locations construct our worldview and attune us to certain sensibilities whether we realize it or not. This work is considered cultural competency, and theatre critics are not the only ones who struggle to adapt to more expansive awareness. I admire the work of education scholars to push against deficit models and language when approaching the work of marginalized communities.

Critical race theory (CRT) scholar Tara J. Yosso explores whose culture holds capital as a means of challenging deficit orientations towards community cultural wealth. In classroom spaces, educators struggle with the same interests of being receptive and intentional in the ways they discuss and interact with elements outside of someone's personal experiences (Mayfield 43). Yosso takes up fellow CRT and education scholar Daniel Solórzano's identification of five tenets of critical race theory that should be centered in approaches to content that manifest in the classroom and beyond, namely "theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum and policy" (Yosso 73). Solórzano's tenets of CRT would benefit a critic's approach to writing on performance as they include: "(1) the intercentricity of race and racism; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches" (Yosso 73). CRT may then serve as a

foundation for any practitioner looking to interrogate their biases and the white supremacy embedded in their ideologies and work.

Yosso contributes to ongoing applications of CRT in educational spaces by centering an asset-based approach to expanding cultural capital to *cultural wealth*. This approach ultimately reframes practitioners' values in a way that can productively inform criticism as well. Yosso complicates scholarship that uplifts Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital which "has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor" (Yosso 76). Instead, Yosso posits all communities carry a cultural wealth that is not just tied to income and class culture. She further advocates to decenter a "white, middle class as the standard," troubling a supposed "norm" that accompanies specific forms of cultural knowledge and capital. When applying a framework of cultural wealth to criticism, critics should actively center an asset-minded approach to all types of performance by all kinds of artists. For example, critics may more rigorously engage with performance that aligns with a Western-minded "well-made play," a dramatic structure that includes a tight plot, a rising suspense, a resolving climax, and a happy ending. When it comes to applied theatre and/or theatre for young audiences, however, there is less criticism that takes up these modes of performance as worthy of ascribing a critical rigor and intentionality. Generally, applied theatre and theatre for young audiences are utilized as teaching tools in education spaces or as hopeful mobilizers of social change. The narratives uplifted or co-created here often include communities that are marginalized and face historical disinvestment rooted in white supremacy.

If critics are both reticent to cover performance that breaks dominant forms and are ill-equipped to approach performance centering marginalized communities, their demonstrated knowledge-in-action will have a detrimental impact on the inclusivity of their criticism. With her CRT framing, Yosso offers six expansions of cultural wealth that can be witnessed both in the lived experiences and artistic works of historically disinvested practitioners. For example, Yosso terms *familial capital* as referring to “cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community, history, memory and cultural intuition” and terms *navigational capital* as referring to the “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (Yosso 79). Incorporating these expansions of cultural capital as wealth into criticism could mean holding more curiosity around family or institutional dynamics rather than naming them unrealistic, underdeveloped, or exaggerated. Critics must incorporate an understanding of cultural wealth into their reflexive practice in aims of demonstrating knowledge-in-action that is asset-minded and resists white supremacy.

Criticism toes a compelling journalistic line as coverage of the arts is inherently subjective yet lives in a field that heralds objectivity. What is lost in this objectivity is the understanding that every person carries with them a set of social locations and ideologies. A critic’s writing will always be influenced by the identities they hold and how those identities function in a society rooted in white supremacy culture. In a necessary troubling of dominant norms, Dolan takes up feminist criticism as a framework that “all representation is inherently ideological” (Dolan 41). The performance at hand and the critic’s critique carry points of view with them. As Dolan contends, since criticism “is

such an important factor in the collective audience's interpretation of a play's meaning, mainstream criticism both shapes and reflects ideological workings of the dominant culture whose concerns it represents" (Dolan 19). Since those writing on, performing, and witnessing theatre reflect a dominant cultural, dominant cultural meanings remain dominant. If we consider theatre critics as "professional audience members," as Snyder-Young does, their rendering of "lived experiences of theatrical events" may be lacking cultural competency when turning their witnessing into "language for imagined readers" (Snyder-Young 65). These imagined readers hold a variety of identities and it is disheartening when a critic's demonstrated knowledge-in-action perpetuates harmful stereotypes or includes slurs.

Vernita Mayfield, education scholar and previous elementary school teacher, outlines a process for embracing cultural competence that is just as applicable to critics as it is to her main audience of educators. Together, Mayfield and Yosso's scholarship serve as a foundation by which I build the case for the necessity of expanding one's breadth of knowledge-in-action through integrating cultural competency into a critic's approach. Cultural competency extends beyond race, ethnicity, and nationality, but interrogating how to exercise new knowledge in these categories of identity can be applied to thinking around others like sexuality, age, and gender. I appreciate Yosso's expansion of culture to include "behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people" (Yosso 75). Interrogating a history of power and oppression in education spaces demonstrates how bias, racism, and privilege manifest in individual interactions and institutional policies.

With aims of combatting the infrastructures that uphold unsustainable and exclusionary tendencies in classrooms, Mayfield turns to a two-pronged approach to cultural competency. First, she advises “*awakening* the deeply embedded values and beliefs on which we are operating and *assessing* where we are, personally,” which is similar to Dolan’s call to name one’s own identity and ideologies (Mayfield 17). Next comes developing an understanding of the present structures of society that contribute to perpetuated inequities, and “*applying* and *acting* on that knowledge to examine false narratives,” in essence exercising a reflexivity of thought (Mayfield 17). In linking critical race scholarship to criticism, Dolan notes people are raised with and cultivate certain ways of thinking and seeing that help them make sense of their culture. Ideology is based on assumptions about how the culture operates and what it means” (Dolan 41). What critics must work towards is gaining cultural competency as a means of embracing an inclusive and productive approach to criticism that actively resists heralding dominant cultural norms. Critics must exercise a resistance to perpetuating stereotypes and ideologies that have the propensity to harm communities outside of dominant culture.

Theories of culturally sustaining pedagogy put forth by scholars Django Paris, H. Samy Alim, and Gloria Ladson-Billings prove fruitful in working towards more inclusive modes of working as they challenge dominant norms and white supremacy culture embedded in teacher and student relationships and their curriculum. Although the critic and artist dynamic exists within a different landscape with different functions, there is room to theorize critics as in community with artists and how relation to community may color their approach to criticism. Furthermore, here a parallel is present in a majority of

teachers not reflecting the diversity of students within their classrooms. Culturally responsive pedagogy provides another framework by which to investigate a critic's process of reflection-on-action in order to develop a more inclusive approach to writing. Although culturally responsive approaches are generally viewed as useful and necessary to exercising practices that are inclusion-minded, putting them into practice as informing of one's work takes diligent labor to self-educate and take action to unlearn bias. I argue embracing a culturally responsive pedagogy is a necessary step in the process of developing a reflexive criticism practice that is productive in the ways it serves artists, audiences, and the archive.

The crossover between the pedagogy of educators and critics exists in a shared liminality, which I demonstrate by integrating Mayfield's exploration of cultural competency and Yosso's expansion of cultural capital with a reflexive teaching artistry. With Dawson and Kelin's citing of reflexivity in mind, critics engaged in this thought practice seek "to understand how he interrelates with others, how open he is to considering choices and ideas that are in opposition to his own, and how responsive he is to the momentary and evolving needs of others" (Dawson and Kelin 31). What stands to further root the call of cultural competency in action comes in scholarship put forth by Django Paris and H. Samy Alim with a "loving critique" of culturally responsive pedagogy. They ask, "What would our pedagogies look like if [the White gaze] weren't the dominant one? What would liberating ourselves from this gaze and the educational expectations it forwards mean for our abilities to envision new forms of teaching and learning?" (Paris and Alim 86). In line with Yosso's positing of cultural wealth, here

Paris and Alim affirm the need for asset-based approaches in classrooms that do not center dominant norms and markers of achievement. In this thesis, however, I use the phrase “knowledge gaps” to signal what Schön would term knowledge-in-action. Although orienting a critic’s lack of awareness as “knowledge gaps” is a deficit-based approach, I want to be clear in what knowledge is potentially *missing* from critics. I am calling for an intentionally reflexive practice that centers cultural competency and inclusivity. These are asset-based orientations that function as possibility models to address the deficit of knowledge gaps. Paris and Alim also trouble notions of community and cultural practices being static entities that are unchanging. This is to say that some identities, relationships, and the language around them are shifting, and so, there is no endpoint in the process to self-educate in the face of pending expansions of knowledge-in-action. Resisting approaches that exercise one’s propensity to obtain and maintain new knowledge may end up perpetuating harm in the way of stereotypes and erasure (Paris and Alim 90).

The stakes of exercising a culturally competent praxis are further clarified by Dolan, as she views culture-making as an activist project, one that is conscious of writing for posterity; she implicates theatre broadly and herself as writer, aware of potential for an archival impact and/or changemaking. I take these framings to heart as a critic committed to advocacy that is solution-oriented and equitable. When considering my dramaturgical roots, I am aware my curiosities align me with a more process-minded approach. I am curious what narratives get produced and by whom. I am curious about pay equity and the personhood of laboring artists. Dolan’s feminist criticism considers

how power functions at the intersections of various social locations, and from there is an opportunity for critics to examine their role in upholding systems and ideologies that do not productively serve artists, audiences, or archive. The role of the critic is that of an active witness and interlocutor, here there is an inherent responsibility to contribute to the field in service of its practitioners.

“Everyone is a critic” is a long-time championed and debated sentiment. There is a hopefulness in this democracy of opinion, an ostensible value in the masses putting their thoughts to the page. Historically, theatrical criticism functions as a form of consumer report, advocacy, and historical record (Fisher 29). Depending on who is writing and who is publishing, these elements have varying levels of power, legitimization, and readership. Despite a breadth of forms and functions, from Tweets to blogs to newspaper reviews, each critical engagement is still existing within a system that struggles to reckon and resist underpinnings rooted in white supremacy. As theatre critics are predominately white (Phillips “Black Bodies, White Writers”), they are prone to what Dani Snyder-Young labels “privileged spectatorship,” which she describes as a white gaze shaped custom to viewing one’s self as centered narrative of experience. Snyder-Young turns to Bourdieu’s developing of the concept of *habitus*, “embodied systems of cultural power, the bone-deep manifestation of the tastes, habits, attitudes, skills, and dispositions developed over a lifetime of culturally specific experiences” (Snyder-Young xx). To Snyder-Young, *habitus* colors how white folks interpret theatre, especially when stories challenge their perceptions of self and how folks different from them move through the world. I assert critics must exercise an awareness of their *habitus* and work to

expand how it manifests in their knowledge-in-action. Snyder-Young is clear in demonstrating how such privileged spectatorship is rooted in white supremacy, which she defines as, “the hierarchical sociopolitical system of racialized power in which whiteness comprises the dominant category,” (Snyder-Young xxvii). Furthermore, I seek to return to expansive understandings of culture. Although my writing as a critic of color may be one of the more prominent identities exhibited in my criticism, I still maintain identities that transcend my race. Culture, again, is expansive and non-static, even as white supremacy culture undergirds our ways of living, working, and loving.

What may be key in combating the underpinnings of white supremacy culture, specifically outlined by Tema Okun, is exercising of a reflexive practice that incorporates culturally responsive pedagogy. Snyder-Young points to Bourdieu’s theorizing of reflexivity as it “allows people to consciously change our habitus and that ‘reflexive labor might be undertaken most effectively not by the solitary or heroic intellectual but by a community of inquirers bound by together by a logic of peer competition and ‘regulated struggle’” (Snyder-Young xxi). I argue that a reflexive practice is one piece of the puzzle in developing a criticism practice that is more intentionally inclusive and rigorous in approach to works that demonstrate knowledge gaps. Additionally, the pairing of critical race theory put forth by Yosso and furthered by Paris and Alim may offer additional active frameworks by which to approach criticism with asset-minded orientations. Exercising a reflexive practice with a foundation in cultural competency is crucial for reflecting-on-action, that is, a critic reflecting on previous writing and process. If critics are familiar with cultural wealth and its asset-based orientations, they are more primed to

be writing with an abundance mindset when it comes to writing about cultures that are unfamiliar to them.

What threatens to impede a learning journey that integrates cultural competency into a reflexive criticism is white supremacy culture. In order to demonstrate how white supremacy culture manifests in the writing and publishing of theatre criticism, I now share some of my experiences moving through the industry as an early-career artist-critic. I further the necessity of exercising a reflexive practice since it has the potential to root critics back into the artist communities they write upon through a rigorous examination of their knowledge-in-action. What will further develop a critic's propensity to move as a citizen in their arts community is centering a pedagogy that invites more resistance upon the dominant white gaze that is pervasive in the field. With this attention on a critic's individual personhood and practice in resistance to white supremacy culture, I argue the integration of a reflexive practice will render a more inclusive and productive theatrical criticism. What comes next is interrogating how the theatre criticism industry and white supremacy culture function on a personal and institutional level.

On Naming and Countering White Supremacy Culture

It is necessary to name and interrogate how underpinnings of white supremacy culture influence a critic's ways of working because only then can interventions be made on a personal and, potentially, institutional level. Tema Okun is among the first to outline the characteristics of white supremacy culture as they show up in organizations. She contends they are "damaging because they are used as norms and standards without being

proactively named or chosen by the group” (Okun 1). In the United States and the American Theatre white supremacy culture has an ideological and material grip on our lives, our discourse, and our art. Institutions and individuals have the power to resist white supremacy culture, but it takes a committing to a framework of equity that is grounded in anti-racism and anti-oppression systems. Okun breaks down white supremacy culture into tenets, each outlined with characteristics. She keenly asserts these tenets “show up in the attitudes and behaviors of all of us—people of color and white people” (Okun 1). It is clear, then, that we all perpetuate harm along and beyond racial and/or ethnic social locations and familiarity with the innerworkings of white supremacy culture can mitigate the harm we perpetuate.

Each of Okun’s outlined characteristics of white supremacy culture can be found within how criticism is written, published, and made discourse. I interrogate how white supremacy culture manifests in theatre criticism in order to forefront new modes of working that are inclusive and do justice to the labor of artists. Okun defines fifteen characteristics, each with bullet points of distinguishing factors and potential “antidotes.” In analyzing a selection of the characteristics, I remember scenarios in which white supremacy culture manifested in my own career. In moments of hardship or disbelief, I confided in mentors or peers and their advice proved dismal as many of my qualms with freelance criticism were explained away as being the nature of the job. But what is this nature? What systems and infrastructures are critics accepting and perpetuating as acceptable? In an autoethnographic mode, I code my own anecdotes of working in theatre criticism through Okun’s characteristics, showcasing the need for more sustainable and

inclusive modes of working and writing. To demonstrate how white supremacy culture shows up in the field of theatre criticism, I turn to my personal experiences surviving, perpetuating, and resisting these systems as an early-career freelance theatre critic during the years 2018 to 2021.

I started writing regularly in Winter 2018 when I was a student in *Rescripted's* The Key: Young Critics Mentorship program, one of the first of its kind. Without the resources to afford to see theatre, it was largely inaccessible to me. This program allowed me the platform and cohort community to see and write and talk about theatre. Once emerging from the Key, I quickly went from freelancing for emerging online publications to that of legacy print weeklies, most notably the *Chicago Reader* and *Windy City Times*. Although missions and values amongst these publications were nearly identical, modes of living mission and instilling value greatly differed amongst these publications. For me, it was a whiplash of a transition as the constraints and expectations placed upon my writing grew and grew and I struggled to make sense of edits and email exchanges that left me agape.

Perfectionism

Anti-racist theatre practitioner Nicole Brewer contends we “speak in draft.”² That is, what we say is a first attempt to cohere thoughts and not a finished product devoid of

² The sentiment “we speak in draft” has been credited to Nicole Brewer in half a dozen theatre practitioner workshops I have taken, but I have yet to track her writing on the subject. I find this provocative as it also points to the ephemerality that may exist even in pedagogical theatre spaces. I imagine hundreds of folks are carrying with them the sentiment “we speak in draft” even if it has not been formally recorded to the page.

mistakes. Perfectionism, Okun's first characteristic as one of the markers of white supremacy culture, rears its head when grace is not extended to critics during an editing process. As theatre critics, we have first physical drafts, ones that get shared with an editor, someone who is equipped to clean up copy and push ideas further. But even with these supposed failsafes, mistakes are made and contended with in different ways. It also reminds me, per Schön, that knowledge-in-action does not fully reflect what someone knows. In returning a draft of one of my first theatre critic assignments, my editor told me they could not work with me if I ever made a typo in the name of a theatre company again. Although it is a potentially egregious error, this sentiment that a certain kind of typo deserves blacklisting negates the quality of the writing in general. This signals that any inadequacies could jeopardize future opportunities regardless of the circumstances. As an early-career critic, I did not have the agency to question this editor's stance. The mistake I made was highlighted as a failure that reflected on my writing broadly rather than in a specific instance. Reaching for perfectionism is unattainable and moves like this instill further barriers to folks making their way into the field of theatre criticism.

Urgency

Sense of urgency is perhaps the characteristic of white supremacy culture theatre critics are most familiar with as the turnaround of writing is tied to the rhythm of the theatre field at large. Critics oftentimes attend press nights or show openings with the expectation to submit a draft review in the morning. This pacing allows for reviews to be circulating as the performance begins its run. This writing functions as a metric of quality

and historicity, with the power to influence theatregoers towards various productions. Potential shortcomings of this model exist in the discrepancy in labor and time to make theatre and that of critiquing it. Artists spend anywhere from months to years working on their pieces before presenting them before an audience. Most criticism is written after a single viewing in the hours or days following the piece. What this urgency allows for is a quick recall of moments that stand out. Critics may have jotted notes detailing colors or questions or lines, but I wonder what is lost in the lack of time to ruminate on performances.

Here, urgency has a handful of impacts, the most common exists in a turnaround that demands a collapsing of specificity as critics cannot return to the performance at hand. On a certain level, this is considered the nature of writing criticism—that what is written is based upon initial impressions, that a critic also serves as a first-time audience. This becomes complicated when considering the difference in criticism between plays that are considered cannon versus those that are new works. Although critics can on occasion receive the script of the performance, a lack of familiarity with the performance can skew a critic's propensity to meet the play where it is at—that is, there is a potential loss of rigor in analysis or contextualizing of the work at hand. Urgency also perpetuates knowledge gaps as critics may struggle to self-educate or research issues that are outside of their everyday experiences or expertise. On the other hand, too much familiarity also has its potential drawbacks.

I remember covering a new play based on the 2014 #Gamergate controversy, wherein a doxxing campaign targets women videogamers with threats of extreme

violence (Mikhael “Male Fragility”). The play centers a “nice guy” and was billed as a “cautionary tale.” The audience bears witness to this character’s descent, which is mired with alignments to the alt-right. He wreaks havoc, slowly but surely, on a handful of women and I remember tensing up, fidgeting throughout the performance. I recognized this man from daily encounters of moving through the world as femme person. In writing this review under the pressure of a deadline, I found myself dissociating. I needed time to process the implications of this work, the grievances it brought up. The final scene is the most harrowing and I wish I could have addressed it, but there is no way to force processing events connected to trauma. Nevertheless, critics are expected to immediately churn out writing regardless of the impact of what they witness. In some instances, it means putting parts of themselves on pause as they labor to get words on the page.

Worship of the Written Word & I’m the Only One

The most traditional form of criticism is that of a review penned by an individual author, and both these aspects can be tied to white supremacy culture. When considering the job of the critic, it has been a primarily solo endeavor, wherein an individual’s writing is heralded as a significant marker of value for the performance. Okun names these characteristics “Worship of the Written Word” and “I’m the Only One” (3, 6). To Okun, worship of the written word generally traces a reliance on documentation from a single source to solidify information. It privileges writing as the primary tool of communication, the most valued form of conveying thoughts and analysis. Theatre criticism is a field rooted in writing, wherein a single person is responsible for synthesizing a live event to

the page, a page that gets published for readers. Additionally, I find it useful to complicate how the written word functions when published from a position of power presumably occupying “dominant” ideologies. Literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner offers the language of “publics” and “counterpublics” to interrogate how groups of people move with and against circulating discourse. Critics writing for legacy print media may face a larger share of the backlash in the face of knowledge gaps as their position has a greater potential for harm done against their artist community. Warner defines a counterpublic as a “subordinate status” that “enables a horizon of opinion and exchange” wherein those “exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power” (Warner 56). In this distinction between a public (perpetuator of dominant ideologies) and counterpublic (troubler of dominant ideologies), there is room to consider the power of multivocality and mediums beyond writing. Furthermore, many critics attest to talking with friends or overhearing audience reactions following a production. Mild conversation happens, sometimes organically, in bars or in train cars. Here there is an opportunity to lean into the energy that spills into lobby spaces and produce criticism that decentralizes one voice. This is especially useful for productions of new works, as it increases the depth of criticism when a breadth of points of views can pull from lived experience outside of the dominant discourse.

One reviewing experience of mine attempted a “Dual Perspectives” approach by listing two takes by two critics together. In March 2019, I covered Jackalope Theatre’s production of “Dutch Masters” by Greg Keller (Mikhael and Sullivan “Dual Perspectives”). My background in dramaturgy positions me as an artist-critic, which is

the intention behind the online arts journal *Rescripted*. The critic I was paired with for this “Dual Perspectives” article has been covering theatre longer than I have been alive. This pairing allows for approaches that are inherently intergenerational, cross-disciplinary, racially diverse, and more. Nevertheless, “Dual Perspectives” does not materially function any differently than publishing two reviews. The pieces are not in response to each other outside of being published on the same webpage. They reflect a diversity of perspective, but perhaps without the depth that would emerge from a conflicting opinion or an ask to further interrogate one’s own language. The play “Dutch Masters” takes up race relations and assumptions. In reflecting on the lede in my review, I took up concepts and named them without critically defining their relevance:

The trauma of our ancestors passes through our bones and brains, impacting all generations whether we know it or not. Broadly speaking, this is intergenerational trauma. For Black folks, it’s also post-traumatic slave syndrome. It’s multigenerational oppression.

In starting my review this way, I wonder about who this lede serves, what context it provides as a set up for the foundation of the play. I could have hyperlinked to an article that unpacks intergenerational trauma and post-traumatic slave syndrome, but that would have removed me from the responsibility of being specific in my word choice. If put in conversation with another critic, concepts that seem like givens are afforded more space for definitions and complications. A form outside of a written review could invite new rigor and depth into theatre criticism, one wherein conversation leads rather than synthesis.

Either/Or Thinking

Theatre criticism also gets siloed into understandings of “good” and “bad” reviews, thus playing into the binary underpinnings of either/or thinking that is a part of white supremacy culture. Okun maintains such thinking “results in trying to simplify complex things” (Okun 4). One of the functions of theatre criticism is consumer report, thus it is ultimately a critic’s job to affirm or reject a production’s quality as to inform an audience of its value. For critics this can be a difficult tenant to contend with considering the legacy of thumbs up versus thumbs down expectations. Although not such a severe binary, even assigning a show a star ranking does much to streamline worth. Considering all of the variables that contribute to the making and shaping of a production, criticism that does not hold space for complexity does a disservice to both audiences and artists.

When resisting either/or tendencies, I find myself leaning on my dramaturgical roots and wondering if and how it serves my theatre criticism. There is much to hold when writing criticism; critics are often contending with the world of the play and the world we are in. At a minimum, the world of the play is rooted in the tangibles of the production, design, staging, script, and team. In putting the play’s world in conversation with our world, there is a trickier sense of how to (or if to) measure how the play functions as a piece alongside a lineage of theatrical works within cultural conversations. I struggled with these elements in reviewing “I Call My Brothers” by Jonas Hassen Khemiri produced by Interrobang Theatre Project in 2019 (Mikhael “A Captivating Everyman”). To better frame my struggles, I turn to Dani Snyder-Young’s questions surrounding criticism’s purpose and its distinction from dramaturgy:

If newspaper criticism's primary function is as a consumer guide, should it operate within frameworks that imagined readers already hold, or should it educate readers to be better prepared to meet artistic work within the frameworks held by the creators? Where are—and should be—the lines between newspaper criticism and dramaturgy? (Snyder-Young 82)

I take Snyder-Young's questions to heart and maintain leaning into dramaturgical impulses makes new, potentially urgent knowledge more accessible. In my review for "I Call My Brothers," there are moments where I question the necessity of a piece that showcases toxic masculinity without consequences. I wonder about the merits of a play that contributes to a canon that already paints brown folks as others, others who are dangerous and need to be policed. As an artist of color, I am contending with appreciation for people like me having space on stage while desiring more than stories that depict us as suffering under the pressure of assimilation. As a critic of color, I wonder how much of this conversation belongs in a review, but it certainly complicates either/or tendencies. The production, from a technical standpoint, was stunning. Writing through the full experience of the production invites complexity beyond either/or framings. Criticism that is rigorous and productive engages with issues that veer beyond aesthetics and a play's "goodness." It is a critic's responsibility to, in good faith, puzzle through what artists are presenting and meet it where it is at with expansive ideas of cultural value.

Objectivity

Thus far, I have leaned on my personal experiences to explore how the field of theatre criticism aligns with white supremacy culture. In doing so, I have demonstrated a

resistance to one of the most present characteristics: objectivity. The argument that a theatre critic must remain a neutral, unbiased party points to a legacy of separation between critics and artists. Critics have worn disguises to resist being recognized. Some critics immediately dash out of the theatre following the performance. Such distance exists to dispel notions of critics playing favorites or being influenced by anything that is not the performance itself. With such a severe commitment to objectivity, critics may be closing themselves off to the interactions that could deepen their understanding of the performance or even challenge their initial interpretations. Since critics function as first-time audience members, there is a fallacy in expecting them to remain divorced from the surrounding conversations and influences that live events entail. Additionally, the framing of theatre criticism as opinion writing does not itself protect the writing from being criticized. Opinions are informed not only by a developed expertise in the discipline at hand but also by one's lived experiences.

On Countering White Supremacy Culture

Okun offers "antidotes" to the characteristics of white supremacy culture, noting there are specific actions and mindsets that organizations and their people can embrace in resistance. The outlining of these characteristics also points to present unconscious biases and centering dominant norms. When dominant cultures are deferred to as standard, this leaves little room for new, potentially more inclusive, ways of working to emerge. Okun notes, "many of our organizations, while saying we want to be multi-cultural, really only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing

cultural norms” (Okun 7). Thus, in arguing for a more diverse theatrical criticism landscape, we must interrogate how the field can adapt and change to include new norms and standards. It is not enough to hire and train diverse critics, especially if the infrastructure they are joining was not designed with them in mind. Rather, critics must be proactive in interrogating their personal alignments with white supremacy culture through the application of reflexive and culturally competent pedagogies. What also emerges is the reality of rigid white supremacist cultures is the fact that navigating these infrastructures is more difficult for critics who are marginalized and/or come from historical disinvested backgrounds. Institutional leaders must check their gatekeeping if they are truly committed to equity and inclusion. Critics also have a role to play here in the way they move in coalition with their current/future peers and their artist community.

On Reflecting

Scholars and practitioners across fields have designed frameworks that theorize on the necessity of self-reflection as a means of moving in ways that are more inclusive and culturally competent (Dawson and Kelin). Reflection can aid in building self-awareness through interrogating knowledge gaps. Donald Schön puts forth the concepts surrounding building a “reflective practice,” that is, becoming aware of implicit knowledge and learning from experience. Schön outlines three core concepts in this process of recognizing and working through biases. First, he terms “knowing-in-action,” which is considered what knowledge is demonstrated in the completion of a task, i.e. showing what you know by doing. For critics, this might look like what ends on their

published page. Second, he terms “reflection-in-action,” which is the process of thinking about what we are doing. This can happen in-real-time, signaling a metacognition, an awareness of what knowledge we are demonstrating. Third, and most crucially, he suggests a need for “reflection-on-action,” a process of taking stock of what has transpired based on completed actions, especially in the face of undesirable outcomes. As a critic, everything I know will not be demonstrated in one review, but my readers are neither in my head nor privy to the totality of my lived experience that influence how I render a performance. If I make a mistake or do harm vis-à-vis my review, accountability will not be found in that piece of writing. Reflection-on-action offers the opportunity to acknowledge that my knowledge-in-action was insufficient or misguided. Operationally, Schön’s concepts provide for a compelling framework by which to foster more inclusive and competent approaches to theatre criticism through the utilization of a self-reflection process.

Developing reflexivity offers an orientation towards the future as it calls for an individual to reflect on past action and adjust based on the outcomes. In calling for critics to exercise a practice of reflexivity, we only increase the rigor and efficacy of their writing as it keeps them rooted in the changing world they write upon. Dawson and Kelin characterize a reflexive individual as the following:

The reflexive individual entertains *what could be* and even considers *what challenges all that I have known, believed or practiced*. A reflexive thinker seeks to understand how he interrelates with others, how open he is to considering choices and ideas that are in opposition to his own, and how responsive he is to the momentary and evolving needs of others. A reflexive thinker turns the lens on herself, interrogating how those deep-seated aspects of who she is determines how she will react to any given experience or situation. (Dawson and Kelin 31)

Notably, the individuals Dawson and Kelin are theorizing upon are teaching artists. The dynamics between a teaching artist and their students are not inherently comparable to a critic writing to an audience. Teaching artists, on their feet, are contending with their audience in real time and have an immediate accountability to the humans they are sharing space with. Critics, however, are afforded a distance from their audience and the call for accountability lives in murkier territory. Even so, critics can benefit from participating in similar reflexive practices that encourage reflection and a resulting changed behavior or widened awareness. By integrating a practice of reflexivity into their approach to criticism, critics are reminded they are writing in community with artists and that this writing carries weighty impacts if their knowledge-in-action signals a propensity to other or exclude. Reflection, first centered by Schön, and reflexivity, furthered by Dawson and Kelin, offer compelling orientations by which a critic can examine their knowledge-in-action through reflection-on-action.

Reflexivity points to a propensity for change in self, which is needed for those writing in a world that is constantly changing. Dawson and Kelin begin with preliminary definitions between *reflection* and *reflexive*:

Reflection

1. The act of reflecting or the state of being reflected.
2. A fixing of the thoughts on something; careful consideration
3. A thought occurring in consideration or mediation
 - a. *A focus on choices, actions and endeavors, reflection makes sense of experience.*

Reflexive

1. Directed back on itself.

2. Grammar. Of, relating to, or being a verb having an identical subject and direct object
 - a. *A focus on the individual, reflexivity questions beliefs, assumptions and habits.*(28)

When considering a critic's practice, it centers writing on others, not the self. In looking back to Fisher's manual on criticism, he argues "Whatever your background as a critic, the corrective to your inevitable bias is to be as engaged in society as possible, keeping yourself alive to inequities and questioning received assumptions" (Fisher 239). Dawson and Kelin break down utilizing a reflective process as moving through "loops" of thinking. There are three questions they put forth as an exercise in reflection that functions in conversation with context, assumptions, actions, and results (Dawson and Kelin 32). These exercises can be beneficial when done solo or in community.

For critics, their writing cements their thinking and knowing for a public. Rendering a performance to the page also invites a public to be in conversation about a critic's thinking and knowing separate from the critic. Sometimes, it takes public outrage directed at a critic for a critic to be pushed to wade into discourse. From here, there are two modes of reflection possible. Reflection on self can become a critical practice that one integrates as a part of every piece written. If critics take on a practice of reflection that does not include the voices of their peers or readers, they might not catch the moments where further knowledge-in-action is needed. If reflection is spurred by community crisis, critics will be more attuned to their gaps and specifically address their missteps. Additionally, a critic's moment of recognizing a knowledge gap may also be tied to the performance they are witnessing. There must exist a mid-point in these

circumstances, one in which critics can partner with others to aid in the development of a practice that is attuned to inclusivity and asset-based approaches. In adapting Dawson and Kelin's reflexive framework, which includes three questions of looped-reflection, critics can grow a personal propensity to reflect on their own and in a community of practitioners regardless if the moment of reflection was a product of being publicly confronted or in a personal wondering. The following questions are offered by Dawson and Kelin as strategies to facilitate reflexive thinking:

1. Single-Loop: Describe a moment from a drama learning experience that caused you to consider, question or shift your beliefs about your practice.
2. Double-Loop: Analyze the experience and discuss how the experience impacted your current beliefs.
3. Triple-Loop: Relate the learning to the choices you made (or hope to make) based on the experience. How did you apply or hope to apply your learning as new thinking about your work? (33)

Here a "drama learning experience" could be substituted for a critic's writing of a piece and/or how the piece landed in public discourse, as I outlined in the beginning of the chapter with pieces I wrote for *Sightlines* magazine. Critics must have a practice of interrogating their past and current writings with a framework that illuminates knowledge gaps in effort to mitigate them in the future. Application of a culturally competent approach through a reflexive criticism makes Fisher's call for keeping "alive to inequities and questioning received assumptions" more actionable (Fisher 239). Critics currently have the power to hold themselves accountable to an ongoing learning journey that does not cease even as they land jobs that herald their expertise marked by time spent in the field.

When a critic's knowledge-in-action demonstrates a gap, the stakes for the impact are raised in the fast-paced public forum that is social media. Critics who participate in social media are also more accessible and potentially primed to be diving into the discourse that emerges from their criticism. In a sense, the knowledge-in-action demonstrated on the page may not be in alignment with the totality of knowledge a critic holds. We find this argument present in Schön's theorizing on reflection on thinking, wherein he notes, "competent practitioners usually know more than they can say" (Schön 8). The expanded knowledge of the critic, then, may exist on social media, as it provides an opportunity for further reflection and engagement with the issues at hand.

On Accountability

Social media falls into another territory wherein critics can develop a personal approach to how or if to engage with their audiences and colleagues beyond the publishing of formal pieces of criticism. Social media has been characterized as a less productive space to facilitate conversations that make space for nuanced discourse that can lead to fruitful reflection. Even so, social media becomes a place for a critic's audience, specifically artists, to push back against or trouble a critic's writing. Critics that are used to being in hot water may have more negative connotations with social media and be less inclined to take to their digital platforms. Refusing to engage in moments of call-outs/ins may be a critic setting a boundary, but it may also signal a critic's propensity to opt out of criticism of themselves. Activist and writer adrienne maree brown, a fierce proponent of emergent strategy notes, "one of the main demands in call outs is for a

public apology” (brown 11). Naming harms done at the hands of a critic may be more nebulous considering the difficulty in tracking impact and intentionality of writing. Critics can state their intentions on social media or in essays resulting from their demonstrated knowledge gaps, but the impact of their initial words is hard to reconcile across their readerships of artists, audiences, and archives. Brown also posits that, “Sometimes we don't even realize we have caused harm, because supremacy is a numbing and narrowing disease” (brown 11). Brown contends supremacy, broadly, cannot be evaded. It shows up in how we handle call-ins/outs, both on a personal and institutional level. Additionally, brown affirms, “sometimes it takes a long time to realize the harm that has happened to us. And longer to realize we have caused harm to others” (brown 50). Social media, then, potentially speeds up a process of realizing we caused harm, that our understanding of people and communities different than our own may hurt from our renderings.

Crucially, critics must center a desire and propensity to adapt to change alongside the building of a reflexive and culturally competent practice. I take influence from adrienne maree brown who facilitates shaping futures in movement building, writing on the power of disrupting oppressive systems/processes and adapting to change. She contends:

Intentional adaption is the heart of emergent strategy. [...] As an individual, developing your capacity for adaption can mean assessing your default reactions to change, and whether those reactions create space for opportunity, possibility, and continuing to move towards your vision. (brown 71)

Adaption is but one element that brown centers in developing an emergent strategy, one that is attuned to an individual and a potential offering for community facilitations. The elements that brown writes through are their own adaption from science fiction author Octavia Butler's fictional religious text *The Book of the Living*. In connecting brown's nine emergent strategies to criticism, I am also drawn to her calls for interdependence/decentralization, creation of more possibilities, reflection, and intention. Each element is indicative of process-oriented possibility models, which is framing I take forth in this thesis. I am excited by the opportunity to offer possibility models for the future of a sustainable and inclusive theatre criticism. Brown first identifies the elements of emergent strategies then defines the element in simple terms. I have done similarly with white supremacy culture. I agree with brown that examining definitions and roots of words is an important step, but I also acknowledge that language shifts and lands differently across communities. Similar to Dawson and Kelin's reflexive teaching framework, brown puts words into practice and offers strategies for integrating new and collective knowledge into everyday living and interactions. Brown's work offers a framework for assessing self alongside assessing others, which proves necessary for critics committed to writing more inclusive and culturally competent pieces.

I propose the integration of a reflexive practice alongside the integration of cultural competency to reach towards criticism that truly serves artists, audiences, and archives. Resisting white supremacy culture on a personal and institutional level is key for the sustainability of a field that has been historically exclusionary to folks who are not a part of what has been considered the dominant culture. In order to demonstrate how a

legacy of exclusion and knowledge gaps play out in the criticism field, I turn to the Chicago arts landscape as a case study.

Chapter 2: Critical Case Studies, Chicago Style

A Landscape of Inequities

Legacies of white supremacy in the United States manifest in theatre communities in several ways and I turn to Chicago as a case study to demonstrate how these roots of exclusion continue to impact current artist communities.³ As a city of neighborhoods, the Chicago theatre ecosystem is incredibly localized due to a history of racist land deeds and lacking transportation infrastructure. Where theatres are located reflects some of the most telling data regarding a city's allocation of resources along the intersections of race, class, and accessibility. Critics are a part of this system, and who and what they cover also reflects such a legacy of erasure via a misallocation of resources, namely time, attention, and due diligence. Here I lay the groundwork of how Chicago's theatrosphere reflects historic inequities and how artists contend with and challenge these inequities. I take up two case studies featuring critic's reviews and the dialog around them, showcasing how two critic's knowledge-in-action demonstrated gaps and varying propensities to address them. In this chapter, I center multivocality and utilize personal interviews with multidisciplinary practitioners and scholars to demonstrate legacies of exclusion and how artists and cultural leaders strive to address them.

No matter how much care and intention go into providing access for all people and their bodies, in the United States and the West we have a history of colonialism and systemic racism to reckon with. This reckoning manifests in various ways, and Chicago,

³ The first third of my chapter was commissioned by *American Theatre* magazine as a part of a special issue featuring the Chicago theatre scene. Mikhael, Yasmin Zacaria. "A City Divided." *American Theatre*, vol. 36, no. 9, Theatre Communications Group, Inc, 2019, pp. 46-6.

for all of its demographic diversity, isn't immune to the racism and (not so blissful) ignorance that plagues American theatres more generally. Many artists see the theatrical experience as a sacred one, comparing it to a church-like experience promising transformation. This comparison is quite apt for the Chicago theatrosphere, where storefront mythologies often take root in church basements. But churches have their tensions, and its congregants have their sins of omission.

When considering the roots of Chicago's racism, it is important to remember how much of it was codified in law (Demby). Black people and people of color were redlined out of homeownership, gerrymandered out of votes, and evicted in the face of bulldozers for an expressway (Rothstein 35). This history impacts where and how theatre is made in Chicago. It impacts who can get to the theatre and who can afford it. Rejection or ignorance of these roots even breeds a lack of cultural competency in criticism, furthering erasure.

What has literally paved the way for the inequities we see today in the arts is a larger system designed to keep people of color out of power and at the margins. We can trace it to the manipulative treaties that forced the Potawatomi off their land in the early to mid-19th century. Or to the Great Migration from 1916 to 1970, when real estate power grappled with the arrival of 500,000 Black folks and the creation of arbitrary covenants to keep them constrained to the South and West sides of Chicago. Exclusion was compounded by the policy of redlining, which under the Federal Housing Administration from 1934 through 1968 determined which neighborhoods were fit for

mortgages based on racial and ethnic composition. Written into deeds was the stipulation that houses could neither be sold nor rented to Black people (Rothstein 83).

Some canonical theatre pulls from this history of exclusion and racist practices. In a famous Chicago case, one that became the roots of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, her father, Carl Hansberry, was able to purchase a house in the then white neighborhood of West Woodlawn on the South Side. According to journalist and South Side native Natalie Y. Moore "The Hansberrys faced racial violence because they lived there," and "Mrs. Hansberry walked around the house with a shotgun" (Mikhail "Moore"). Moore notes racist housing policies also manifested in physical harm as the Hansberry's daughter "Lorraine was injured by something thrown into the house." The incident escalated to the Supreme Court with *Hansberry v. Lee* in 1940, which rules that the Hansberrys, as Moore reports, "should be allowed to live there, but not because of equal protection of the law but because not enough white homeowners had signed the petition saying that Blacks could be kept out" (Mikhail "Moore"). Some narratives are shaped and inspired from lived experiences that depict inequities that are ongoing.

Racist housing policies are the foundation upon which Chicago's inequities are built and critics should be sensitive to these legacies. More recently, the Dan Ryan expressway, opened in 1961, cut through the heart of the South Side's vibrant neighborhoods. Public housing was built only in Black neighborhoods. To this day the Chicago Transit Authority Red Line train only goes to 95th St., though the city goes to 130th St. Black and brown neighborhoods on the South and West sides continue to face disinvestment. A 2016 leadership transition at the Field Foundation of Illinois—an

independent foundation that significantly supported local arts for nearly 80 years—led to rigorous research and mapping of its own past funding patterns. This research unveiled some troubling patterns. As arts program officer Tempestt Hazel puts it in our interview, this “fact-finding mission” was designed to provide a “new way of being extremely focused and racially explicit about grantmaking” (Mikhael “Hazel”). In a sense, the Field Foundation pursued reflection-on-action. The result was a series of “heat maps” illuminating much of the Chicago racial divide in terms of quality-of-life indicators, such as school closings, commute times, health insurance, and access to the arts (Field Foundation “Heat Maps”). With these heat maps, the Field Foundation could then take this data as a means of reflection-on-action, that is centering new knowledge as they take the steps necessary to address past oversights.

The heat maps showed that the foundation’s previous grantees were almost exclusively on the North Side, and ignored organizations serving communities on the South or West Sides. In essence, their funding went to predominantly white and wealthier organizations. Armed with this data, the foundation demonstrated what not only they, but all responsible funders must acknowledge when supporting Chicago nonprofits: a legacy of disinvestment that will only continue without a more strategic and explicit funding model focused on racial equity. This history and its impact lie beneath us, including our theatres. It is easy to mythologize some institutions as pillars of Chicago theatre and fail to acknowledge how privileges of whiteness, education, and city resources helped make it possible. Historic institutions including Goodman, Steppenwolf, and Lookingglass are a part of this North Side-based and largely white legacy. In his book *A Theater of Our*

Own, past *Chicago Tribune* chief critic Richard Christiansen laments, “The problem with writing about theatre in Chicago is that it resists comprehensiveness” (Christiansen 19). The same could be said about its racism.

At these predominantly white-built institutions on the North Side, including many in the Loop and Off-Loop theatre districts, artists and audiences of color were not initially in the picture. Prominent Chicago playwright Ike Holter shares with me that, “Ensemble hangs over the theatre like a mythology. It means people working together, supposedly for a greater good” (Mikhael “Holter”). But the downside of such tight-knittedness, Holter adds, is that “these ensembles that have been around for decades... are full of these white people from the ’80s and ’90s” (Mikhael “Holter”). Consequently, for too long, stories on Chicago stages failed to reflect the diversity of the city while remaining inaccessible to non-North Side artists and audiences whose commute to these stages could be an all-consuming task, a powerful barrier to entry in itself.

Chicago is geographically large, and transportation is not equally accessible across the city. “We have this idea that the Loop in Chicago is central, and it’s not,” asserts Coya Paz Brownrigg, artistic director of Free Street Theater. “The Loop is east—it’s as far east as you can get in the city and it’s pretty far north. It’s not the midway point of the city at all” (Mikhael “Paz Brownrigg”). For many of Chicago’s people of color and lower-income residents, a single trip to a North Side venue might require two trains and a bus to get to the theatre. Such an issue of geographical inaccessibility poses difficulties for artists and their audiences, and the inequity grows more insidious when

considering the role arts coverage plays in the economic viability of artistic works in neighborhoods beyond the North Side.

In response to this lack of access, BIPOC artists founded their own theatres. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s provided an initial catalyst for theatres founded by artists aiming to make theatre in and with historically disinvested and marginalized communities. Among the earliest was Free Street Theater, founded in 1969 as a multiracial company with a mission of challenging racial and economic injustice. Eschewing a traditional brick-and-mortar model of performance proved more accessible. Under the direction of Patrick Henry, Free Street performed in public spaces for audiences who generally would not have seen theatre otherwise. Another long-running institution, the Black Ensemble Theater, founded in 1976 by Jackie Taylor, had a similar mandate to fight racism via authentic storytelling and community organizing.

Chicago, according to Paz Brownrigg, has always been a city amenable to a growing scene, and theatre artists have accordingly always made space here wherever they could. In 2000 she co-founded Teatro Luna. “At the time [Teatro Luna] was Chicago’s first and only all-Latina theatre company,” Paz Brownrigg recalls (Mikhaiel “Brownrigg”). “It was a city that made that possible. At the same time, part of why we had to start that theatre company was because there were so few opportunities for Latina women on Chicago stages. So I think that do-it-yourself mentality can be a double edge for some people. It’s part of why you *have* to do-it-yourself—nobody is including you at the party. You have to start your own party” (Mikhaiel “Brownrigg”). Taking action in

the way of creating new opportunities remains a pattern for practitioners tired of waiting for institutions to embrace asset-minded approaches to cultural wealth.

Without resources or attention, however, BIPOC-founded and -run theatres are unable to coalesce into something sustainable. Although institutions uphold representation, a BIPOC artist's ability to *self-represent* remains novel. These culturally specific organizations continue to be under-recognized as credible institutions by mainstream papers and granters, as they are often viewed as lower-tiered than larger, subscription-based regional theatres, as if size were congruent with quality. As Ricardo Gamboa, a South Side scholar and theatremaker, puts it, "That's a way of perpetuating racism, because it erases you from the archive. It tries to suffocate that work and kind of bury it by trying to make it a non-option in theatre offerings by not even letting people know that it's there" (Mikhael "Gamboa"). Here we can consider both critics and funders as kinds of cultural gatekeepers of stories and of voices, of who gets to speak and who is considered valuable and credible.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that at mainstream white institutions, "diversity" has become a buzzword used in marketing materials and mission statements in hopes of attracting a "diverse" audience (i.e., more money) and grants (i.e., even more money). With this narrow interest in mind, the real work of diversifying the entire institution is not an immediate priority. These historically white theatres will program a "diverse" season yet still hire white directors and creative teams. Working artists of color are then left vulnerable as they are hired into productions ill-equipped to tell their stories. What might break this pattern is the work happening in education departments. When analyzing the

roster of full-time staff and freelance teaching artists at theatres like Goodman, Steppenwolf, and TimeLine, the education departments are often made up of BIPOC staff, as demonstrated by each of these companies' staff pages respectively. Interestingly enough, though, most of this effort impacts youth externally, leaving much of the theatres' internal inequities to flourish.

When predominantly white theatre companies start interrogating how white supremacy culture is embedded in their aspirationally diverse, inclusive, and equitable institutions, they must dismantle systems that centers their team's most visibly present identity markers. Indonesian-Lebanese actor and community organizer Arti Ishak, with credits at Goodman, Silk Road Rising, and Victory Gardens, questions representation onstage because it pits artists against each other in problematic ways. "As a biracial actor and as someone who is trilingual, it is often tough for me to be recognized as an Asian American actor in this city, and I fully believe it is based on the way I look from the perspective of whiteness," Ishak says (Mikhael "Ishak"). "I do not 'look like' an Asian American. I think that type of mentality affects a lot of people of color in this city. Both in the way of excluding them from jobs they may be right for, but also including them in jobs that are deeply problematic to cross-cast. It imposes this idea that some people of color could pass for anything" (Mikhael "Ishak"). Ishak even performed a solo piece specifically on being biracial, but was still siloed into an "Arab Muslim" box by a white critic.

It is as if by advocating for color-conscious casting our field has made another perplexing shift, one wherein observers only take into account the most visually

dominant identity. What emerges, then, is another shift in terms: *identity-conscious*, posited by director and adaptor Lavina Jahdwani and casting director Victor Vazquez. Broadly their calls for being “conscious about somebody’s rejection of gender as a construct, somebody’s queerness, somebody’s abilities, whether neurological or physical” centers a breadth of lived experience while “actively and radically making space for all the different ways that actors exist in this world” (Jahdwani and Vazquez). Such identity expansive framing is in line with scholars like Synder-Young, rooted in theatre spaces, and Yosso, rooted in education spaces. Calls for specificity in language and an expansion of understandings of culture must be heeded by practitioners and critics interested in doing better by the communities they write in and along.

Indeed, the city’s critical dialogue, like the leadership of its major theatres, is still lacking voices of color. So when work by people of color in Chicago gets reviewed by white critics, implicit bias and/or knowledge gaps can’t help but be present. Sometimes it is not so implicit, as in the case of the infamous Hedy Weiss review of *Pass Over* at Steppenwolf in the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 2017 (Tran “The Review That Shook Chicago.”) Reviewing a play about two Black youths accosted by a white police officer, Weiss relied on the stereotypes of “black-on-black” crime to discount the play’s portrait of police brutality, which is not an academic or hypothetical issue for everyday Chicagoans. In response, many theatres banded together to deny Weiss complimentary press tickets, and eight months later the *Sun-Times* fired Weiss, a 33-year veteran at the job whose *Pass Over* review was hardly her first run-in with readers who found her

comments bigoted. White freelancers now share the reviewing duties at the *Sun-Times*, with the exception of a recent piece by Sheri Flanders, who may be their first Black critic.

A *HowlRound* article published merely two months before this controversy proved prescient. In it, Chicago dramaturgs Regina Victor and Tanuja Jagernauth penned “The Need for Cultivating Theatre Critics of Color,” outlining a history of harmful reviews. Victor then partnered with Katherine O’Keefe and co-founded an alternative platform, Rescripted.org, for what they call “empathetic and culturally competent” criticism. “Being able to send critics who care about the fact that that show is being produced, who feel as though the show is representing them in any way, who feel as though the show is moving a conversation about their culture forward, makes a massive difference in the product,” Victor shares in our interview (Mikhael “Victor”). “It is more specific. It is more loving. It is contextualized. It is usually placed in artistic and cultural legacy, which is something that is often lacking in mainstream coverage” (Mikhael “Victor”). Victor also launched the Key, a mentorship program supporting young critics. This is not to say critics should be barred from reviewing shows outside of their lived experiences, but rather to highlight the possibility of depth and specificity if reviewers acknowledged how different bodies move through Chicago in different ways. I turn to two reviews and their resulting digital conversations as case studies to demonstrate how (or if) a critic’s knowledge-in-action can be impacted by an online community talking back.

Not About a Whale

In this section, I take up a new play, a chief critic, and an audience of artists questioning the purpose of both. In June of 2018, Sideshow Theatre Company produced Kristiana Rae Colón’s play *Tilikum* and a review by *Chicago Tribune* chief critic Chris Jones ignited online conversations surrounding the role of the critic, legacies of exclusion, and resources for a new generation of critics (Jones “Tilikum”). What is illuminated in this case is how dire theatrical criticism can become when a critic’s knowledge-in-action is not paired with reflection-on-action. Based on the dialogue that Jones’s review inspired, artists are fiercely demanding criticism that is written through a framework that *sees* them. What I offer as a culturally competent and inclusive criticism endeavors to render a more productive writing practice that centers the intentionality and lived experiences of artists. Part of doing diligence as a critic is having an understanding of the artists and their backgrounds, their influences. I begin this case study on “Tilikum” by identifying our playwright.

The Playwright

Kristiana Rae Colón is an activist, poet, and playwright lauded for her writing of an abolitionist canon centering afro-futurism while working towards liberation. She is a Black Latina who grew up in Chicago’s slam poetry scene. She was radicalized during the Ferguson protests as she mobilized alongside peer artists to fundraise for tear gas protection for protestors. This was one of the first times she realized the power present in community when directly asking people what they need and making it happen.

#WeAreWhatWeNeed became a centering mantra as artists and activists worked together to secure funds and other resources from Chicago to Ferguson. These partnerships resulted in the founding of The #LetUsBreathe Collective which formalized as an alliance of artists and activists to organize “through a creative lens to imagine a world without prisons and police” (The #LetUsBreathe Collective “About”). Colón is a co-founder of The #LetUsBreathe Collective and liberation has remained a central theme of her work across disciplines. When looking to her playwriting as a cannon, one of her breakout pieces, *florissant & cansfield*, was based on her experiences mobilizing alongside other young people and protestors. Colón is interested in making abolition legible and actionable, as resisting carceral logics can happen on a personal and institutional level. Although this provides ample context to Colón as an artist and activist, it is not integral information to have before witnessing any of her work because of the clarity present in her linking of socio-political issues to that of the world of her plays.

The Play

Colón premiered her new play *Tilikum* with Sideshow Theatre Company in Chicago in 2018. On the surface, *Tilikum* is based on the true events of the eponymous killer whale caged in quarters too small, living as a captive for the entertainment of SeaWorld audiences. The play synopsis offers such framing, not making explicit connections of *Tilikum*'s conditions to folks who may be suffering under the same just beyond the theatre:

Tilikum was a king, and the oceans of the world were his. Now, he is a captive in a marine amusement park, doomed to live merely as an opportunity for profit. Alone

behind bars he forgets the feel of freedom, but when fellow prisoners ignite the fires of his memory, he starts down a path that threatens to consume everything. Ripped from the headlines, Kristiana Rae Colón's *Tilikum* explores captivity, violence and rebellion in a vital and visceral blend of theatre, drumming and dance. Poetic and lyrical, *Tilikum* calls out the power structures—both corporate and human—that ensure continued oppression, and the complicity of those willing to stand by and do nothing. (Sideshow “Tilikum”)

In a sense, Sideshow's own publicizing of the play sets an audience up for an experience that is attuned to the material struggles of animals in SeaWorld. Yet, even in language centering carceral language (“behind bars,” “prisoners”) to describe the home and state of these animals, the materials are signaling a deeper conversation potentially relating to abolition. Later in this section, I consider how the production design explicitly support's Colón's messaging with elements signaling police lights, solitary confinement. What is offered here, however, is only a taste of the production materials available concerning the more urgent thesis of the play. If critics are considered professional audience members, one could imagine further curiosity would entail a dive into materials either before or after the play. A critic's approach also includes deciding how much information they take in concerning the context of the play, as some may argue the play should stand by itself and a critic's job is to capture the play. When a critic is reviewing a show that is outside of their cultural (in the most expansive of definitions) background, these materials can serve as necessary context and to dismiss them inhibits fruitful knowledge growth.

The Paper/The Critic

When considering Chicago's criticism landscape, there is only one full-time theatre critic staffed at a legacy newspaper. Although there are a handful of alternative bi-weekly print and indie online publications, the weight of a review from Chris Jones

published by the *Chicago Tribune* is palpable. Jones has been a full-time critic at the *Chicago Tribune* since 2002, following the retirement of Richard Christiansen who had helmed the post since 1978. After a decade in academia, Jones left his tenured associate dean position at DePaul University to serve as the *Tribune*'s new chief theater critic and a Sunday culture columnist. Jones also carries with him a decade as a theatre reporter with an emphasis on pre-Broadway tryouts. Since 2014 he has been the director of the National Critics' Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. Jones's multi-decade career is expansive and his continued role as an educator should instill a responsibility to due diligence for the future of the craft.

In the writing of his review of *Tilikum*, Jones was contending with the same constraints of any journalist tasked with pumping out consistent writing with daily turnarounds. Infrastructural constraints are a frustrating reality when considering the immediate economic and future archival impact that Jones's writing carries. General capacity per review is low and exercising a rigorous due diligence while integrating a reflexive practice can easily fall to the wayside. Nevertheless, with the power and influence that Jones carries in his writing, his review of *Tilikum* and the resulting social media discourse offers an opportunity to reflect upon how a critic handled a moment of being called to reflect on his writing and what future steps could be taken to mitigate the harm illuminated.

Not only does Chris Jones hold one of the most powerful journalistic positions in the Chicago arts landscape, but he does so while maintaining the most systemically privileged identity markers also representing the dominant theatre-going audience—a

straight, white, middle-aged, able-bodied, cis-man. From the get-go, Jones is not only contending with historically tense relations between critics and artists but also that of racial tensions between white critics and BIPOC artists more specifically. Dani Snyder-Young takes up the tensions between critics and their audiences, citing Jones's own since deleted post on Facebook:

to be a critic—one who was once young but has aged—is to be constantly told that you don't like something, or get something, because you are other than the artwork—of a different ethnicity, perhaps, or some other way in which you cannot get it as you were not the target audience. It's an easy hit. Hard to defend. There is some truth in that, but not as much as you think, if all minds are open (Snyder-Young 72).

What I find compelling about Jones's take is his naming of himself as “other,” when more often than not, it is his identities that are largely represented on the stage. In moments wherein he is tasked with rendering those who are more prominently and loudly considered others, audiences on social media are potentially pointing out where his knowledge-in-action falls short. I wonder what Jones would characterize as an “open mind” and how such aspirations can be materially applied to demonstrate a propensity to learn from and integrate new knowledge. Criticism provides an opportunity for critics to write through their understanding of what they have witnessed, but tensions may arise when the something missed is considered vital by the artistic community at-large.

The Review

In tracking the form and function of Chris Jones's criticism, his rendering for an imagined audience, of Kristiana Rae Colón's play *Tilikum*, I will describe what knowledge-in-action is being demonstrated by Jones. Then, I will analyze how this

rendering captures the production when considering a readership of audience, artists, and archives. Further interpretation will signal room and necessity for the application of a reflexive framework that aims to mitigate future harms as demonstrated by artists speaking out on social media.

The *Chicago Tribune* headline reads, “‘Tilikum’ tells the dark story of a captive orca at SeaWorld. Jones opens his review rooting the reader in historical context, painting the picture of SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau being dragged into the water by her ponytail, a 2010 incident that also inspired the 2013 documentary *Blackfish*. Citing this documentary is a useful contextualization as it sets up a reader and potential audience member to grasp the play’s roots. Jones goes on to characterize the play as:

in essence, an impassioned defense of Tilikum—and, at the same time, a similarly fervent indictment of the ecologically invasive practice of capturing magnificent creatures in the wild and then expecting them to live in pens and perform practiced routines for their supper.

Jones’s rendering comes early in his review, in the third paragraph, and he later locates the play as a piece of “activist playwrighting.” If solely looking to Jones’s piece of criticism as a means to figure out what this play is about, readers would come away with the idea that Colón’s work is centering SeaWorld as the big bad. Overall, Jones is calling for more complexity pointing to moments that, to him, feel simple or lacking of depth:

all females with a **complex** view of the orca [Tilikum] thrust into their midst
Orcas are **complex** creatures, but that makes a whole lot of competing metaphors.
entertainment corporations are **complex** entities
the political and pedagogical force of her work would be far greater if her villain had at least a touch of **complexity**.

Dawn's genuine desire to get close to her aquatic companion and the ethics thereof, is the most **complex** part of the show—and, as yet, it's underwritten.

Jones is seemingly fixated on the intricacies of orcas and their relationships to the humans rather than what he alludes to as “competing metaphors.” Here I am reminded of Jill Dolan's calls for critics to use more descriptions in their work, challenging critics to earn their claims. It is in Jones's flagging what he views as having and lacking complexity that leaves me to wonder if he knew that *Tilikum* functions more as an indictment of carceral systems that cage Black people rather than casemaking for animal rights.

In reacting on Facebook to Jones's review, Colón characterized his writing as a “shallow engagement since he did not take up the most obvious of metaphor. Although Jones's review is not entirely false, his “shallow engagement” renders the archive of this theatrical piece incomplete. His review chronicles the work along the lines of docudrama, spending much time comparing the play to the real circumstances surrounding the play's plot. To engage critically with Colón's piece is to consider it within her larger abolitionist canon, to take up her language of “whale-on-whale violence” or “I can't breathe” as critiques of a system larger than SeaWorld.

Jones's review neglects to take up the thesis of the play, ignoring ample allusions to the prison industrial complex, the murder of Black people, and the culpability of whiteness. Jones either resisted or missed the play's core underpinnings. Further depictions of the set and interrogation of the program note can serve as evidence of this

critic's refusal to explore the meaning behind imagery and intentionality of the playwright.

To start, the set is horizontally split three ways: at audience level there is the pool, above it the observation deck, and then a raised platform behind a "glass" tank wall. Though much of the action was immersed in imagined water and subtle shadow, the audience was not too far removed from the very real subject at hand: prisons and policing. *Tilikum* is stolen from his home of the ocean, captured by a man only named by Colón as "The Owner." Police sirens wail in the background, lights in blues and reds flash. *Tilikum* represents Black and brown people still stuck in limbo, incarcerated and separated from community. Colón goes as far to name this in her playwright's note:

Spoiler alert: this is an abolitionist play. That means it is in my canon of work that asks you to imagine a world without prisons and police. Another spoiler: slavery was never abolished. The 13th amendment made forced bondage illegal except as punishment for a crime, in a nation that has waged a centuries-long campaign to villainize and criminalize Black and brown people. Spoiler: that means every day you have drawn breath in America, slavery has been legal, in the form of prisons (Sideshow "Tilikum")

Although critics may abstain from reading materials in programs notes that may impact their interpretation, such materials can only strengthen a critic's ability to assess what artists have aimed to achieve with any given piece. Framing Colón's play solely as a piece of environmental activism erases her true critiques of the prison industrial complex.

Jones's review and the resulting artist community conversations is what initially piqued my interest in *Tilikum*. I bought a ticket because of the outrage that spilled across social media. Jones has not spoken on this incident and did not respond to the online

discourse. The silence leaves folks to wonder about his propensity to recognize the impact of characterizing a play in a manner that erases the artist's intentionality. Taking a public stance on his review would demonstrate needed reflection-on-action. Sharing some transparency about his process and his intentionalities could function as a means to alleviate some of the tension arising in this controversy. Interestingly enough, another case study featuring a critic and their review offers a possibility model for what generously engaging in productive artistic community discourse could look like.

Not About a Citizen

What brought me to this next show, *Language Rooms* produced by Broken Nose Theatre Company, was not a controversy but my fellow Middle Eastern theatre community who had partnered with the Chicago Inclusion Project to organize a theatre artist outing. The Chicago Inclusion Project is an organization that “exists to facilitate inclusive experiences and hiring practices throughout Chicago theatre” (Chicago Inclusion Project “About”). Playwright Yussef El Guindi's piece went up in May of 2019 under the direction of Kaiser Ahmed. That past January, a Facebook group called ChiMidEast Theatre Artists was formed to further connect us Middle Eastern artists together. The Facebook group also serves as a way to organize our community for collective outings in support of each other's work. The Chicago Inclusion Project and our new Facebook group had much crossover so the groups coordinated an outing. It was framed as an opportunity to specifically support fellow POC artists. What transpired was an upsetting experience as the play seemed to perpetuate core stereotypes of the people

who showed up in support. When it comes to Middle Eastern stories, the representation that is most depicted centers terrorism and themes of nationalism (Yuen et al. “Terrorists & Tyrants”). When contextualizing El Guindi’s plays within a post-9/11 history, it becomes clear that the trajectory of his career closely aligns with the uptick in theatre companies seeking Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) stories that delve into such complex socio-political narratives (Alshetawi 177). Although *Language Rooms* was framed as a “dark comedy,” I was left to wonder at whose expense (Broken Nose Theatre “Language Rooms”). I wondered about the theatre’s propensity to hold space for narratives of demonizing immigrant parents, uplifting violence, and aspirational totings of the American Dream. I could not help but clock the optics of a group of POC artists showing up to support POCs artists for a play that seemed to affirm the danger in our otherness rather than combat it. We took up the back two farthest rows of the house, and I remember overlooking a majority white audience responding boisterously in some of the moments that pained me most.

The Play

The play follows Ahmed, a government translator eager to prove his American patriotism. He desires to prove himself as one of “the good ones,” an Arab American that is happy to serve US interests in fighting Islamic terrorism. He is partnered with Nasser, and they are the only two Muslims working in an increasingly toxic work environment. Located in a CIA blacksite, microaggressions abound and we witness the characters crumble and spiral as their loyalty to the United States is challenged in the face of rumors

detailing their supposed involvement with the enemy. In Ahmed working as a translator, his interpretations of correspondence are deemed too sympathetic to his fellow Muslims and he is forced to extremes to prove his loyalty by dismissing his own cultural roots. Here Ahmed is desperate to belong and claim an American identity, even if this means perpetuating the harmful, violent ideologies found in Islamophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Our playwright El Guindi sets up characters of the same cultural backgrounds to rehearse generational and cultural divides.

The Conversation

There was such a dissonance between the folks in my community I had sat along versus the rest of the audience. Following the performance, I scoured reviews to see what complexities were taken up by critics. Most of the reviews were penned by white critics praising the work as a highly recommended piece of political theatre, with descriptions ranging from “fanciful and frightening,” “astonishing,” to “chilling,” while characterizing the actors as “quite fearless and convincing” (Broken Nose Theatre “Language Rooms”).

I took to Facebook, albeit vaguely, wondering about the above:

This art hurts in a way it shouldn't. I saw a show that made me hold my breath for 2 hours. Even as I sat amongst my own community, witnessing pain and stereotypes and aggression, there was little refuge. I've never felt so trapped, squished into seats that are never quite big enough. Locked in, similar to the folks on stage.

Please give me Middle Eastern stories where:

1. being other does not result in violence
2. there is no shame in our immigrant/refugee parents simply existing
3. women aren't erased or treated like shit

I'm so tired. Y'all praised this. How do I shake it off? (Mikhaiel “Facebook”)

What I outlined are the pervading tropes of MENA representation. Although the production was largely considered a piece of satire, sometimes leaning into the absurdity of intense demonstrations of patriotism, MENA community members were curious of the impact of these representations. My Facebook post was then shared by multidisciplinary artist and community organizer Arti Ishak with the specific prompting:

Scenario: The intent was representation. But the end result (the impact) was stereotypical and harmful. So how much, if at all, should we still celebrate the intent? GO.

The orienting of this community forum via Facebook was posed to take up the value of producing a play that perpetuates orientalist tropes and sacrifices marginalized characters to demonstrate the fallibility of United States nationalism and the fight against terror. Furthermore, this production did not include common resources that are usually paired with performances dealing with material that may land on their audience in difficult ways—no trigger warnings, no space to process via a post-show, and no inclusion of mental health resources. Resulting discourse pointed to this lacking as irresponsible, especially considering the culturally specific nature of the show, demonizing folks who are already marginalized.

Such sprawling social media discourse caught the eye of an artist-critic who had reviewed the show favorably, joining the chorus of praise that followed *Language Room*'s opening. Lucas Garcia, a queer Latinx artist, writing for *Rescripted*, commented on my Facebook post asking if they could direct message me a question. At this point I had already been fielding messages from artists working in community wondering what

could be done to alleviate the hurt or harm as well as what could be done as a means of accountability. These were almost unanswerable questions for me as an audience member not connected to the production at-large, already reeling from the amount of emotional labor this incident demanded. Garcia is a peer to me in the artistic community and I assumed best intentions based on our rapport and their previous arts coverage.

The Critical Response

Garcia's initial review entitled "Fear and Loathing in 'Language Rooms' at Broken Nose Theatre," centered on themes of belonging and community acceptance. They characterized the play as "darkly comedic" and a "absurd horror," ultimately landing with: "Broken Nose's production is clever, and full of welcome twists of humor in an otherwise cruising landscape of terror" (Garcia "Fear and Loathing"). Garcia is deft in their character descriptions, acknowledging the fraughtness of the Muslim characters' identities in a society wherein the "goal posts for acceptance are constantly moving." Garcia leans on rhetorical questions to further probe the unanswerable questions posed by the play. Their approach to criticism as demonstrated in this piece points to a propensity to interrogate the world of the play and its characters while holding some general space for connecting the struggles of Arabs and Muslims to a broad immigrant experience.

In personally reaching out to me, Garcia expressed a desire to write a follow-up piece to their review in which they wanted to trouble the ease by which they accepted *Language Rooms* as a piece of theatre successfully critiquing violent narratives centering Muslim and Arab identities rather than perpetuating them. Through email

correspondence, Garcia engaged Arti Ishak and myself as a means of uplifting the voices calling for accountability from Broken Nose Theatre that could include acknowledgment of the harm of the production and how to resist it from happening again. Garcia was primarily contending with their role as a critic who realized their initial review was “missing something” (Garcia “Critical Response”). Through *Rescripted*, under the encouragement of editor-in-chief Regina Victor, Garcia penned “A Critical Response” to their review. Garcia points to the Facebook discourse as directly challenging their “acceptance of El Guindi’s text [...] [which] relies on stereotypes to reconstruct the culture he wishes to critique.” Interestingly enough, Garcia was also the author of a *Rescripted* review “The Spectacle of Suffering in ‘Through the Elevated Line’” that previously challenged the representations of Middle Eastern identity noting:

I asked about the impact of plays that recreate acute racial trauma for the purpose of educating or building empathy in Western audiences. So what changed? How did I change in that time that I received those stereotypes and narrative structures so easily? How else have I internalized harmful views about MENA and Muslim folks? What am I doing to challenge and interrupt them?

In this, Garcia is wrestling with how their knowledge-in-action did not demonstrate their previous understanding of narratives that fall into the category of a “spectacle of suffering” they named. Cultural competency here seems to be shifting as Garcia’s critical approach to the productions varied.

A Critical Discourse

Jones’s review of *Tilikum* and Garcia’s review of *Language Rooms* were both subject to an artistic community discourse that called into question the role and

responsibility of the theatre critic and provide opportunity for further application of a reflexive framework that inspires a more inclusive criticism. Jones and Garcia may be considered on opposite sides of the spectrum regarding their approach to criticism as well as their closeness to the artistic community. Jones's full-time job is as an arts journalist and he did not wade into the discourse surrounding his coverage. Garcia, however, is a freelance critic who also works as a playwright and dramaturg. Despite less resources and power, they took their coverage a step further with an additional reflective essay. Both critics are operating under different constraints with varying amounts of power and resources, but Garcia's willingness to speak to the harms in his review signals a possibility for further engagement with one's writing.

Garcia's "Critical Response" becomes a compelling example for the application of a reflexive criticism when turning to the looped learning offered by Dawson and Kelin. In taking up the single-loop, Garcia's experience of witnessing a dialogue that pushed against their understanding of *Language Rooms* put into question their personal practice as a critic. Garcia describes this experience where their knowledge-in-action was challenged, where what they wrote on the page did not wholly convey their sensibilities. In the double-loop, wherein one analyzes the experience, Garcia discusses part of artistic practice they neglected to note. One critique shared in a Facebook comment by Ishak takes up Broken Nose Theatre's choice to cast a South Asian actor in the role of a MENA actor. Garcia learned that such a casting decision "confirmed and upheld the racist imagining that Muslims are a monolithic group, and that South Asian and [MENA] cultures and people are interchangeable" (Garcia "Critical Response"). Garcia had not

previously written how casting decisions already set the production in dubious territory and it is only in engaging in artistic community did Garcia become aware of the impact of non-identity-conscious casting (Jadhvani and Vazquez “Identity-Conscious Casting”). In Garcia closing out their “Critical Response,” they move into triple-loop territory, identifying what new knowledge they hope to bring to their practice as a critic while examining self-accountability:

if I purport to be a critic that is committed to pursuing racial equity, disrupting systems of oppression, then it is my responsibility to activate my privilege and position and leverage the platform I have to address these kinds of instances. (Garcia “Critical Response”)

What becomes clear is that not every platform is inherently designed to support these moments of reflection. Garcia felt implicated as a critic that lauded a production that was doing harm to a community of artists and decided it was their responsibility to address where they had fallen short. MENA artists also hoped Garcia’s “Critical Response” would illuminate the need for a public town hall on the ethics and responsibilities of MENA representation. Garcia’s coverage also signals a critic’s propensity to do right by the artists they are writing upon. In Garcia writing on and along their peers, they demonstrate a strength in the fluidity of professional identities.

These case studies signal a need for possibility models for theatre criticism that would benefit from culturally competent frameworks and a practice of reflexivity. Adding new voices to the field is a crucial step to diversifying, but the field is not zero-sum. Current critics need methods that interrogate how they write and why they write. As long-time critics learn to embrace reflexivity, they become proponents of new and

inclusive knowledge that productivity informs their writing. The sustainability of theatre criticism relies on critics bringing the same rigor to personal reflection as they do to reflecting on their artistic subjects. What emerges here is a range of possibility models that will positively impact a critic's practice and their industry.

CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL POSSIBILITY MODELS

Platforms

Cultivating new voices in a field with steep barriers to entry is a huge undertaking, but one repeatedly called for by artists and advocates in the wake of harmful or lacking theatre criticism (Smith “The Critical Palette”). The question becomes where do these new voices go in a field where the job market is virtually nonexistent and low-paid? How do these new voices hone their skills without the resources to do so? This lack of training and employment opportunities is harrowing for folks interested in writing theatre criticism, but it demands critics do more than write. For critics who are not staffed full-time on a newspaper or within a media outlet, they need to have a foot in jobs that pay their bills. Although this points to criticism as not being one’s main source of income or even focused pursuit, it allows for a wider range of experiences and backgrounds to influence point of view. Interestingly enough, there is a sector of folks not too far from critics facing similar job insecurity and low-pay—the artists whom they are covering.

In this chapter, I explore the critical platforms *Rescripted* and *Token Theatre Friends* to demonstrate how they trouble and contend with a field that historically centers dominant culture and singular voices. I conduct close readings and listenings of essays, publisher statements, and web series/podcast episodes to unveil the labor behind diversifying critical platforms. What becomes clear through my asset-mapping of these programs and projects, is the necessity for a more sustainable and inclusive infrastructure. Respectively, *Rescripted*’s and *Token Theatre Friends*’ programs and projects crucially aid in shaping the future of criticism by demonstrating what is already possible when

recentering criticism as an exercise in love and peer advocacy. What emerges is the strength in approaches of the artist-critic and colleague-critic, despite one of the most historic and curious divisions appearing between artists and critics. An artist's entrenchment in the field as a worker may actually prime them for the role of the critic based on their intimate knowledge of the field and creative process. Such expansion in who can be a critic and how criticism is published signals a productive shift in the field. Within the last five years, a rise in critic programs and projects emerged with a focus on cultivating both a diversity of critics and a diversity of criticism.

Interestingly enough, the 2003 landmark study "Investing in Creativity: A Study of the Support Structure for U.S. Artists," names access to training and professional development as a necessity for artists (59). But it would take more than a decade for programs like The Key: Young Critics Mentorship Program and the BIPOC Critics Lab to provide space and resources for early-career critics. Crucially, these critic training programs exist outside of university institutions that have a tendency to center "art for art's sake" without concrete job-planning that maps a breadth of careers (Jackson et al. "Investing in Creativity" 60). In this rise, new media founders are interested in their digital platforms embracing criticism that decenters writing and a singular voice, which equips emerging critics with more skills and better jobs prospects. Building new platforms that make space for emergent criticisms also function as a possibility of resistance against white supremacy culture. These possibility models matter for the sustainability and accessibility of arts journalism.

RESCRIPTED

The Founding

In their seminal article, artists Regina Victor and Tanuja Jagernauth penned, “The Need for Cultivating Critics of Color” in April 2017 that would lay the foundation for a training program for critics. Published via *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, they call attention to criticism’s role in gatekeeping, trouble the divisions between artists and critics, and offer the soon-to-be-launched *Rescripted* as a platform for emerging artist-critics to develop their craft. Uniquely, the platform is pitched as a “collective of theatre professionals from all levels and disciplines in the field who are interested in engaging with their peers on a critical level” (Rescripted “About Us”). This online publication is challenging industry norms concerning bias and separation of critics and artists.

Rescripted disrupts accepted power dynamics between artists and critics by naming them peers, folks working alongside each other rather than against each other. Furthermore, as noted in its about section, *Rescripted* aims to impact the field by creating opportunity through lessening the barriers to field entry:

Rescripted is a response to the national shortage of theatre critics and the need for a broader range of voices in the critical sphere. Rescripted publishes reviews, artist interviews and essays on the performing arts. Rescripted aims to reprogram the way we critically engage with each other while cultivating critics and adding new voices to the field.

Rescripted is intentional in being a hub for artist-critics in aims of allowing more agency for artists in shaping the conversations of their craft. By being immersed in the field, artists have greater stakes in how their work is rendered for an audience and for history.

What is core in the mission of *Rescripted* is leading with empathy and love, which I was exposed to as a student in The Key Mentorship Program. Co-founder Regina Victor personally attests to these orientations as a crucial component in the training program. For theatre practitioners, empathy is lauded as a key component of their work. Victor extends similar intentionalities to how critics should be approaching their writing:

The definition of empathy is to understand and share the feelings of another person. This is definitely the root of *Rescripted*, identifying the intention of a piece before responding to it. Our original mission is to critique with love. Love is a verb, it is a practice, it is a way of being. The foundation of love is truth. So if I love you, I can tell you the truth; there's no decoration or self-satisfaction. But the trick in that for me is that the truth is inherently cruel. So if you're making a business of truth telling, you have to also make a business of empathy. (Tran "Critiquing With Love")

Victor's framing around love as an active, intentional practice is reminiscent of bell hooks' own assertions. In Victor's approach, critics should be active in mobilizing love on the page and beyond. When looking to hooks, she asserts, "When we are loving we openly and honestly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust" (hook 14). Critics who choose to write with and from love add an actionable layer to their writing. Putting love in action instills a layer of due diligence as critics are reminded their readers include artists. As an artist-critic, Victor posits to the writers and themselves, "if I were to read this piece to someone's face, would it result in a productive conversation?" (Tran "Critiquing With Love"). *Rescripted*, both as a home and nurturer of artist-critics, presents a possibility model for more transparency and collegiality to emerge in the writing of arts criticism.

Colleague Criticism

What *Rescripted*'s intentionalities evoke is similar to that of “colleague-criticism,” a methodology put forth by performance studies scholars and practitioners Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Jill Dolan, and Jaclyn Pryor. I found it heartening to learn that conversations calling for generosity and transparency in critical writing among colleagues was circulating in the academy more than a decade prior to its manifesting in new criticism platforms. Being introduced to this writing in graduate school was clarifying, and it may mark a moment wherein academia was prescient in positing ideas and approaches that could have immediate impact beyond the ivory-tower. The trio locate their theorizing of colleague-criticism as beginning in 2003, but their article “Colleague-Criticism: Performance, Writing, and Queer Collegiality” was published in 2009. These scholars are also blurring the lines between artist and critic, theorizing a blueprint:

As colleague-critics, we write about performance as artists, as colleagues, as friends, and as scholars; we speak to our knowledge of both the work at hand and the experience and context of making work; we keep our theory and practice in a state of present dialogue; and we work to expand the role of the artist in local, public arts discourse. (Bonin-Rodriguez et al.)

Bonin-Rodriguez, Dolan, and Pryor showcase the range of expertise they carry as artists themselves, signaling an extra depth that comes along with intimate knowledge that is gained by working with and around those whom they are writing about. Furthermore, centering a “present dialogue” reminds us that criticism cultivates conversation with living and breathing artists—these writings do not land in a void. Our trio also highlights that in colleague-critics foregrounding their relationships to their artist community, their writing serves in expanding “understandings of the artist’s material practice.” Since

critic-colleagues are critically engaged in the artistic landscape, they are more primed to root an artist's practice alongside the artist. Erasing the "specious boundary, or borderland, between art and commentary" lends to more productive criticism that imbues a sense of accountability upon critics writing on their colleagues.

Dear White Critics

Rescripted takes on the work called for in colleague-criticism, and in doing so it contributes to an emergent infrastructure of theatre criticism resisting white supremacy culture. While college-criticism is a call for a shift in critical practice, *Rescripted* is critical practice made flesh and evident in the moment. *Rescripted* is a localized platform that centers arts coverage of Chicago, but it still exists within a national landscape. Interestingly enough, there are essays that speak to the field, particularly in the face of local and national controversy. Regina Victor functions as an editor-in-chief of *Rescripted* and contributes to the reviews, features, and essays published in the online journal. This is common for editors of publications, as it aids in modeling trajectory and demonstrating bounds of the coverage. Victor's writing of the column "Dear White Critics" potentially breaks the mold of "objective" reporting as they take up controversies that have national implications surrounding the use of language that others and harms.

The "Dear White Critics" column functions as a sort of letter-to-the-editor, meaning that it address the editor in a public forum. "Dear White Critics" offers the public a chance to witness and models direct, potentially change-making engagement. It is writing one could expect to be published by the offending publication. Generally, these

takes, pointing to missteps and evidencing harm, are written by folks who have less power. Victor here functions as artist and critic and editor taking a stance against practices that have potential to impact their home publication. Their essays serve as potential takedowns of ideologies that threaten to harm artists and their work. One could expect this to function as a letter-to-the-editor to the publications that are publishing the offending articles. However, Victor, as an editor themselves, is taking a stance against offending practices in their home publication against other critics. The audience for these essays centers critics as they are addressed directly to interrogate their use of slurs and language that others.

Victor's series currently consists of three essays written between March 2018 and 2019. Each essay takes up reviews that demonstrate specific knowledge gaps by critics. Victor's mapping of the history and impact of harm is compelling as their evidence includes potent personal experience, screenshots of original reviews that have been scrubbed from the internet, and critic's apology statements. Victor is also outspoken regarding the sheer labor this work takes and how these essays also reflect their propensity to lean into humor:

Dear White Critics is a series Regina Victor is tired of writing. While they are somewhat playful in writing, that is because these pieces are significant emotional labor, and sometimes the only way to deal with blatant disrespect like this is to laugh. Support local artists and grassroots criticism so Regina doesn't have to be so tired. Thanks. (Victor "'Doubt' You Meant to be Ableist")

This note is included following the third piece in the "Dear White People" series. As an Editor-in-Chief, Victor is taking a stance against colleagues by utilizing *Rescripted's* method of centering empathy and love. With Victor's roles as an artist in the Chicago

theatre community, they also write as an artist disappointed with how the distance between critics and artists manifests as dehumanizing. It is clear the labor Victor takes on here is meant to exhaust, as it counters the white supremacy culture deeply embedded in the arts field. In tracking Victor's movement through these essays and the series at-large, I argue for the necessity of editors-in-chief to be transparent in how their personal social locations influence their practice and how this practice carries stakes for the future of an inclusive arts criticism.

Please Stop Using the N-Word

In Victor's first piece entitled "Dear White Critics: Please Stop Using the N-Word," they take on a conversation that seems incredibly introductory. Victor cites the use of the n-word as recurring malpractice not an isolated incident, in fact, in a single calendar year, two white critics have taken heat for their usage of the racial epithet. Their essay centers on a white critic's review of *Guess Who's Coming Dinner*, produced at Court Theatre in March 2018. In Victor's lede they write, "What is wrong with white critics? I really want to know. Have you all lost your mind??"⁴ Rightfully, Victor takes this language as a great offense and points blame squarely on white critics, their editors, and publications. Victor speaks to their colleagues, ones with whom they share artistic community.

⁴ One should note the rhetoric here are hyperbolic but also veers into stigmatizing of mental health.

This case involving critic Justin Hayford of the *Chicago Reader* also brings up questions of journalistic integrity reflecting both on the critic and the paper. In the initial publishing of the review, Hayford used the n-word as a descriptor but as outrage circulated, Hayford claimed it was a poor paraphrasing of a line in the play. The *Reader* released the following:

Editor's note: During the play, one of the characters uses a racial slur. We have updated the text to show that the offensive language came directly from the script. We apologize for the confusion. (qtd. by Victor "Stop Being Transphobic!")

First, the *Reader* using a royal "we" signals much about the institutional backing of critics. When and for whom an institution sides with demonstrates how deeply they align with white supremacy culture. The paper is privileging the voice of their singular critics over a chorus of readers and artists questioning how the epithet made its way through the editing process. Victor's essay challenges the *Reader's* statement providing evidence from the script that shows the amended review misquotes play. On a journalistic level, this is malpractice. When approaching this review with an eye for potential impact on readers, including artists and audiences, the *Reader's* editor's note fails to acknowledge the gravity of even printing an epithet. The note focuses on the word's usage as an error of the text, not one signaling an ideological gap in using slurs without purpose to re-appropriate or deconstruct its meaning. When it comes to the labor of making amends, the institution took the path of least accountability—by adding an editor's note and inaccurately amending a sentence. Victor interrogates this angle in their essay and invokes the journalistic standards set by other publications like the *Washington Post* and the *Atlantic*, and Victor concludes "the overall answer from the internet is a resounding

NOPE. We are not casually using the n-word in publication” (Victor “Stop Using the N-Word”). The work to call-in/out racism is tedious and Victor demonstrates we should have solved these issues long ago, especially within a field that has supposed standards for publication (“Race Reporting Guide”).

Victor reflects on this experience aware of their varying positionalities as a Black femme artist and editor-in-chief. This review makes them question their own expertise, noting, “I own the very journal I am using to discuss this issue, and yet I still looked it up because that is what gaslighting looks like in 2018” (Victor “Stop Using the N-Word”). Compellingly, to further illustrate the impact of the slur, Victor includes their visceral, bodily responses in their essay. They outline “five stages of rage” that vibrated through them while sitting with this review: “My chest tightens, my eyes widen, my fists clench and my heart starts to beat real fast as every time that word has ever been thrown into my vicinity without my consent by a colonizer flashes through my mind” (Victor “Stop Using the N-Word”). Victor’s invoking of self here reminds me of performance ethnography approaches uplifted by scholar/practitioner Omi Osun Joni L. Jones. Victor inserts their body’s reaction to reading the criticism work of a colleague, further demonstrating the impact writing can have on the reader. In this essay, Victor demonstrates radical transparency as a reader and writer of criticism. In pairing an exploration of journalistic standards with their lived experience, they disrupt notions of objectivity and either/or thinking. As the author of this essay, they wield their positionalities as an editor-in-chief and as an artist in pursuit of bettering the field, in essence, making it more hospital for artists of color.

Stop Being Transphobic!

Furthermore, Victor's approach to the "Dear White Critics" series cements in their second essay demanding, in its headline, "Stop Being Transphobic!" They directly ask for bare minimums and present ways forward while showcasing their passion for the sustainability of the criticism field. This July 2018 essay takes up both Ben Brantley's *Head Over Heels* and *Men on Boats* reviews as well as Hedy Weiss' coverage of *Hir*. Victor again locates themselves, their identities, as being disrespected at the hands of critics, this time as a trans and genderqueer person. With this essay, Victor calls specific attention to the influence both Brantley and the *New York Times* wield when allowing something like pronouns to be treated as the butt of a joke. In turning to apology statements made by Brantley, Victor questions the critic's understanding of the harm he committed. Brantley's initial review pokes at the word "binary" as "what's starting to feel like the decade's most overused word" and purposefully misgenders a character as a punchline when writing "I mean them" as a cheeky corrective (Victor "Stop Being Transphobic!"). Victor maintains:

Brantley made the active choice not to give a shit about a relatively large and ever growing demographic of people he is supposed to advocate for or at the very least respect. You cannot convince me that Brantley would have made that joke if he actually had compassion and understanding for the trans community instead of our pronouns as a burden he was excited to get one over on. It's insulting to the New York community, the national theatre community, and most importantly it limits the art. (Victor "Stop Being Transphobic!")

Brantley had been at his post as a theatre critic at the *New York Times* for twenty plus years at the time of these reviews. Victor calls into question Brantley's propensity to learn from these moments of harm due to their severity and the repeat offenses littering

his tenure. Brantley's knowledge-in-action continues to do harm and with no public-facing reflection-on-action, artists are less inclined to trust he is writing from a place of empathy and love in service of their shared artistic field. Victor's essay has a call to action for their colleagues:

As a new generation of arts leaders emerges we must find ways to train and legitimize the perspectives of writers who are interested in compassion for those who are not like themselves. [...] We will not wait for tolerance, we will instead write our way into the world in which we want to live. (Victor "Stop Being Transphobic!")

Overall, what the "Dear White Critics" series demonstrates is a need for more voices with varying lived experiences as well as a platform that will hold those voices accountable.

The Key: Young Critics Mentorship Program

Rescripted aims to be this platform and debuted The Key: Young Critics Mentorship program in September 2017 as a space to cultivate and encourage the next generation of critics. This platform is an embodied response to decades-long inequity, a growing material resource that plants a seed of futurity for arts journalism. It functions as one of the first critics mentorship programs of its kind. On a material resource level, the Key provides the students tickets to performances, a travel stipend, publishing opportunities, and connections to professional culture editors and writers. Prior to the arts industry's shutdown due to coronavirus, the training program took place at Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Steppenwolf holds no official affiliation or sponsorship for the Key, but Victor secured space through their relationship as a previous artistic fellow. Initial funding of *Rescripted* came from the Friends of Chicago Theatre, and the platform launched a Patreon in March 2021 for additional crowdsourced support. The program

usually spans three months from September to December, serving cohorts sized six to ten participants. Although the young critics in the Key currently do not receive financial compensation during their program, *Rescripted* still lessens critics' barriers to field entry by providing the other resources necessary to exercise and expand the role of the critic. These are necessary components of cultivating a new generation of critics as lowering the barriers to entry is crucial in the sustainability of building an inclusive field.

At its inception, The Key: Young Critics Mentorship Program provided critics with an opportunity to train alongside peers in a workshop model. Although the application for the program requests a writing sample, it is not necessary to submit official clips or demonstrate one's experience as a critic. Rather, *Rescripted* is framed as a low-stakes environment to exercise arts writing through a learning-centered ethos. Through the course of the program, students can expect to write four to five reviews, focused on theatre coverage and a piece of digital performance. The program rotates on a weekly basis between meeting in a classroom space and attending a piece of theatre to be written about and workshopped for the following week.

Victor plays the role of facilitator in these sessions alongside media culture writer Oliver Sava. Victor brings with them a background working theatre artist and writer. They are a queer, Black, trans, femme with roots in Oakland, California. At the time of founding *Rescripted*, they worked primarily as a dramaturg and arts administrator in Chicago's theatre scene. Victor is generally interested in non-linear storytelling and Afrofuturism, stories of joy and liberation. They currently serve as Artistic Director of Sideshow Theatre Company, which has been one of their artistic homes since moving to

Chicago. Sava, on the other hand, resists a traditional theatre background and very much lives in the staff and freelance writer world. Although he has published theatre criticism, his beat spans books, pop culture, and TV/film. He is a gay, white, cis-man with roots in the Chicago suburbs. He is not a working theatre artist, but many of his social circles overlap with artist practitioners. Together Victor and Sava serve as a balance between the desire to push the field of criticism forward while contending with current constraints of professionalization and perceived scarcity.

In the Key, Victor and Sava center an ethos of knowledge-sharing and resisting of credentialed expertise. The Key cohort of students also reflect this range as some students come with a bylines whereas others may still be attending undergraduate programs. Such a breadth allows for curiosity to thrive from a place of experience moving as a person, an artist, and/or budding scholar. Although the range of ages between mentee and mentors is not especially large, this breadth allows for a peer or collegial mindset to take root amongst writers. In this workshop space, opportunity exists to flesh out ideas and inquire upon new modes of approaching theatre within a framework of empathetic criticism. This program makes space for reflection-in-action, through the workshopping of ideas during the review writing process. And, it makes space for reflection-on-action, the sharing of reflection on reviews published by *Rescripted*. Each week informs the next and pulls from the prior. Furthermore, the methodology of the Key is steeped in a similar ethos as colleague-criticism put forth by performance studies scholars and practitioners Bonin-Rodriguez, Dolan, and Pryor. The Key critics are writing in community with each other

as well as in community with their city. Such an approach breeds mutual respect and opportunity to challenge each other on their understanding of the work and lives at hand.

Although *Rescripted* is successful as a platform that challenges more traditional approaches to criticism, the platform *Token Theatre Friends* may provide an additional challenge to the form of criticism through their centering of modes like web series and podcast. In turning away from the written page, New York-based critics Jose Solís and Diep Tran demonstrate a possibility model for criticism that truly centers a multitude of opinions in conversation. Solís and Tran become another example of colleague-criticism as they are interested in being in community with the artists they write on. They even invite artists to speak in their web series and pontificate on the role of the critic. Taking criticism beyond the page is a compelling possibility model with opportunity to reexamine the purpose and accessibility of criticism. Tran and Solís's approaches to criticism resist white supremacy culture by challenging a worship of the written word while decentering supposed objectivity through a singular voice.

TOKEN THEATRE FRIENDS

The Founding

“Token Theatre Friends” was launched by Jose Solís and Diep Tran in 2018, under Theatre Communications Group’s magazine *American Theatre* with aims of utilizing mediums beyond writing to center criticism as a form of dialogue with theatre and its audience. Additionally, Solís and Tran center their subjectivities as artists of color in their approach to theatre criticism, which lends to a model of criticism similar to

Rescripted wherein the self is present on the page or in the multi-modal media. Where “Token Theatre Friends” differs from *Rescripted* is in the backgrounds of the critics. Solís and Tran are not working as artists; their main practices are as culture writers and journalists.

Tran carries with her masters level credentials in journalism and started working at *American Theatre* in 2011 following the completion of the one-year Goldring Arts Journalism Program at Syracuse University (Clearwood and Jones 47). She grew up in California, and although she did not have any artists in her immediate family, she was interested in working in the arts. Tran viewed journalism as the more sustainable vehicle by which to support herself in the arts and “fell into the whole advocacy route,” alluding to her prescient coverage taking up diversity and representation (Clearwood and Jones 49). After working at *American Theatre* for almost a decade, Tran became senior editor in 2018. Tran then oversaw the launching of “Token Theatre Friends,” which was initially inspired by Solís.

Solís grew up in Honduras and notably always knew he wanted to be a critic. He spent much of his time as a kid watching Hollywood films and handwriting criticism into his personal journal (Palmarini “An Interview”). He butt up against a mentorship gap and self-educated on criticism by reading reviews and interviews. Solís left Honduras to pursue college in Costa Rica where he earned a degree in graphic design. He then moved to New York City to pursue a journalism career. Solís began writing professionally on film and theatre in 2003, and since then has risen as a fierce advocate of criticism and critics of color.

Centering Subjectivity

In partnering to found “Token Theatre Friends,” Tran and Solís endeavored to create a platform that encouraged a more conversational and accessible approach to criticism. Tran and Solís have both maneuvered through moments in their careers where they have fiercely contended with the racism prevalent in an industry that cannot seem to shake its histories of non-identity-conscious casting and harmful portrayals of BIPOC communities. In titling their platform “Token Theatre Friends,” Solís and Tran implicate themselves as the go-to people of color among their friends or theatre audiences:

What is a token theatre friend? It can mean being the token person of color in a play who serves no other purpose than to support the (white) main character (see also: sassy best friend, magical Negro). And it can refer to the experience of being the only person of color in a white theatregoing audience.

It can also mean being the one friend in your social group who loves theatre—the one they turn to for advice on what shows to see or for leads on tickets. (*American Theatre* “Token Theatre Friends”)

Tran and Solís are clear their points-of-view are rooted in their lived experience, and in founding this platform, they are taking space as critics of color in service of artists and their audiences. Interestingly enough, *Rescripted* emerged from the same urgency and echoes the labor of previous generations of feminist critics working to dismantle a criticism that valorizes whiteness and patriarchy. “Token Theatre Friends” takes up a similar charge, even if less explicitly. Solís and Tran frame their approach as wanting to be “that friend” their audience can turn to for recommendations, and so, their primary modes of sharing these insights are by talking about them.

Although utilizing videos and audio for theatre criticism comes with some precedents, Tran and Solís’s approach to the form, centering subjectivity and diverse lived experiences, is cause for their consideration as a possibility model for the future of theatre criticism. The first iteration of “Token Theatre Friends” featured a YouTube channel for their theatre reviews and artist interviews. In their pilot episode, Tran and Solís introduce how they will be structuring the web series. Consumer report functions as the backbone, as Tran explains they will be talking through the performances they have seen along three price points with the central questions centering, “if the show was worth our time and your money” (*Token Theatre Friends* “The Pilot!”). Tran and Solís affirm that the price points are not indicative of the value of the theatre experience and hope to demonstrate the breadth of options available at any given week in New York City. Putting multiple theatrical shows in dialogue with each other as Tran and Solís are also in conversation allows for a fluidity and accessibility to theatre criticism that decenters the perceived “thumbs up” versus “thumbs down” framings that can have sometimes dire economic consequences for the production critiqued.

Tran and Solís frame their web series as providing options to their audience to share their theatre love and knowledge, which varies even for “The Token Friends,” demonstrating a potential for their criticism to shape each other's perspectives. In their pilot, they take up three productions at three price points. In talking through their impressions of each production, Tran and Solís begin with a mild synopsis of the performance including the industry standard inclusions of playwright and director. As The Friends chat, they hone in on different aspects of the productions as each vary in

form and the context helpful to root the play in the now. Tran and Solís start their reviewing with the most expensive production noting it “\$\$\$” with the New Audience’s production of Adrienne Kennedy’s *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box* under the direction of Evan Yionoulis. The Friends describe the play as full of love, racial strife, and generational trauma. Kennedy pulls from personal experiences and family history for her Deep South play set in 1941. Both critics were surprised the play ran only fifty minutes, with Tran calling it a “snow globe of a piece, over before I fully digested it” (*Token Theatre Friends* “The Pilot!”). She also characterizes the play as spending too much time in the territory of exposition and history. Solís concurs and positively offers framing the play as an epic in all ways except the length, where healing is possible. The Friends demonstrate a propensity to actively engage with each other’s criticism and be additive to interpretations.

In reviewing *Miles for Mary* created by the ensemble of The Mad Ones under the direction of Lila Neugebauer, Tran and Solís showcase varying depth along description of directing choices and contextualization of history. Set in 1988, high school teachers attend subcommittee meetings to plan their annual telethon. Tran is excited by Neugebauer’s ability to direct conversation around a table, “making it really entertaining” (*Token Theatre Friends* “The Pilot!”). In their web series format, the episode also cuts to some montaged scenes of the performance allowing an audience to get a taste of this orientation. Solís shines in his ability to synthesize the historical moment of a piece based in the 1980s. He then connects an era of conservative presidencies, with Reaganism echoing their current moment in 2018. Pairing Tran and Solís in “Token Theatre Friends”

showcases a breadth of knowledge that shows up in what they spend time discussing, which organically widens the scope of their criticism of the production. Solís and Tran demonstrate different knowledge-in-action but in this colleague-critic-esque format they are complementary, inviting a greater depth to their analyses.

In their final verbal theatre review, Tran and Solís discuss *Draw the Circle* by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen under the direction of Chey Yew where they examine a question of representation in trans stories. Playwright/actor Deen’s performance is a self-written solo show wherein he takes up the points-of-view of folks in his life responding to his coming out as trans. Tran notes, “Usually when we hear stories about trans people, they are told from different points of view from different people. But it’s rare that the people are written and portrayed by a trans person.” Here Tran is indirectly naming a history of cis-people that take on roles that do not align with their gender identity, in effect, taking opportunities from trans actors to play trans characters. Tran also wonders if Deen acting in this piece but embodying other characters was “detrimental” to the “authenticity” of the story since his voice was not the one centered. Solís contends that was the part he found “the most moving,” as Deen was present in the stories of the characters he was portraying. In response to Solís’s criticism, Tran offers what can be considered reflection-in-action, a reflection on her previously spoken criticism that then colors her next thought. Tran names the amount of personal work it must have taken for Deen to feel secure performing such heavy, sometimes hurtful, moments that were based on true experiences. Tran and Solís present critical conversation as a desire to honor the

intentionality of the artist, note the rarity of the stories that are being presented, and still wonder about its efficacy.

“Token Theatre Friends” centered Tran and Solis as the main hosts for their web series and podcast, but job transitions among them invited an opportunity to reexamine their structure. Tran exited *American Theatre* in December 2019 in the face of a job offer as the features editor at Broadway.com. There was no public communication that Tran would be leaving “Token Theatre Friends” permanently, but Solís hosted the show independently until June 2020 when the project formally separated from *American Theatre* magazine. While partnership with *American Theatre* magazine proved fruitful with the production of over fifty episodes and the sharing of a national listenership/readership, embracing a crowdfunding model via Patreon could allow more agency in Token Theatre Friend’s coverage. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, “Token Theatre Friends” transitioned to doing interviews via Zoom, widening the breadth of their coverage even further. Tran was also furloughed from Broadway.com and later rejoined Solís as a co-host following *Token Theatre Friends* founding as an independent media company. On their new website, *Token Theatre Friends* boasts, “We are fully crowdfunded, meaning we don’t answer to boards or industry insiders. Our obligation is to our audience and artists. We are by the people, for the people” (*Token Theatre Friends* “About”). In their first podcast episode launching the second iteration of “Token Theatre Friends,” Tran affirms the duo will be covering theatre even as the industry has shuttered. They will also take up pop culture, “cultural commentary on politics, social justice, [and]

things that bother us” (*Token Theatre Friends* “Ep. 1”). In a sense, theatre criticism takes a backseat as both the arts field and the nation contend with global health.

Questions of Sustainability

As a media platform for theatre criticism, *Token Theatre Friends* demonstrates the efficacy of conversation in lieu of formally written reviews as a means of decentralizing a single voice, but it puts into question the sustainability of a platform that still relies on two. Here, *Rescripted* emerges as a more sustainable form of independent media as a collective spirit was centered from its inception. In fact, four months after Tran’s rejoining of *Token Theatre Friends*, she would formally step away in November of 2020 citing “personal issues that [she] can not share.” Tran was a consistent co-host for twenty episodes. Her participation in the series ebbed and flowed through October 2020 and then communication to their audience on her exit was shared via their newly launched Patreon in a subscriber-only blog. Tran writes, “when we created ‘Token Theatre Friends,’ we didn’t want it to be just us. The site is bigger than me and Jose” (Tran “I Have Some News”). Even so, the web series messaging and logo work of *Token Theatre Friends* included Tran and Solís’s cartoon faces with the tagline “Meet Jose Solís and Diep Tran ... Two friends who love theatre so much they podcast, make videos, write about, and review it!” This cements Tran and Solís as the primary co-hosts from the inception of the project, leaving one to wonder what challenges the duo faced in maintaining an independent platform in a time of crisis.

“Token Theatre Friends” was again hosted solo by Solís for a few episodes until the welcoming of Ayanna Prescod as a co-host on Episode 25 which aired on December 31, 2020. It would take until February 12, 2020, for the new *Token Theatre Friends* approach to be named on the podcast by Solís introducing Episode 28 with: “If you’re new here, we’re basically a community of BIPOC friends and performance lovers who get together every week to talk about the things we have seen and that we have loved” (*Token Theatre Friends* “Ep. 28”). What this signals is a widening of collaborators while still centering an asset-minded approach in naming love as a central motivator for the work of documenting and discussing as a BIPOC staff. During this time, the *Token Theatre Friends* website is updated to include the following:

Token Theatre Friends is a community for theatre lovers to engage and discover with the work of artists we love. In our weekly web series and podcast, along with our features and reviews, we bring a fresh perspective to the performing arts. Our entire staff and hosts are BIPOC. We don’t talk about representation, we are representation. (*Token Theatre Friends* “About”)

Here it is also clear *Token Theatre Friends* is taking a harder pivot towards making space for BIPOC narratives and artists. Such widening points to the need for more critics of color to be entering and staying in the field less white supremacy culture rears its head in the replication of platforming a limited amount of voices until they exit under duress or burnout. Interestingly enough, such an endeavor is another seed that Solís planted in his desire to better the landscape of mentorship for young critics. These impulses are in line with The Key: Young Critics Mentorship Program that was founded by *Rescripted*, but with Solís pulling from his roots in the film world and extending the multimedia nature of *Token Theatre Friends*, he took a “lab” approach.

BIPOC Critics Lab

What started as an experimental self-produced project, called the BIPOC Critics Lab, ended up as a new program in partnership with the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. Solís cites the roots of wanting to start this program bubbling up after completing the National Critics Institute at the O’Neill in 2016 under the helm of *Chicago Tribune* chief critic Chris Jones (Weinert-Kendt “Critic as Cheerleader”). In a cohort of fourteen only two participants were BIPOC. In the summer of 2020 (narrowly coinciding with “Token Theatre Friends” separation from *American Theatre* magazine), Solís put out a call on Twitter for a cohort of critics of color interested in taking a ten-week workshop of master classes with him. The primary article detailing Solís’s founding of the BIPOC Critics Lab comes from *American Theatre* editor Rob Weinert-Kendt, entitled “Jose Solís: The Critic As Cheerleader, and Critics’ Lab Leader.” Solís initially started a GoFundMe campaign to support his endeavors, and although the students did not receive stipends to participate, Solís would work to get at least one of their resulting essays, features, or interviews published. Additionally, Solís encouraged experimentation with audio and video platforms as he had done alongside Tran with “Token Theatre Friends.” The BIPOC Critics Lab is on the forefront of expanding the field both in terms of who is a critic and in what form. When considering core methods of countering white supremacy culture, centering multivocality and multimedia serve as core disruptors in systems that traditionally platform individuals and gatekeep the accessibility of criticism. What this points to is the necessity of developing opportunities for critics from a breadth

of cultures by lowering the barrier to field entry while expanding traditional modes of criticism.

Possibilities

MENTORSHIP AND EXPANDING THE FORM

Both *Rescripted* and the BIPOC Critics Lab demonstrate the possibilities that can emerge when centering new voices and new mediums, but they also highlight the significance of questioning the white supremacy culture underlying many of traditional approaches to theatre criticism. They provide bylines to emerging critics as a means of portfolio building and fostering name recognition. Mentorship here serves as an opportunity to reflect on one's own practice and engage with a generation that resists the unsustainability of a critic's job. These programs provide models of workshop spaces that decenter an authoritative voice and lean into a cohort framework, especially when staff at the highest level of a newspaper or magazine continue to demonstrate a lack of reflection-on-action. Interestingly enough, such a call for what may amount to rotating freelance opportunities for new critics, comes from the makers of We See You White American Theatre (WSYWAT).

COHORT AND CONTRACT MODEL

On June 2nd, 2020, WSYWAT, a "collective of multi-generational, multi-disciplinary, early career, emerging and established artists, theater managers, executives, students, administrators, dramaturges [sic] and producers," put forth a list of demands as an "omnibus declaration of interlinked strategies" to acknowledge the depth and

persistence of “anti-Blackness and racism in the American theater.” Although calling for transparency is one of their centering tenets, it is unclear who exactly makes up this collective as their website notes three theatremakers in conversation became thirty and then over three-hundred signatories to an expansive document of demands. “Press” is included among the demands sections naming:

Theatre criticism for BIPOC productions, performers and theatres must be written through the lens of anti-racism. If press outlets cannot train their white writers to use an anti-racist lens, we demand that they not review BIPOC productions until they contract BIPOC critics. (“BIPOC Demands” 23)

The collective’s stance signals it is preferable for BIPOC productions to go without criticism than to receive coverage from critics that may perpetuate harmful perspectives or unproductive interpretations. WSYWAT calls for the disinvestment of “salaried positions for critical review and feature writings” and instead “invest in contract-based positions that are filled with at least 50% BIPOC writers.” Such is a provocative demand as it decenters a singular voice and the infrastructural position of critics. Even so, this may fall into an essentializing territory even if WSYWAT names their emphasis on an anti-racist lens as inherently intersectional, one that “should not be taken as an excuse to overlook sexism, ableism, ageism, heteronormativity, gender binarism, and transphobia” (“BIPOC Demands” 1). If publishers of criticism commit to hiring a culturally diverse team, this would mitigate the harms perpetuated by a lack of diversity. Such decentralization from a singular voice also disrupts the power imbued upon a singular piece of critical writing. More critics and critics working together on pieces proves a compelling model that makes space for reflection-in-action during the writing process.

Here it is necessary to turn back to understanding of cultural competency as extending beyond race and instead embraces the complexity of identities critics and the artists hold.

CULTURALLY COMPETENT APPROACH

Critics must have a framework that expansively considers the way cultural wealth is demonstrated on and off stage. Whether a critic chooses to uplift a narrative or question its complexity, there are material impacts associated with their writing. Critics wield institutional power that has economic impact, power that can threaten the sustainability of artists that are working outside of dominant modes and culture. As proponents of the field and its artists, critics must interrogate their personal biases and knowledge gaps. They must write as advocates and allies and accomplices to their artist peers and colleagues. Although journalism as a field ascribes to industry standards, I have demonstrated the ways these align and perpetuate white supremacy culture. It is a critic's responsibility to be exercising their own propensity to write about theatre and its artists with rigor that counters the detriments of white supremacy culture. The power and culpability of theatre writers is especially palpable in moments where artists are demanding of accountability and integrity. When considering cultural competency at its most basic definition, it comes down to one's propensity to self-educate on the unknown and do better, actionably. Language matters. As I write, our arts industry, shutdown as the pandemic rages, contends with the decades-long abuse of producer Scott Rudin. For coverage from legacy papers to stall and later trip over their coverage categorizing his actions as bullying (Paulson "After Bullying Reports") and bemoaning an "industry that is short on visionary

leaders” is egregious (Marks “Scott Rudin steps aside”). This thesis on theatre criticism carries with it implications for the whole of journalism and its aspirations to due diligence and, impossibly, do no harm.

REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

The only way forward is to contend with our past—on personal and systemic levels. Theatre critics must bear witness to their own writing with the same critical eye they do to the artists they write on. Critics who choose to develop a reflexive practice are committing to a rigor only found in the approach of the artist-critic and/or colleague-critic, an approach that centers their subjects with empathy and love. A reflexive critic is open to receiving feedback and engages in the discourse that emerges from their writing. A reflexive practice is one built in community, in active dialog with the field and its makers. I maintain some of the most productive questions in facilitating a process of reflection-on-action are already a part of the critic's practice; in returning to Manzoni and Goethe’s pivotal provocations: “what were the theatremakers trying to do; how well did they do it; and was it worth it?” (Fisher 29). Critics can turn these questions onto themselves and their writing, which align quite compellingly with the triple-loop learning offered by Dawson and Kelin, which include the steps to describe, analyze, and relate. A reflexive process instills a responsibility for a critic’s written words and affirms that exercising a propensity to incorporate new knowledge will only strengthen their criticism.

Thus, my core possibility models for the future of inclusive criticism rely on the following: continued mentorship and expansions of the form, a cohort and contract model, a culturally competent approach, and a reflexive practice. In returning to the concept of possibility models, these do not emerge as one-size-fits-all solutions. Rather, they serve as intentions to be activated on personal and institutional levels. As a current freelancing journalist, I know the power I wield is incredibly different than my colleagues who have secured staff positions. Our resources and capacities may exist on opposite sides of the spectrum. But in personally exercising these possibility models, I am committing to my own set of ethics and practices that inform all parts of my artistry and humanity. What I advocate for is a rigorous generosity, with self and with others. By turning our witnessing as critics onto ourselves, we are remaining vulnerable and vigilant. Vulnerability comes in engaging in dialog with our artistic peers, in acknowledging we are also learning and prone to both speaking and writing in draft with a certain demonstration of knowledge-in-action. Our vigilance, then, includes holding ourselves accountable with reflection-on-action.

Every time I write a piece of arts journalism, I should learn something about myself and my practice. I should clock my patterns, my struggles, my impulses. In this reflexivity, my witnessing of self, I can then address my gaps and widen the breadth of my reflection-in-action. Developing a reflexive practice amongst peers is not only vital for the growth of critics but also for the growth of the arts field. In learning to witness ourselves, we awaken to our alignments with white supremacy culture that do not serve our practice or relationships. Critics must actively center inclusive, critically engaged

ways of being and working with those they write about and along. Only in countering white supremacy culture will we cultivate a field in which a fuller breadth of critics and artists can thrive.

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