

For BIPOC women in theater who have had enuf: A roundtable on resistance

In light of #WeSeeYou, Regina Aquino, Thembi Duncan, Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, Paige Hernandez, and Deidra LaWan Starnes have their say.

By **Guest Author** - July 24, 2020

By **Thembi Duncan**

DC Metro Theater Arts has committed to offer our communications channel to help amplify the BIPOC voices (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) that are now pointing the path to American theater's future. The following roundtable is part of that commitment. This conversation was recorded from a Zoom meeting July 11, 2020, coordinated by Malcolm Lewis Barnes and transcribed for publication by John Stoltenberg. The read time is about 30 minutes.



Regina Aquino, Thembi Duncan, Deidra LaWan Starnes, Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, and Paige Hernandez. (Their bios are at the end.)

Thembi: Hey, everybody. This is an amazing opportunity to be covered in love and respect and joy because I have these wonderful women. I'm going to moderate a conversation about Black arts in general, but Black theater in particular. So, ladies, the first thing we want to do is have you all introduce yourselves.

Lady Dane: I am Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi. I am a Black, trans, African, Nigerian, Indigenous, Cuban performance artist, playwright, author, advocate, screenwriter, priestess, historian, goddess. That is who I am, what I do.

Deidra: My name is Deidra LaWan Starnes. I am an actor. I am a writer. I'm a mom. I'm an educator. Associate Artistic Director at 1st Stage. And I'm going to have to catch up with my girlfriend over there because I do have my tribes, I just don't know 'em by heart. I can throw out my Nigerian and my Kenyan and my Somalian, which are three I remember. So yeah, that's that's me.

Paige: Hey, everyone. I am Paige Hernandez—performer, educator, playwright, choreographer, director, and newly named Associate Artistic Director at Everyman Theatre. I'm just super excited to be here.

Regina: Hi, I'm Regina Aquino. I am a first-generation Filipinx American actor, mother, and a DC and Maryland native.

Thembi: I'm Thembi Duncan—moderator, theater practitioner, and arts administrator. I came up in my career in the Washington, DC, area and currently work and reside in Buffalo, New York. I'm just overwhelmed with joy to be able to have all you ladies in the room. And I want to start us off with a question about the current situation, the spring and summer of 2020: **The past few months with COVID-19, with the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, how has that affected you as a person, as a woman, and as an artist...how has it affected your creative process?**



Deidra LaWan Starnes

Deidra: Discoveries are happening moment by moment because so many things are happening. I was on a call with Lady Dane and Regina earlier, and I said, I'm just traumatized. I'm still traumatized by everything that's going on in the world and the realization of something we all knew. We knew it, we knew it was there. But I think there was something about having that boot in your face in this time of stillness, which is what I think COVID provided the world, a time of stillness.

One thing I realized as a person, as a human being, is that I miss people. I miss freely walking around without fear of catching some kind of disease. I miss being able to smile because I've always got a mask on my face. Of course, I'm smiling, but it's different. It's muffled. It's stifled. And I miss being able to engage with people I don't know and not fear anything.

As a woman, I miss my boo. For reals. I'll just put it out there. I miss my boo. We haven't seen each other since the end of February or maybe beginning of March, I lost track. I miss my daughter. I haven't seen her since she went back to school after winter break. I realize how much I love my son.

As an artist, I realized that if I'm not in a safe place, it's really hard for me to be creative. I don't want to create any more pain, because that's what's coming out of me, that's what I'm feeling. I don't want to create any more pain. Lady Dane has been talking about having our trauma always

being put on stage, and people profiting off of our trauma. I don't want to profit off of my trauma, and I don't want anybody else profiting off of my trauma. So I'm having a harder time finding a creative space for light.

Although, because I was taking an online class and I had to, I did create a pilot, a comedy, called *Been There, Done That*. And by the grace of God a woman who is producing something else of mine read it and sent me her first right of refusal. So I did create something that was funny and Black, and she liked it and we'll see what happens. But outside of that, I keep trying to figure some other things out and just can't get there. 'Cause it's all trauma.

Lady Dane: The Black Lives Matter movement, it's really not a resurgence, because we've been fighting, we've been having these conversations. It's just that more of the world are willing to actually be in community with us and join in. That's the difference this time. But just within the past week six Black transwomen were murdered. Those are my sisters. I do not know them all by personal association, but when I am talking about dismantling systems, that conversation is not just for myself but for my sisters as well.



Lady Dane Figuerora Edidi

I knew when I first heard about COVID that it was going to get bad. I knew that the white supremacist system of our government already didn't value us, and it would not care whether or not COVID took us. But I also knew that our salvation never rested within the supposed benevolence of white people and especially our government. So for me, community has always been very important. I knew that within community, there was a way for us to craft, to forge, to imagine a new world together.

There was a moment where I got sad, of course, and I wanted to also feel joy—because we're so often told that we don't have the right to feel joy, and that somehow our joy is a betrayal to our people. So I wrote a play about two Black people who live across from each other during the time of COVID called *Between Time*, set in Baltimore. Their windows are separated by a small alleyway and they fall in love—because I wanted to feel joy. I wanted to activate within myself the gift that I was born with, which is to imagine not just a new way of being but a new world free of oppression for all of us.

Thembi: In your creative process, are you envisioning a post-COVID world experiencing your work or are you thinking, Oh gosh, I've got to think of a whole new way this piece can look?

Lady Dane: With *Between Time* there's a dance that the actors do and they're supposed to touch, but it could happen with social distancing. I wrote an episode for [Round House Theatre's] *Homebound*, which was specifically created to comment on and reflect on the times now. I'm also working on other scripts that are post-COVID. There is a play that is a series of nine vignettes that can be done within the parameters of social distancing. The actors don't have to touch, they're supposed to be six feet apart, and we find these two actors in different spaces where social distancing is already happening anyway. It's a commentary on our system. So I am also thinking about that as well, because the safety and the health of creatives is deeply important.

Deidra: *Been There, Done That* was the first thing that poured out of me and it had nothing to do with COVID or anything that was going on. I did not write that to be produced. I wasn't factoring in what was going on in the world right now. But it is good. And it is funny. We just have to figure everything else out when we see what our world is like on the other side of this.

Paige: For me, these past few months change a lot for me as a creative in terms of a deeper awareness of accessibility. Now I am more interested in art that can go hand-in-hand with health—where you can experience my art and my expression without compromising or being at risk to catch a virus? COVID-19 is one thing, but there's a new awareness around an existing racial pandemic as well—this new epic wokeness...where pieces of mine that may have existed just a year ago... sit differently now. It's my responsibility as an artist to update, adapt and modify those works.



Paige Hernandez

I've been really looking at my work as an educator, as a writer—and what can I do to make sure that it still has the maximum impact while the world is changing and spinning so fast? I think we'll see in three months, six months, a year, how flexible any of us have been, how open, how receptive, how much we're willing to grow, to stretch, to change. Like, yes, we're writing all these COVID plays. My latest commission is about a stepmom and stepdaughter doing Tik Tok dances. It's very in the moment, because that's the culture we're experiencing in this pandemic. But what are the deeper themes in there that can translate into something bigger when we're ready to have the type of social interaction that we're used to?

And my direct answer to this question is that any kind of artistic expression right now that doesn't go hand-in-hand with social justice and/or health, feels frivolous to me. I want to make sure that we're able to find joy—but joy can come from acknowledging what everybody's going through. This moment in time is just so ripe for all artists to really evaluate how we fit in...how we can newly navigate and how we come out of this stronger than ever.



Regina Aquino

Regina: I absolutely want to cosign all of that. Paige said how art for her is tied to social impact, and I have found in this time away that my art and my activism are married. I've only recently started writing and developing a podcast, but I identify most strongly as an actor, as a performer. In order for me to feel productive and inspired and passionate in ways that do not uphold white supremacy—that do not make me a subject to the Western theater narratives that have been assigned to my face and my body—I need to enliven that activism all the time.

I have started to do that in theaters, at auditions, at rehearsal—pushing back and asking: What are the other racial demographics in a show? Am I playing a maid? I'm not interested in playing a maid. I'm not interested in being the sexual object between two white men. I'm not interested in being the concubine. If the leading man is a white man and the other romantic interest is a white woman, we need to discuss why we're doing that, what's the intention. And if you are not

interested in investigating the racial implications of your casting choices, I'm not interested in doing your show.

A lot of theaters have spoken about their support of the Black Lives Matter movement as if Black lives haven't already mattered for centuries. And these "statements of solidarity" and this desire of white-led theaters to be performative in their advocacy to capitalize off of very real, very vivid Black oppression happening right now all while still upholding systems and producing shows that exploit Black stories or Asian stories or Latinx stories is offensive to me.

During this time away, there's so many BIPOC artists that are inspiring me to be more vocal, everybody is becoming more vocal. It seems like everybody is standing in solidarity, to name the injustices that we've all suffered at the hands of the white supremacist theater system. And that foundational change is going to make me look at the art that I make and the people that I make art with very carefully moving forward. We can't go back to the way that it was.

As a woman, this time away has changed me because I have two children, and this pandemic has given me more time to be home with them. I get to see my children grow up in ways that I wasn't able to last year. I did five shows in one calendar year, and I spent a whole month away from my daughter as she traveled for the summer. I didn't get to put my son down to bed for nearly a whole year of his five years of life. So those things that we give up as mothers to make our art and to be productive—it didn't occur to me how grateful I was to have this time with my children and to be able to shape how they internalize what's happening in this world—not just with the pandemic, but talking about Black Lives Matter and taking them to protests, even though they have to wear masks. Recognizing that we should absolutely be identifying everybody's cultures together and with intention. Not feeling bad about talking about how I am different from the other moms in this very white Arlington County that I live in. Not being afraid to talk about how he has friends that are Black and that they may be treated differently than he is, that I may be treated differently than he is. This time, as terrifying as it is, has given me a lot of gifts.

Thembi: Speaking of conversations, **there is a conversation going on about Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and all of the different intersectional identities where some of us overlap. And I want to know what you all are hearing. What conversations are you participating in? What conversations are you steering clear of when it comes to what's happening in the DC theater community in particular?**

Deidra: One of the things I'm hearing is a lot of silence, and that silence for me is very telling. I'm going to go ahead and put it out there: to date, I have not heard from my agent. I kept getting emails about updating my profiles and I wasn't responding to them. Finally, I got one that said, Hey, we've been trying to reach you, and I responded back, I'm sorry, I've heard nothing from you all during this time as one of



Thembi Duncan

your first Black artists. But hey, I guess it's business as usual. I answered the questions and I still haven't heard anything.

I pretty much have been by myself in the house with my grandmother and my son, and **the conversation that I'm having is how we're feeling as Black people and wanting the world to not lose the momentum, because we now have the ear of the world. There will be a relaxation period where people will feel like, Okay, well, things are moving, so it's okay. And no, it's not okay. This is the battle. This is a battle in the war.**

The other thing that I've been hearing from artists is just the sheer exhaustion of being a Black artist right now, with people making solidarity statements, with people hiring Black people to fix their diversity and culture issues. And it's like, yo, you started it, you fix it. And then recognizing that I actually work for a white organization. But in that white organization, they're not turning to me and asking me a bunch of questions about Black people. They're asking me questions about me, which I respect and appreciate..

Now, to be honest, if you're going to work for a white theater, you should work for 1st Stage, period. Just because of how they treat human beings and how they feel about human beings.

We've all sat together and we've decided that we are going to be a theater company that cannot get called out. And we agreed that we're going to be who we say we are. Yes, we need to have some action statements and things that we need to do to make sure. But, you know, other theaters are putting out this stuff, and we know which ones mean it and which ones don't. We'll see, you know, we'll see on the other side how this works.

What I've noticed in the entertainment industry is whatever is hot in the moment is what the art is. Let's say jellybeans are hot right now for whatever reason. Somehow somebody who had a great promotional campaign got jellybeans out there on the market. So you're going to get a whole bunch of T-shirts that say jellybean. You're going to have a whole bunch of people naming their children Jellybean. You're going to have a whole bunch of theaters producing things about jellybean. And as soon as jellybean is replaced by pinto bean, it's over.

As BIPOCs, and especially as women, we've seen it: You can't have two Black women out there at the same time. It's that thing where we can't all exist and be taken at face value for the talent that God has given us. It's always gotta be what's in vogue, because that is attached to a dollar sign.

Lady Dane: I want to reflect and expand on what Deidra said because I'm a part of a lot of conversations with a lot of different theaters and organizations and/or artistic directors. And right now, making a solidarity statement is the thing to do because everybody's looking at these white institutions.

I do want people to understand the framework I am coming from, so that we're all clear about why I'm saying what I'm going to say: The land that we're sitting on now is stolen land. Every person on this call has been impacted by the violence of colonization. I want everyone to understand that the economic violence that we have encountered has been for the benefit of white people. I want everyone to understand that this country—from the roads that are paved to the

bricks of the theater institutions that we work at—has been purchased through violence by the genocide of Indigenous peoples and by the enslavement of Africans. And so these theaters owe us. More than what they have done ever. A hundred years plus since theater has been codified as an art form in the United States, they owe us. I want to start there first.

Secondly: Who's telling the story is not enough. Putting Black and Brown people on a stage, putting BIPOC people on the stage, is not enough. Producing one Black playwright in a season is not enough. Having Black and Brown and Indigenous people performing in an institution that is steeped in white supremacy—that has been built off of our backs and off the backs of our ancestors and the deaths of our ancestors, for the enjoyment, for the pleasure of white people—is no longer going to work. Doing August Wilson in your season as your one Black play, because you want to play on the psychological nostalgia of Black people, is not enough—because there are new stories being told. There is a new world that we are being asked to craft and imagine.

Theater at its heart is a spiritual practice. Before Greece there was Africa. Theater is deeply connected to the spiritual lifeblood of a people, of a nation, of a land. Therefore, theater has the responsibility to be at the forefront of social justice and change.

I'm exhausted by having these conversations with white people who hold structural power, who feign white helplessness. White helplessness is a manifestation of white supremacy. What we are being asked for now as a people, as a human race, is to dismantle white supremacy completely. And when white theater heads say to us, "It is hard," I want them to change the language: to say that something is hard it means that it will take great strength. What we're being asked to do now in the theater will take great intention and integrity. I want them to use language that is truthful. I want them to say "It's inconvenient" because to say "It is hard" puts the work back on us.

All of who we are outside of the theater is who we bring into the theater, and there is a system of colonization and white supremacy that has terrorized us outside of the theater. The theater has been built embedded with that. When a white person says to us that it is hard, what it elicits from us is compassion and empathy, because we have been raised our whole lives to see them as human, even when they do inhumane shit to us. And I want them to say the truth: It is inconvenient for them, because that puts the onus back on them.

No more of this fucking emotional manipulation. No more of this economic violence. Reparations are owed to us. These leadership positions are owed to us. A board supporting, loving, centering the leadership of Black leaders is owed to us. Giving us money—even when we ain't got no literary agent, even when we ain't got no Tony—is owed to us. **We are done playing Mammys. We're done holding them. If they feel like the work that is being asked to be done is too much, and it is so daunting, then are these institutions worth saving?**

Thembi: You channeled a truth that I feel came from the ancestors. I feel it echoing through all of our bodies. It speaks to the work that we're always being asked to do: the power that we have that we always give away. We show compassion and we hand that power over because it was

ripped from us so many times over and over and we have been socialized to give it at will. And it's really powerful when we say no.

I think a way to move through this conversation is to **think about the #WeSeeYou movement and the demands that have now been made public from BIPOC people and what they want from white theaters, what we want, what we expect, and what we are owed.**

Regina: "Theater at its heart is spiritual. Theater has the responsibility of being at the forefront of social justice and change"—Lady Dane Figueroa. That should be in textbooks. I should have that tattooed on my body. That's my soul.

Thembi: The people in this room have already been doing that work. Your body moving through theatrical space is doing the work. And now, as Paige was saying, **this radical wokeness is happening. People are like, "Oh my gosh, racism is really bad! White supremacy—oh, that's a thing, I guess." Did you not hear us screaming it from our DNA?**

We've been doing the work. We know what happens with white supremacy. When that machine discovers something, it gets taken and monetized and capitalized on, and it no longer belongs to the people who created it. The Black Lives Matter movement was created by three Black queer women, and we know what's happening to it. We know it requires everybody to participate for something to move, but we also know what happens when we create things. So what do we do to hold on to our identities? How do we hold on to who we are without it being taken from us and renamed?

Deidra: What we do was a gift. It was given to us. Our ability to create was a gift. It's divine. Lady Dane brought that into the room. What we do is spiritual. Everybody can't do what we do. And everybody can't make a room feel like we can make a room feel, whether we're dancing, whether we're singing, whether we're acting, whether we're just moving in space and can't nobody do it like we do. Collectively can't nobody make that happen in the way that we do. It's a gift.

That being the case, the gift is priceless. So **what we have to be willing to do is throw the demands on the table: If you want my work, if you want my body, if you want my voice, if you want my words, this is what I want from you: I want a Black director. I want a Black design team. I want a portion of that money to go back into the community that you're pimping to get grants to come in to see this show. And if they say no to any of the demands, we have to be willing to walk away and trust that we are taking our gift with us. They did not deserve it.**

Sometimes I think, What am I going to do? How am I going to pay the rent? I need the show. I need this moment. I need this gig. I need this job. All we need is spirit—because we have each other. And there is no dag-gone way Lady Dane or Paige or Regina is going to go through something and call me and say, "Dee, I have a need," and I'ma turn a blind eye. We have got to stand up and stop letting them take it. We have got to stand up. We have got to stop allowing ourselves to be marginalized.

Now here's the thing: *Hollywood Shuffle*. There's always going to be somebody that's gonna take it. There's always going to be that person that's gonna take it. That was the whole thing, his whole dilemma. He [the aspiring actor Bobby] finally stood up for himself and decided not to do this stereotypical part, and there was somebody ready to jump in. So understand there is going to be somebody who's going to jump in and do it, but they can't do it like you. It's not going to be the gift that *you* would have given them. It's going to be a different flavor. It's not going to be the divine flavor that you brought to the table. But that is one of the things that we have to start doing: If you want my trauma, if you want my song, if you want my dance, this is what you have to do for me. I want a scholarship fund coming out of here. You're bringing these kids in to see your theater, because you're trying to create future theatergoers. Well, they're *not* going to be future theatergoers because you're not reaching out to the parents. Why don't you create a scholarship fund? Why don't you really do something to ensure the futures of BIPOC children instead of trying to ensure the future of your audience?

The other thing is really hard. It goes outside of our art, it goes to our lifestyle. We have to stop buying into the myth that we have to look a certain way, that our hair has to be a certain way, that our body has to be a certain way. The only thing we need to do is treat our bodies like a temple and be healthy. We're specifically talking about ourselves as artists and as theater creatives, but we do exist in a world of systemic racism in a world of marginalization and oppression that goes outside of the theaters.

Like, some of my favorite stores, I can't shop there anymore, because I found out they use prison labor. For me that means they are part of the prison pipeline because they are profiteering off of the labor of prisoners. Prison is supposed to reform but that's not what it's doing. It's taking advantage of the individual. And it's throwing our Black and Brown men into more culture shock and trauma because of all the atrocities that go on inside of the prison walls. So they come out traumatized, brutalized, and have nothing left to give as the assigned-male-at-birth human beings that they are. And then they can't vote.

I got into a big debate with a friend who was like, "Well, I don't really feel comfortable going out and protesting. I mean, I think all we have to do is vote." Voting is not going to be enough because all of us can't even vote. Not only that, they are sabotaging the votes. They are doing everything in their power possible to keep us from voting. They did it in 2016 and they're doing it again. And they're doing it right up in front of our faces. So voting is not enough.

Somehow we have to get into the capital infrastructure and stop spending our money on these folks. I don't know how to do that. I need help with that one. How can I single handedly bring the man down? I can't, right? We all have to do it, but I don't even know how to start. Except I'm not shopping at some of my favorite stores right now.

Thembi: But that's you making that sacrifice—you saying, I'm going to take a stand. And you *are* making a difference. And it's all those little things that you do, but your artistry—and your ability to put people in positions of power in the arts—is the lane where you can make the most difference.

Paige: Being in affinity spaces where like-minded folk can really be honest and authentic is just food for my soul. So I am definitely here in any way possible to amplify those voices when I can, whether it's to share the space or be able to let others talk, people who've been able to give their full energy and passion to this.

These have been a rough couple of months for me, so I'm still kind of finding my grounding so that I can recharge up and tag-team others whenever anybody's ready. And that's revolutionary too, just being able to tag-team, pass the baton, and help, so that we can all take time to charge and to do what's best for ourselves.

The various burnouts are inevitable.... it's gonna happen. And on top of that...the potential to get sick. I know what Deirdre was just saying....**our existence is revolutionary. Some days we can't fight as hard as we want, and we can't fight in the ways that we want, but that doesn't mean that we won't live to fight another day.**

Thembi: What collaborations that are happening right now with BIPOC folks are inspiring you? Are there collaborations that you're hearing about, that you're getting excited about, that are moving forward? And what does the DC theater community need to know about BIPOC?

Regina: The work that was done on the #WeSeeYou document and the brain trust required to create it—they came up with a 31-page document in two months. I think that solidarity is great. The fact that it centers on Black perspectives and specifically calls out anti-Blackness is great, because as a non-Black POC I am learning about my proximity to whiteness and the privilege that I have and the privilege that my entire community of Filipinos experienced under that whole model minority fallacy.

It's something that has kept the majority of the elders that I know locked into this idea that there is some kind of hierarchy that serves their best interests in the immediate situation, but ultimately is a form of oppression that they do not see and are not willing to admit because they grabbed onto any belief that empowered them to feel they could immigrate here and survive—this lie that they were somehow going to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. The anti-Blackness that they learned in their home country, in the Philippines, was perpetuated by a colonial system that was founded by the Spaniards and then perpetuated even further by the Americans. That's my experience, those are the people that I grew up with. I grew up being taught colorism. And it's rooted in a self-loathing that Filipinos have internalized and perpetuated, taught to them by colonizers.

And you question the things that you were taught by your elders who were taught by people who didn't have Black people around them. So all of this cultural awareness that the Filipino community needs to embrace really falls on the shoulders of my generation and the generations after me that are here and are American and can call in our elders and say: A lot of the stuff that you're holding on to is not true. And you need to let that shit go. Because it's oppressing you just as much as it oppresses the Black people you think you're superior to. If there is a hierarchy, there is still someone above you. So why are you accepting that?

Filipinos have been colonized and oppressed for over 400 years. It's an internalized process. And it's very frustrating for someone like me who grew up around Filipinos, both here and in the Philippines, but also grew up American and was told that democracy exists. I believe that. I don't see it anywhere but with my peers. I don't see the intentional desire to protect everybody and enact justice and freedom and happiness for everybody, except for my peers in these safe spaces.

And a challenge for me as a non-Black POC is making sure that when I am fighting in solidarity with the Black people in this country who have been fighting this fight since before this country was founded, I am always trying to be aware of my own privilege and proximity to whiteness. So that in my desire to amplify voices, I'm not also silencing or minimizing them by taking focus. So that privileges afforded me are not erasing what my Black peers are also asking for.

I am not white. I am very much othered in every way, everywhere I go. Whenever I walk into a space and know that I am not white, because I'm surrounded by whiteness, I'm also aware that I am not Black. Finding ways that I can stand in solidarity and find my voice while ensuring that I'm honoring the voices of people who I need and who want solidarity from me—that's where I am right now.

Deidra: When you're a BIPOC and when you're female, you have an added trauma to your life that you see the world through several different lenses and these lenses just pile on and pile on. You can see through and see things in the way that other people can't see them. Regina, you talked about it and you cried, and it brought me to tears, because I started having flashbacks of those moments when I had to leave my kids to go do a show, and my son would run to me and say, "Mommy, don't leave me." You know, trying to be an artist and trying to be a generation that raises a generation in the right way. Thembi and I have older children, but there's still time—a generation that raises a generation where lenses are not *a* lens.

This idea of racism is because people don't understand humanity. This is America, the land of the free, but we ain't never been free. When people have not felt that, when they have not had to experience that, our challenges will always be different because we always start barefoot on a rocky road. Lady Dane might lose a car to repossession. And then a white woman may lose a car to repossession. But the effects that it has on Lady Dane will always be different because Lady Dane started without shoes on her feet, walking down a rocky road to get that car in the first place. So somehow *they* will never experience or feel what we feel. They will not. It's just not, it's just not, it's just not.

How some ever, what *they* need to understand is that we are human beings with hearts and with veins and with lungs and with eyes and teeth and tongues. So we are royal just like they are royal. We are divine beings, just like they are divine beings. And it doesn't matter where they think we came from, because we actually know where we came from. We came from Africa. We were first.

Lady Dane: I think that the solutions that we're looking for now are beyond the imaginations of white people. And I think that white people need to know that.

Thembi: Are you saying that now the work has to come back to us to do the imagining of the change? Or are you saying the demands *are* the work that we have done? And now: Do what we said.

Lady Dane: How long have we been demanding? The things that are in the #WeSeeYou document are things that perhaps every artistic director has heard from a BIPOC artist before. I think that we're very clear about what needs to happen, and we can go a step further. We can talk about the fact that what is also needed is for each person to be committed to dismantling internalized white supremacy and systemic white supremacy. Every person.

I will speak for myself as a trans person. Colonization said that I was not supposed to exist. And my existence here is because I know my ancestors imagined me existing. That white supremacy could not kill that dream of my existence. That me as a Black trans woman born in 1983 was told I can't be all of who I am. And that I had to imagine myself, not simply living but being, thriving. And that being here is an act of godly imagination that is beyond the limitations of humanity.

And so what I'm saying is that we have already said what a world free of oppression looks like. That all require a lot of work. It requires some people feeling inconvenienced. So I believe the solutions that we are seeking will not be found within the imaginations of white people.

Regina: I truly believe that Black women should lead this country because they would know what to do, but again, it's putting the work on Black women. How do I, as a non-Black person of color, take some of that labor to help, but still focus and center and push and promote—how do I do that? How do I help? How do we move forward?

Lady Dane: Black women are already doing the work. Black women are already doing this tremendous work and have already created blueprints for what the world could look like and what the dismantlement of internalized white supremacy and systemic white supremacy can look like.

Thembi: So to put it in theatrical terms, if I, as a director, have this opening scene and there are all these white people in the front, downstage, having this activity and all the lights are on them, do you see it as a shift where they simply move out of the way and the lights change and now we are focused on the Black women who have been doing the work behind them, but we could not see that work, because the centering and the light and the production values were focused on the white people? Is that sort of what you see happening, moving the attention away and revealing the work that we've already been doing anyway?

Lady Dane: Yes. And I want to also love on Regina for a second because I believe that Regina is doing the work. And is doing the work of centering and is also doing the work of dismantlement. It does not mean that any of us on this call will always get it right. Sometimes we'll have to hold a mirror to ourselves. But to put it in theatrical terms, if we want to get real, real down to the nitty-gritty: reparations. Reparations are *owed*. Because to pretend as if a theater that operates within a capitalistic framework and model does not understand how economic violence has impacted BIPOC people is an illusion. It feeds into the idea of white helplessness.

The fact that certain programming plays on a certain demographic of audience, the fact that certain artistic directors will say, “I can’t do this show because it makes my white board feel uncomfortable.” The fact that constantly theaters are saying Black people do not come to the theater. And some of those things are, “Oh, do Black people have the money, the discretionary funds, to come to the theater?” The fact that an artistic institution will know it is underpaying BIPOC artists and will not just pay them the higher fee tells us that they know. The fact that an institution will understand from where cometh its funds tells me that they are hip to the game.

Our theater institutions are funded by blood money. And to pretend that somehow they do not know that would feign absolution. If an artistic director is running a company within a capitalistic framework, it knows from where cometh its money. It uses its show not as a tool for liberation—because if theaters were actually using some of these shows for tools for liberation, we’d have a lot more mad white folks in the audience. It activates white tears.

But how many people leave theaters that are in the heart of DC and see the humanity in those Black and Brown people out on the street, those homeless Black and Brown people by the Metro station? How many of those white patrons see the humanity in them? And not just see the humanity in them but become committed to the total dismantlement of white supremacy, which garners white privilege?

Theaters will use these shows as shackles and leashes because they know people gotta feed their kids, because they know that if you give up that show, that might be the means between whether you’re going to eat that month or not. So what I am asking is to stop playing in my face.

You know people hungry. Actors are underpaid anyway. Even on Broadway their show closes and they back at the unemployment line. They are oftentimes the last and the least paid. How are these theaters going to show up for us not simply as artists but as human beings?

These institutions are in bed with the same companies that are using prison labor, that are run by people who own companies that bomb folks in the Middle East, that are run by companies that have ties with slave labor in Africa and in China. Look who the funders are, look who they thank at the beginning of their shows—and then see who those people are in bed with, see what Congresspeople those people are in bed with and what laws and legislation those people are passing. You gotta be real smart to be able to game the system, baby.

So I want us to be real honest with each other real quick and real soon and real in a hurry. Because these shows are being used as tools to keep us complicit and complacent—because how I’m a feed my baby tonight?

Deidra: Thembi gave that beautiful analogy and Lady Dane said so beautifully, we’re already doing the work. We’ve been doing the work. There is an inherent warrior in us. If we go to the psychology of the Black American female, starting on the plantation, or even starting on the Middle Passage, what had to be endured even while you are lying in the bowels of this ship taking

you to your doom and having some foreign human being place themselves brutally inside of you, and then continue to perpetuate that kind of rape over and over again?

The #MeToo movement became the #MeToo movement after it was *already* the me-too movement. When #MeToo came out the way it came out, my response was: Really, y'all? Really? Because from the bowels of the ship, to the cabin, to the rice field, corn field, the cotton field, and massa's house, we've been getting me-too'ed, and our families have been taken from us and stripped from us and pulled from us. So we have no other choice but to do the work.

We are survivors. They can't kill us. They keep trying. There's all kinds of genocide going on in this country right now. There's educational genocide. There's drug war genocide. There's gang war genocide. There's a prison genocide. There's all kinds of genocides going on under the umbrella of institutional and systemic racism. So we have always been survivors and they can't kill us. They can't. They cannot kill us. It's been tried. We just multiply. And we deal with our trauma and we *live* in trauma. Black girl magic, it's real. It's Black girl divinity. It's always been there and it had to be there because of the positions we found ourselves in.

I know a lot of people are like, "Y'all still on slavery? Get off of that." Well, yeah, we're not there anymore, but it has a lot to do with the psychology of this country. And it has a lot to do with the oppression that we still find ourselves under in this country. So when we stop being brutalized, when we stop being marginalized, when we get our *reparations*—when we get all of that, then we'll stop talking about slavery. But right now, slavery still exists.

Thembi: I could not have imagined the richness, the depth of this conversation. And what it tells me is that we all felt safe in this space. You all were able to share and to follow the thread that you needed to follow. Everything that all of you said needed to be said. My questions were just a way to launch a conversation that could go wherever it wanted to go, wherever you all took it. Whatever you wanted to say was perfect.

Paige mentioned how this was an affinity space, and I want to thank you all for bringing your full selves to this space. We don't always feel safe in certain spaces to express ourselves fully, and I'm grateful that we could do that in this space.

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Regina Aquino is a proud Filipinx DC-area native. SELECTED DC CREDITS: Theater Alliance: *The Events* [received Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Lead Actress], *Brownsville Song (B-side for Trey)*; Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company: *Describe the Night*, *The Arsonists*; Studio Theatre: *Vietgone*, *Red Light Winter*, *Dog Sees God* [Helen Hayes Award nomination], *Polaroid Stories*; Folger Theatre: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Nell Gwynn* [two Helen Hayes Award nominations]; Olney Theatre Center: *Tiger Style!*; Synetic Theater: *A Christmas Carol*, *The Little Mermaid*; BROADWAY: Lincoln Center & Kennedy Center TYA: *Where Words Once Were*;

INTERNATIONAL: Actor's Actors Inc. Manila: *Our Country's Good*; EDUCATION: Duke Ellington School of the Arts, The Studio Acting Conservatory, Manhattanville College. UPCOMING: *Marjorie Prime* at Prologue Theatre directed by Jason Tamborini; *The Red Beads* at Theater J directed by Johanna Gruenhut.

Thembi Duncan is an arts administrator, director, actor, and teaching artist with nearly 20 years of experience synthesizing theater, American history, and social justice in and around Washington, DC. Leadership highlights include serving as Creative Programs Director of Young Playwrights' Theater, Producing Artistic Director of African Continuum Theatre Company, and Lead Teaching Artist at historic Ford's Theatre. She directed and performed in numerous productions during her career, most memorably plays by Pulitzer Award-winning playwrights Lynn Nottage, Dael Orlandersmith, August Wilson, and Ayad Akhtar. She proudly served on the theatre Washington Helen Hayes Awards Board of Governors for two terms and cofounded the biannual Black Theatre & Dance Symposium at the University of Maryland with Scot Reese, Head of Performance. Thembi holds a BA in Theatre, Summa Cum Laude, from the University of Maryland. She currently serves as the director of Arts Engagement and Education at Shea's Performing Arts Center in Buffalo, New York.

Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, dubbed the Ancient Jazz Priestess of Mother Africa, is a Nigerian, Cuban, Indigenous, American performance artist, author, teacher, choreographer, priestess, speech writer, playwright, writing coach, advocate, healer, a founding member of Force Collision, and a two-time Helen Hayes Award Nominee. She is the founder of The Inanna D Initiatives, which curates, produces, and cultivates events and initiatives designed to center and celebrate the work of TGNC Artists of Color. Considered one of the most prolific artists of our time, she is the first trans woman of color to be nominated for a Helen Hayes Award. In 2015, she received an Emerging Leader Award for her work with the DC Trans Community and is the GLBT History Project's 2018 recipient of the Mujeres en el Movimiento Arts Award. She has also costarred as Patra in the new web series *King Ester*.

Paige Hernandez is a multidisciplinary artist who is critically acclaimed as a performer, director, choreographer, and playwright. As an AEA equity actress, Paige has performed on many stages throughout the country. She has collaborated with the Lincoln Center and has been commissioned by several companies including the National New Play Network, the Smithsonian, The Kennedy Center, La Jolla Playhouse, and the Glimmerglass Festival. She is the recipient of an Individual Artist Award from the Maryland State Arts Council as well as three Helen Hayes nominations for choreography and performance. Paige has also been named a "classroom hero" by *The Huffington Post*, a "Citizen Artist Fellow" with the Kennedy Center, "40 under 40" by *The Washington Post*, and one of "Six Theatre Workers You Should Know" by *American Theatre Magazine*. She is elated to be the Associate Artistic Director of Everyman Theatre in her hometown of Baltimore, MD. With her company B-FLY ENTERTAINMENT, Paige continues to develop and tour original work internationally. www.paigehernandez.com

Deidra LaWan Starnes, Associate Artistic Director at 1st Stage, is a theatrical educator, performer, director, and writer. Acting credits include *The Good Counselor* and *The Member of the Wedding* at 1st Stage. Other acting credits include *The Amen Corner*, *Much Ado About*

Nothing, Milk Like Sugar, The Gospel of Lovingkindness, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Invisible Man (Helen Hayes Award – Ensemble), *Intimate Apparel* (Helen Hayes Award – Lead Actress), *A Raisin in the Sun, I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document...., Two Trains Running, Spunk, Twelve Days of Christmas, Charlotte’s Web, Passing Strange, In the Red and Brown Water, Radio Golf, Doubt, Stuff Happens, and for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, directed by Ntozake Shange. Film credits include *Chasing Refuge, Nocturnal Agony, and Ladder 49*. Her directing credits include *A Civil War Christmas* and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (Helen Hayes Nomination – Most Outstanding Production), *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf, Street Life, The Name Game, and Soul Collector*. Deidra has taught acting and/or performance-based classes at The Theatre Lab, Duke Ellington School of the Arts, University of Connecticut, Howard University, and several DC Public Schools. Additionally, she was the Elementary School Program Coordinator at Folger Shakespeare Library. She has a BA in Theatre from the University of Maryland, an MFA in Drama from the University of Connecticut, and an MA from American University in Producing Film, TV, and Video.

Guest Author