

Speaking to be Seen

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I wrote the following speech in a communal document that was read to the Member of Parliament in my Toronto ward. It was read in the summer during a time when anti-Black racism in the dance community was being illuminated.

Before writing the speech, I was invited to a community meeting with established local artists and dancers where a question was asked about what each of us, who live in this ward, needed to succeed. I had a hard time answering and nervously spoke about wanting to be considered when the city creates outdoor/public spaces. After the meeting I realized that I hadn't been able to find any answers because I had no idea how, where, or with whom I was meant to succeed, or what success even looked like for a mixed-race/Black artist like me. Why, with a university degree and thousands of hours of training and performing, did I not know how to triumph in this community? I emailed the organizers to explain my hesitation in answering their question. This is when I was invited to join a meeting with our MP to share my experiences.

I am a mixed-race artist who grew up in mainly White spaces. I learned how to navigate the dance world in a grateful, polite, and even meek way, which allowed my voice to sometimes be heard more clearly around White people. I seemed just White enough to be palatable, and yet I was aware that some folks still saw me as Black and thus "other." This is a mixed kid's social balancing act. I felt I was constantly under a watchful eye, going from a dancer to "a Black dancer" and back to a dancer when it suited the system. It's somehow hard to understand the effect of assimilation even when it is on your rubric. Experiencing the erasure of my Blackness led to hiding it often, even from myself.

During lockdown, I was finally coming to terms with my position as a mixed-race/Black woman and artist and with the state of my community; a community that has helped me become the artist I am today, but that has also consistently let me know when I was a little too much. My Blackness hadn't had the chance to shine without being policed externally or internally. I had learned to prevent myself from becoming a threat. This speech captures the moment I overcame my fear of becoming "An Angry Black Woman" and let my voice be heard.

Hi.

I'm Chenise, a professional performance artist who uses dance as the basis of all the art that I create. I have travelled coast to coast in Canada for professional dance training and performance. I also love teaching, mostly jazz dance, to those new and old to dance as a way of exchange, to uplift and empower.

I cannot speak for all people/dancers in the margins who have not been seen or heard in this community. I am speaking from my perspective, as someone who has been dancing professionally for over ten years but yet has not had many chances of success in my career in this community.

I know that my presence in creation spaces with other professional dance artists or companies would only make their life easier and support my success. It's a win-win, but I have to be invited, I have to be accepted, as well as physically and psychologically safe in the spaces where creation happens. I am not personally concerned with percentages of representation because they are not a true representation of what is happening. My QTBIPOC peers and artists and I are not heard, even though we have the skills, we have the training, we have the talent. We are here and have been here telling the community what we need, but as independent artists we don't even get the privileges that come from having the jobs, which is what the numbers show. For me and others like me, this is a request for the most basic of needs for success in our sector.

I am doing well. I am doing well during a pandemic. I am doing well during a pandemic when (because) the whole world has stopped. What does that mean?

As someone who does not feel successful, I have questioned whether I belong in these meetings. Will I be heard? Will I get credit for my ideas or will they be stolen? Do I deserve to have the floor?

I am not falling through the cracks because I didn't have anything to stand on with the struggle of working and living in Toronto. I was burnt out. I am healthier since receiving CERB. That's good for right now but also highlights how dire my situation was before. I'm speaking up about it because now I know that I'm not the only one.

My dance career has gained momentum as the world has shut down because I didn't have the space to succeed in the parts of the dance community I am actually trained to succeed in.

I am fortunate to have what little resources are needed to succeed in this current environment: the internet, a small space, and a bank account. Dancers are extremely adaptable, we don't even ask for much, but somehow we struggle to get access to basic

standards for working conditions. These issues face the Toronto dance community as a whole, but wouldn't it be amazing if this ward could be an example, or even a catalyst, for change in the city?

The need for recognition, space, and resources for QTBIPOC dancers is a request long overdue for fulfillment. With these requests in mind, I would ask you to consider your position of power in reimagining our lives in this ward during this unpredictable time. Your position allows you to make positive impacts in this community right now. This is the perfect time to reassess why we have heard the same voices and to remedy the situation by finding a new way for marginalized folks to have space. As you venture to fulfill these requests, the first questions you ask should include: How will you make community spaces an equitable endeavour? Who will you enlist and pay to achieve results that help ALL members in your community succeed?

Individual and cultural identity are so mixed and yet so at odds for many QTBIPOC. The connections made through community can be incredibly supportive and valuable for these artists. Unfortunately, those with a cultural upper hand use their advantage to profit on community, stripping these connections away from community. So, who and what are we forgetting in this term *community*?

I included Queer and Trans peoples in my speech to my Member of Parliament because I am aware of these voices of my peers that are not amplified. I can only speak to my experience as a dancer who is part of the BIPOC community.

Dance doesn't have to conform to colonization; dance was here before Canadian dance institutions were founded. Like most art institutions in Canada, dance institutions seek to preserve a hierarchy in which Whiteness is at the top. Because of this hierarchy, contemporary dance and ballet continue to be the ultimate styles for a dancer to achieve success. The journey to "making it" as a Canadian dancer is a colonial experience. Indigenous and syncretized dance forms face erasure here; competition and classism turn art into a business where community, expression, and healing are less valued, and the essence of the art forms are lost. It feels like my practice is dragged into politics and dance's hierarchy whenever I seek to create, which prevents me from expressing myself fully and connecting to people who need dance.

Dance is at its best when certain rules are bent, when people are able to better their community through art. Unfortunately, oppressive dance institutions still hold much influence and socialize us to contribute to their sustained power.

Although the colonization of dance has deemed certain dance traditions more worthy than others, those values comment more on the oppressors than they do on those they marginalize.

It is interesting to feel accomplished as an artist and connected to my community during a time when the world is experiencing a crisis, but trauma can bring people together, and my vision of dance is to uplift based on what connects us. The lockdown has allowed me to begin the process of decolonizing my dancing. Without gatekeepers, my art reaches people quickly, and I am beginning to realize that my lack of access to space, funds, and opportunities wasn't imagined. There had been many things in the way, including people who saw my White peers as more worthy of positions based on criteria other than merit. The feeling of unworthiness was an external burden that was quieted when we were all forced inside by the pandemic. I finally had the opportunity to understand that the voices telling me that I wasn't enough were not mine, but authority figures of institutions who kept hierarchies intact.

In times of crisis, healing and connection are invaluable. Though BIPOC dancers have proven their worthiness, we are still not seen. We watch our culture being appropriated, an appropriation we are then asked to pay to see performed in public, on stolen land. Meanwhile, we struggle to be recognized as accomplished artists. Then we are called bitter, jaded, sassy, or even angry, as if these feelings aren't justified. The work we do to "make it" in this "community" does not yield the same fruits as our White peers. This is my experience with over ten years dancing professionally in Canada. The mental and emotional work that I have to do before considering a job, going to a dance meeting, or taking a class is debilitating and goes unacknowledged. Though BIPOC continue to do a lot of the heavy lifting, I know that dance is my purpose, my input is needed, and my voice will reclaim the yesterdays to create tomorrows.