

## **The Proscenium Theater as a White Space: Phenomenologies and Architectures of Exclusion**

A key line of inquiry within Critical Whiteness Studies has been to acknowledge and map 'whiteness as a spatially situated phenomenon' (Jackson 1999). The term White Space has come into use to demarcate spaces populated by almost entirely white bodies due to their social, historical, and structural capacity to keep people of color out. One of the ways the White Space can be understood is as a literal extension of the white body. In her essay *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007), black feminist scholar Sara Ahmed argues:

whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies. We can think of the chair beside the table. It might acquire its shape by the repetition of some bodies inhabiting it: we can almost see the shape of bodies as 'impressions' on the surface. So spaces extend bodies and bodies extend spaces.

In this essay, I will begin to identify and analyze the proscenium theater, the prestigious home to Western Concert Dance, as a White Space, in which social and cultural whiteness cyclically extend into the architectural elements of the theater, which in turn encourage a multiplicity of extensions of the white body. First, I apply Ahmed's phenomenology of whiteness to the experiences of the white choreographer and audience member in the proscenium theater. This section theorizes some of the possible spatial, physical, and psychological modalities in which the western concert stage 'keeps white bodies in'. Next, I synthesize Sarah Schindler's case studies of 'architectural exclusion' through an analysis of Elijah Anderson's definition of White Space in understanding the proscenium theater as space designed to 'keep bodies of color out' (See Figures 1, 2 and 3 for preliminary statistical information). By focusing on physical design of the proscenium theater, my intention is to expose the 'built in' tenants of white supremacy that house the gamut of contemporary issues alienating audiences, performers, choreographers, and administrators of color from the theater.

As a white member of the western dance community as a dancer, choreographer, presenter, and scholar, my concern in this essay and much of my scholarship is to identify and analyze the ways in which white supremacy informs the dance spaces in which I am an agent. I see Critical Whiteness studies not as a gross generalization, for which it is often reduced, but rather as an invaluable discourse for understanding the symptoms of deeply entrenched racism. This form of analysis, though at times philosophical and metaphorical, is an important tactic in seeing and understanding manifestations of white supremacy in an effort to rehabilitate western concert dance contexts from racist underpinnings.

FIGURE 32: Ethnic Identity by Role

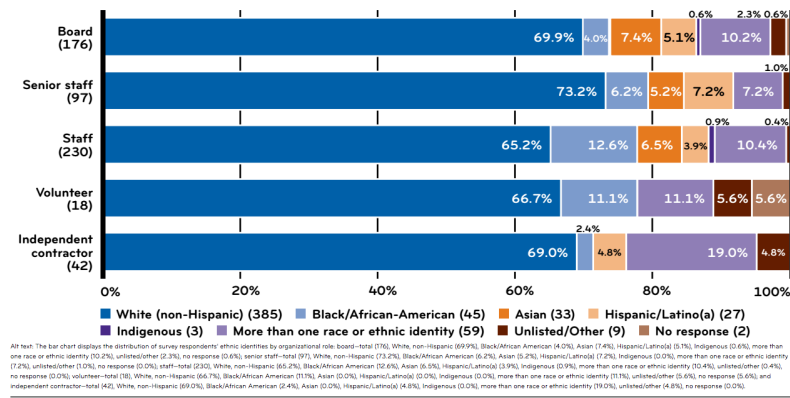
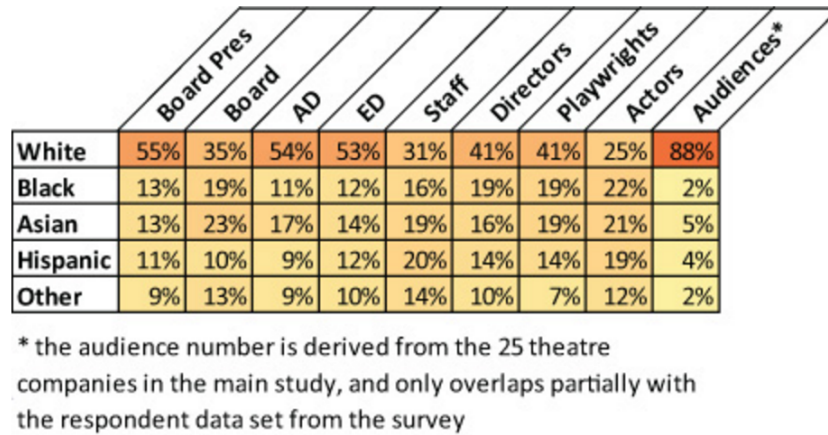


Figure 1: DanceNYC 2016 Workforce Demographic Report

Figure 2: 2012 Bay Area Theatre Workforce and Audience Demographics from *Giving Shape to Whiteness*

	Dance Attenders				
	Total Dance	Dance Fans	Open Minds	Main-streamers	Light & Easy
White/Caucasian	77%	69%	82%	87%	71%
African-American	7%	12%	4%	2%	8%
Latino/Hispanic	12%	12%	13%	3%	20%
Asian-American	2%	1%	0%	2%	0%
Other	1%	1%	0%	3%	0%
Refused	2%	2%	1%	3%	0%

Figure 3: Chicago 2005 Dance Audience Demographics

When we apply Ahmed's framing of whiteness as spatialized reciprocal extension to the example of the proscenium theater, we can consider the body of the white male choreographer, whose whiteness and maleness has historically secured his legacy as the most dominant demographic in this role as director, visionary, and master of the stage (Jennings 2013). It is his body that is extended not only through his dancers, who perform the steps generated from his body, and the dancers' spatial pathways multiplying his being throughout the stage, but the whole play space, the stage, the lighting, the set design can be seen as extensions of his body. Modern theater design no longer only elevates the stage, rather it tapers the auditorium such that the raked seating and angle of the walls focus the audience's gaze to the singularity of the stage and the grand extensions of the choreographer. House lighting also aids in this effect: 'With the advent of electricity, the illusion was further enhanced by controlled lighting, which made it possible to darken the auditorium where the audience was seated and create the illusion for the spectator that he was not in a theatre' (*proscenium* 2008). The total effect once the lights go down on the audience member, and the lights, set, dancers, and choreography unfold before her, is a phenomenology of blissful disappearance. When considering Ahmed's extension through the body of the white choreographer, the design of the theatrical space erases the body of the audience member altogether, focusing the whole of the human and nonhuman resources of the building on the extension of the choreographer.

It could be argued that the design of the theater can enable this act of extension for any choreographer regardless of their skin color. However, Ahmed's argument is nuanced in that it is not only the replication of the white body upon a space that accounts for the phenomenology of whiteness as extension, but the fact the space reaches back to support the shape of the white body: 'In other words, whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape' (Ahmed 2007). The legacy of white supremacy in western concert dance, by which I mean that white bodies have dominated the role of choreographer, dancer, audience member, technical crew, producer and administrator, means that the feelings of ease, comfort, and support experienced by the white choreographer within the walls of the theater, are his and his alone. The many imprints of white feet upon the stage reach back towards the feet of the white choreographer, supporting him, reassuring him that many like him have come before.

However, the choreographer is not the only white body extending into the architectural phenomenology of the western concert theater. Dan Graham in his chapter *Theater, Cinema, Power* explains, "The emergence of the theater as an enclosed architectural form in the sixteenth century coincided with the codification of the new perspective laws and with the political emergence of the bourgeois city-state' (Graham 1993). He explains, "the rules of privileged perspective were drastically altered with the development of court theater- designed for nobility alone' (Graham 1993). Graham offers a foundational example of one of the first court theaters, constructed for Prince Vespasiano Gonzaga in the city of Sabbioneta, Italy in 1539. He continues, 'Vespasiano's theater conventionalized the rule that the actors and the acting should be addressed at all times to the gaze of the ruler' (Graham 1993). When we shift the extending powers of whiteness to the revered audience member, we see that the design of the theater historically places nobility in a private box in the central balcony, which casts the

design and activities of the entire building subservient to the ruler's gaze (See Figure 4). The cycle of white power invested in the ruler extends out from his elevated central throne to the stage, the site of his entertainment and affirmation, and circles back through the energy and gaze of the performers in reverence.



Figure 4: Mariinsky Theatre St. Petersburg: The Tsar's Box (ticketsofrussia.ru)

Of course, most theater audience members are not considered nobility, though the status as a theater goer continues to be deeply linked with race and class. A 2015 Washington Post article entitled *Ballet is more diverse than ever. Why is the audience still so white?* states: 'Ballet audiences, however, remain a solidly homogenous group. In 2012, 80 percent were white, two-thirds were female, and more came from families earning \$150,000 a year...' (Deng 2015). It is this body, of the white affluent audience member through the repetition of her presence, that the red velvet seat takes on her shape, and her shape fits so comfortably to the seat. Ahmed writes, To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappears from view. White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape. The bodies and spaces 'point' towards each other, as a 'point' that is not seen as it is also 'the point' from which we see. In other words, whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape (2007).

It is this exact phenomenon of disappearance enabled by comfort that takes place for the seated white wealthy audience member when the lights go down in the theater. This deep level

of comfort blurs the barrier between the white body and its environment, as the seat, the fellow audience members, the dancers on stage, and the theater itself are all reciprocally formed and forming in her image. Sitting in the dark, the white audience member is able to give herself over to the magic of the theater. Because she experiences extensions of herself all around her, she can indulge in a journey of total kinesthetic and narrative empathy.

*Tactics of Architectural Exclusion in the White Space of the Western Dance Concert Theater*

Following Ahmed's theory of extensions, one might ask why any body cannot extend their presence into the red velvet seat of the theater? Elijah Anderson, professor of Sociology at Yale University, in his essay *White Spaces*, explains the allure of entering White Space of the theater: 'the white space is where many social rewards originate, including an elegant night on the town, or cultural capital itself— education, employment, privilege, prestige, money, and the promise of acceptance' (Anderson 2015). However this access to 'an elegant night on the town' is often fraught with discomfort or danger for the non-white body. Ahmed not only emphasizes that it is the legacy of repetition of white bodies in a space that enables extension, but that the ease and comfort of inhabiting White Spaces for white bodies hinges on the white homogeneity. The White Space of the theater and the white bodies populating the theater create an invisible closed cycle of comfort that only operates if its purity is protected. White Spaces function such that white bodies are free to extend, and that 'bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social,' experience 'a phenomenology of 'being stopped' (Ahmed 2007). Though of course this bodily stopping can be enacted by social action, architectural forms can play a key role in creating physical barriers, limiting spatial pathways, and segregated spaces for bodies of color.

Léopold Lambert, architect and writer dedicated to the study of the politics of space and bodies, writes, 'Architecture is an instrument of domination. It organizes bodies in space with a varying degree of coercion, from what may appear as voluntary to the most extreme instances of violence. It does not invent racism, but it provides the spatial and territorial conditions for racism to exercise itself' (Lambert, 2016). Though visitors to a space may not be able to identify the exact ways in which an architectural structure is regulating their movement and psyche, the real experience of spaces as comfortable or uncomfortable, welcoming or off limits, full of possibility or constricting is undeniably felt. Though there may not be a sign in the window of a theater that reads WHITES ONLY, the actual physical design of a built environment, as well as the social/cultural messages imbued into a space, can serve the same racist purpose as such signage. Sarah Schindler in her article *Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment* for the Yale Law Journal, notes, 'it is not controversial among planning and geography scholars to assert that the built environment often is constructed in a way that furthers political goals' (2015). By political goals, Schindler does not mean to imply that all architects create consciously racist designs, rather that all buildings exist within the political climate of which white supremacy is deeply entrenched. Schindler goes on to outline the primary architectural tactics that are employed in protecting White Spaces or 'architectural exclusion' which enable Ahmed's phenomenology of being stopped. Three of these design strategies are highly pertinent to the example of the proscenium theater: 1). Physical Barriers to Access 2). Exclusionary Zoning, and 3). One-Way Streets (Schindler 2015).

### *Physical Barriers to Access, Exclusionary Zoning, and One-Way Streets*

White Spaces erect physical and social barriers in order to protect the segregation that facilitates white people's feelings of comfort. Philosophy professor at Georgetown University Bryce Hueber, explains in his paper *The Dangers of White Spaces*: 'The inhabitants of White spaces, spaces constructed around White bodies and White ideologies, often view their neighborhoods as clean, safe, and familiar; and they often assume that people who are racialized in other ways live in neighborhoods that are dirty, dangerous, and strange' (Huebner 2011). Motivated by protecting their 'safety, cleanliness, and familiarity', White Spaces always install barriers of entry. Schindler describes 'one of the most obvious forms of architectural exclusion: the walls, gates, and guardhouses of gated communities. These architectural features serve to keep out those who are not expressly allowed in' (Schindler 2015). The first guarded access point to the theater is the box office. Here all patrons are asked to buy a ticket, or pick up their previously purchased tickets, though high ticket prices stop the majority of possible patrons of color from even setting foot in the lobby due to the historical racialized wealth gap. If a patron of color has secured a ticket, the elegant social space of the lobby often outfitted with bright lighting, refreshments, and an open floor plan, facilitates a sometimes consciousness sometimes unconscious appraisal process by white theatergoers and box office attendants of the person vying for entry to the theater based on their skin color, clothing, and social behavior. Anderson, writes of these preliminary barriers:

When the anonymous black person can demonstrate that he or she has business in the white space, by producing an ID card, or simply passing an initial inspection, the defending "agents" may relax their guard, at least for the time being. They may then advance from concern with the person's deficit of credibility to his or her provisional status, suggesting a conditional "pass" (Anderson 2015).

The box office and lobby experience could be framed as a civilized version of the 'stop and search' for people of color wishing to be granted a 'pass' into the theater. Award winning African-American playwright Dominique Morisseau recently posted a scathing article about a series of racist experiences she endured during a theater visit. She tells of entering a lobby in a New York City theater hoping to buy some affordable last minute tickets. Not being able to afford the expensive price, she asked around the lobby if anyone could offer her an extra ticket;

After a short while, an usher approached, accompanied by an older white woman in glasses. The usher said, "You're looking for tickets, she has tickets. Maybe you can help each other."

The woman, possibly in her early 60s, looked at me. We'll call her Jane. I said: "I don't have any cash, so I can't really take those off your hands." She handed me the tickets: "Well, just take them," she said. Then, as she walked away, she added, "Just don't pop your gum, because I hate that."

I wasn't chewing any gum at the time.

When I finally registered the comment, she was already walking off with her husband. My friends and I quickly deliberated on what she meant by it. We were all black. This elderly white woman could be making a generational assumption, a racial assumption, or both. Whatever the case, she felt she needed to educate me on theatre etiquette. Why

she assumed I wouldn't already have theatre etiquette, I would love to know (Morisseau 2015).

Though Mrs. Morisseau was allowed access through this first barrier into the theater, it was only after she had to publicly share her financial status that she could not afford entry, and then endured racist commentary from a white patron for imagined 'young black' theater behavior. This example illustrates the success of the the box office as a barrier in keeping out so many people of color, and grounds the reality that 80% of the bodies sitting comfortably in their red velvet seats are white.

Seats in the western concert theater are often segregated by price and superior sightlines to the stage. Recall the centralized box occupied by nobility attending the theater, 'There the privileged position was accorded to the ruler and all other viewing positions were assigned on the basis of social rank' (Graham 1993). In urban planning speak this process is called 'zoning'. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes the goals of theater design to be two fold: 1) to be aesthetically pleasing and 2) to be ensure the comfort of the patrons. It describes one aspect of physical comfort in the theater to be based on 'safety', which, as Huebner describes above, is relative term and racialized concept in White Spaces (Hildy 2009). Britanica goes on to outline spatialized social comfort:

Among the factors that are generally considered when it comes to social comfort is whether the arrangement of the audience within the house reflects the accepted social order within the culture. ...The location of the theatre within a town or city is also a factor in social comfort, as the expected audience must feel that it is proper for them to be in the area. The level of decoration of the theatre can also be a factor in social comfort, as it can make the audience feel that the art being presented is above or beneath their social level (Hildy 2009).

Though this zoning practice has been realized to a varying degree of severity, the architectural possibility of segregating the seats into hierarchical zones has been designed into the auditorium. For example what is described as 'social comfort' can be seen to its racist potential in this Jim Crow Era Virginia State law:

Every person...operating...any public hall, theatre, opera house, motion picture show or any place of public entertainment or public assemblage which is attended by both white and colored persons, shall separate the white race and the colored race and shall set apart and designate...certain seats therein to be occupied by white persons and a portion thereof, or certain seats therein, to be occupied by colored persons (*Examples of Jim Crow*).

Though there are no longer laws regulating the occupation of bodies of color in the White Space of the theater, segregation continues to be practiced in ticket prices. Today these prices do not operate along overt colorlines, but their historical residue of racial zoning in the theater remains palpable. .

In the first section of this paper, I described in detail why the audience space is historically and presently a White Space and how the seats are comforting extensions of the white body. So what happens when a body of color attempts to sit in one of these seats zoned for whiteness? The seat itself, and the behaviors prescribed to it act as a barrier. In his 2005 *Dance Spirit*

article on Dance Theater Etiquette, Christopher Rutt lists the top ten rules for respectful dance theater attendance:

1. Keep food, gum and drinks out of the auditorium.
2. Keep feet off the chairs.
3. No flash photography or videotaping.
4. No talking.
5. No cheering or yelling.
6. No littering.
7. No headphones.
8. Keep cell phones and beepers off, not just on a silent setting, even during intermission. Some theater sound systems can be disrupted by in-service cell phones.
9. No hats or big hair — they obstruct the view for others.
10. Go easy on the perfume or cologne, if you must use it at all (Rutt 2005).

Numbers 4, 5, and 9 can be understood to have racial implications. Returning to Dominique Morisseau's theater antidote she shares that once seated, the white woman who gave her the ticket scolds her for laughing, clapping, and engaging in call and response with the performers onstage who were clearly eliciting such participation: 'In the middle of the play's opening, as my friend and I laughed and enjoyed ourselves, Jane leaned in toward me and whispered, "Can you stop and keep it down?"' (Morrisseau 2015). She elaborates on other personal experiences she and her family have endured while attempting to sit comfortably in the seats of the audience:

- That time at a prestigious theatre festival when black women were responding exactly how I want them to respond to my play—loudly and expressively and “ummm hmmm”-ing—and an older white patron approached them at intermission and said: “Can you enjoy the play a little quieter, please? ”
- That time my play was being performed at a Tony -award-winning regional theatre and older white patrons saw me coming to my reserved seat (that they were sitting in), and refused to get up from that seat until an usher assured them that I was the playwright.
- That time my parents were coming to see my first Equity production at a beloved regional theatre, and again, older white patrons refused to believe that the seats they had taken were actually reserved for people that looked like my parents (Morisseau 2015).

For Morisseau this microaggression was not an incident of harmless elitism, 'It is harmful. It further marginalizes audiences of color and tells them they are not fully welcome in the theatre, except by permission of the white audience. It tells the upper-middle-class white audience that theatre is their home first and the rest of us are just guests' (Morisseau 2015). The seats of the theater are not welcoming, or comfortable for the body of color, rather they can insist that this body does not fit.

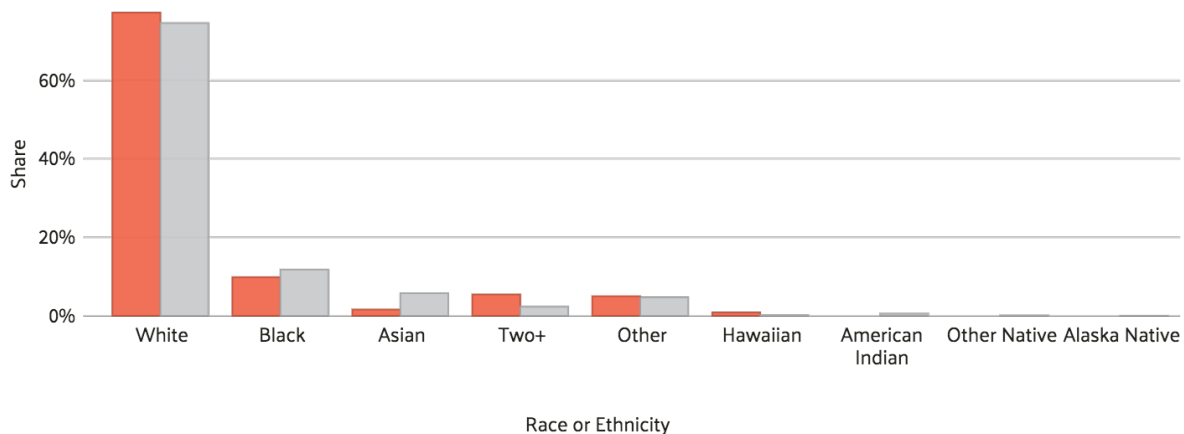
Recalling Lambert's concept that architecture itself does not invent racism, but creates the conditions for its existence, and Ahmed's phenomenology of being stopped, we can see how the homogeneity of seats of the theater calls for a homogeneity of perceived racialized behavior and appearance. Number 9 in Rutt's list of *Dance Theater Etiquette* spells out that big hair, ie an afro, or a hat, ie a head wrap are explicitly not welcome because the architectural sightlines of



the theater only accommodate white hair styles. This type of barrier/zoning is enacted on the very heads of the bodies of color in the White Space of the theater.

One could argue that the split between the audience and performer by the proscenium arch acts as a barrier and a zoning device. However, I also propose Schindler's example of the one-way street as a tactic of architectural exclusion can be applied to the spatial design and experience of the theater in two possible ways. Schindler explains that one-way streets, 'function to funnel traffic away from certain areas and into others' (Schindler 2015). Remembering that 80% of ballet audiences are white, and as we can see in Figure 5 below which compares data from 2015 and 2014 that white people make up close to 80% of total dancers and choreographers in the USA. According to this data an audience member of color is denied access to the one-way channel leading white people to the stage.

## Race & Ethnicity for Dancers & Choreographers



Dataset: ACS PUMS 1-year Estimate  
Source: Census Bureau

DATAUSA:

Figure 5: Data USA

Though we can see in the chart above that people of color do register in the measureable demographics for dancers and choreographers, the dominance of white audience numbers remain constant. Fraught with racist roles of the past or the minority performances and companies of the present, people of color have a historical presence performing on the proscenium stage for white audiences. Recent Broadway sensation, *Hamilton*, portraying the story of US founding father Alexander Hamilton through the music and dance vernacular of hip hop, is made up of a full cast of people color. Though the bodies on the stage were hugely diverse, and the reclaiming of American history through the hip hop genre could have meaningful resonance for an audience of color, an African-American journalist who attended the show noted: 'the performers onstage seemed to make up the majority of brown people in the house the night I went' (Demby 2016). Here, the one-way street is reinscribed, as the theater as a White Space is upheld. Though performers of color may forge their place on the stage, white audiences retain their one way traffic into the sanctum of the theater.

## *Conclusion*

In this essay, I have theorized the ways in which the western concert theater can be analyzed as a White Space by discussing the phenomenology of the white body within the theater, and proposing the physical and social design of the theater function as forms of architectural exclusion. This work of unveiling the unseen impressions of white supremacy within the theater is a critical starting point for understanding the social, historical, and architectural discourse surrounding western concert dance scholarship. We can return to Gramsci's famous declaration: 'The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory.' (Gramsci 628). This engagement at the intersection of Critical Whiteness Studies and Dance Studies attempts to forge a beginning of such an inventory that demands accountability. It is from this place of "knowing ourselves" that our work as white choreographers, scholars, and dance patrons can begin.

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