

Dear WAMily,

In early June 2020, WAM Theatre released [a statement of solidarity](#) with #BlackLivesMatter in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, James Scurlock, and too many others. In that statement, the WAM Team and Board, as individuals and as an organization, committed ourselves to aligning our activist work with the principles of anti-racism. Below we will name the practices and behaviors of which we are now aware that have excluded, exploited, and misrepresented our BIPOC¹ WAMily artists and community members, and we outline the measures we will be taking to repair that harm and to reduce and prevent future harm².

Today, we are writing this open letter to you, our WAMily, to invite you to share this journey with us and to hold us accountable to the principles we set forth below.

Our WAMily is wide and wonderful. It includes all those who work with us as artists and staff; partner with us as community collaborators and beneficiaries; attend our events; and volunteer, donate to, and support our organization in other ways. Our intention is that all members of our WAMily—across race, gender, sexual orientation, location, age, and ability—feel seen, heard, and valued. Today, we speak to all of you.

WAM is a predominantly white professional theatre organization that operates at the crossroads of arts and activism, focusing on intersectional feminism³ and gender equity. We create our art in a rural community, the ancestral homelands of the Mohican Tribe, now known as the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts. While the number of people of color in Berkshire County has grown 76% since 2000,⁴ this population currently forms 8% of our county's total.

As we share our accountability document with you, we acknowledge [We See You, White American Theater](#). Its list of demands, which

¹ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. As theatre artists, we also understand the power of words and how their meaning constantly evolves. The terminology that we are using reflects our anti-racism training and sincere desire for inclusivity and will evolve as our journey continues.

² As per [Nicole Brewer Conscientious Theatre Training](#).

³ The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap. More about her work at <https://www.aapf.org/>. Read her 1989 paper [here](#).

⁴ As per [BRIDGE's IDEA Institute](#)

emerges from years, decades, and generations of harm and trauma, clearly required an immense amount of strength and emotional energy to craft. With humility, we extend gratitude for that work.

We are also grateful to all those from whom we continue to learn, including [Gwendolyn VanSant](#) and [BRIDGE](#), a valued community partner that is vital to our cultural competency learning; [Nicole Brewer](#), an anti-racist theatre consultant who works with our leadership team; Heather Bruegl, Director of Cultural Affairs for the [Stockbridge-Munsee Community](#), who partnered with us in 2020 on *The Thanksgiving Play*; and [Trenda Loftin](#), who serves as our BIPOC Staff Advocate.

WAM's mission remains focused on advocating for the rights of women and girls. But in order to address one form of systematic discrimination or disadvantage, we understand we must address and disrupt them all.

To all of you in our WAMily, thank you for holding us, the WAM Team and Board, accountable as we work to dismantle our [white supremacist culture](#) and become an anti-racist organization.

We are guided in the work by this quote from *Me and White Supremacy* written by Layla F. Saad:⁵

“For real change to happen, you must also challenge systems and work to create structural changes, dismantling white supremacy institutionally as well as personally. It is hard to imagine what a world without white supremacy would be like. A world where BIPOC get to live with the same level of dignity and humanity as white people. And yet we must continue to work toward it. White supremacy is the paradigm we have come to accept as normal. But normal does not make it right. It never has.”

Here's to doing all we can to create the world in which we want to live.

With gratitude,

The WAM [Team](#) and [Board](#).

⁵ Saad, Layla F., *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*, 2020, Sourcebooks, Page 209.

ACCOUNTABILITY

WAM's Accountability Statement

This is a living document. Our work is evolving.
Our journey will proceed at the speed of trust.
Will you join us?

We recognize that, in our first ten years, we have:

- Functioned in, and benefited from, a [white supremacy culture](#)
- Caused harm and trauma to our BIPOC artists through our white supremacy culture
- Not adequately compensated our BIPOC artists for their emotional labor
- Presented, without enough deep care and intention, plays about Black Trauma for the edification and enjoyment of our white audiences
- Dealt with vendors without knowing their commitment to anti-racism
- Cast the majority of plays in our first ten years with white artists
- Presented plays mostly written by white artists
- Worked with all-white design teams
- Worked with all-white crews and stage management teams
- Presented our work to majority white audiences
- Been governed by an all-white board of directors
- Inappropriately featured BIPOC artists to promote diversity in press, promotional, and fundraising materials
- Participated in media interviews and reviews that have harmed BIPOC artists by displaying bias and/or white supremacy culture
- Over multiple seasons, featured plays by white writers on our mainstage and plays by BIPOC artists in our Fresh Takes Reading Series
- Extended hours during technical rehearsals (known in our industry as 10 out of 12s), thus perpetuating unhealthy work environments

We understand that our process of learning and unlearning must be ongoing. We acknowledge that WAM's leadership is responsible for educating itself, and we also know that there are, and will be, areas we have missed. To help us repair past harms and reduce and prevent future harms, **we humbly extend an open, standing invitation to share with us what you have seen or experienced at WAM, or to share ideas or ask questions about what we need to work on.** If you choose to share, we pledge to slow down to listen, to do so with cultural humility and breath, and to move at the speed of trust in our conversations.

We also recognize the concerns inherent in sharing experiences. Therefore, after consultation, we have created a [Google Form](#) where you may express your thoughts and opinions anonymously if you prefer. You are also welcome to contact Kristen van Ginhoven, Producing Artistic Director of WAM Theatre, directly at kristen@wamtheatre.com.

Going forward, our efforts will be focused in three areas. Under each, we list our goals and corresponding efforts to date.

In Leadership and Training, we will:

- Provide ongoing, mandatory anti-racism and cultural competency training for the WAM Team and Board (both individually and as a group practice). The Team dedicates a monthly meeting to anti-racist personal work and professional practices. The Board's next retreat in March 2021 will be devoted to the next phase of this work.
- Maintain a budget line to underwrite consistent initiatives for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. In 2020, this financial commitment enabled WAM's Team and Board to attend [Nicole Brewer's Anti-Racist Theatre](#) training and [BRIDGE's New Pathways Conference](#), as well as employ Tenda Loftin as an anti-racism theatre consultant.
- Actively adjust and transform our traditional board structure to support WAM as an anti-racist organization. The Board's governance committee, led by Wendy Healey, WAM's Board Chair, is researching alternative board models and structures with the goal of implementing the most appropriate option in 2021.
- Actively examine and adjust our beneficiary selection process to ensure we are being transparent, equitable, and of maximum service to our community partners.
- Create a more inclusive company with more BIPOC artists, administrators, and board members over the next five years, so that our leadership might more accurately reflect our community and bring to our stages untold stories about the country in which we live.
- Provide transparency in our Pay Equity hiring and employment practices.

In Productions and Season Planning, we will:

- Never again produce a season that consists solely of all-white artists. Ensure paid opportunities for emerging and experienced BIPOC theatre makers and administrators. In 2020 we offered paid apprenticeships to six young BIPOC theatre artists, commitments we have invested in long-term, with at least two individuals joining our team in 2021. Our 2021 season will focus on BIPOC voices and narratives. Going forward, our artistic and season planning team will include more BIPOC artists as decision makers.
- Hold auditions that are welcoming to all. Toward that end, we pledge to dismantle the power dynamics in which BIPOC artists audition for all-white panels of decision makers. Going forward we will have a BIPOC WAM director/artist/employee present at all auditions.
- Challenge ourselves to recognize, examine, and work to remove any aesthetic limitations born of racist narratives and the worldviews of Western patriarchy. Understanding that the majority of stage roles are not racially specific and may be played by actors of any race, we will have intentional conversations during our casting process as we explore the impact of race in the stories we share.
- Acknowledge the emotional labor of our BIPOC artists who are working at a predominantly white institution. We will listen to them and strive to connect them with local communities and events as they request. In 2020 we hired a BIPOC Staff Advocate, a trained anti-racism consultant, who throughout the rehearsal and production process helps WAM artists and leadership navigate and mediate racialized conflict or challenges. In 2021, we will create a written overview of our anti-racism policies and protocols, including steps that will be taken to address any incidents of harm. Distributed to each rehearsal room, the document will allow production team members to develop additional policies as needed for that particular production.

- Move intentionally toward creating anti-racist spaces throughout WAM's rehearsal and performance process, even within all-white settings, (as may be inevitable given our community's make-up).
- Eliminate extended work hours during technical rehearsals and maintain a five-day rehearsal week to help avoid unrealistic expectations and exploitative practices.
- Invite artists to opt out of audience talkbacks at any time, if they so choose, and hire an individual trained in anti-racism to facilitate talkbacks at all our programming events.
- Continue our practice of beginning each performance with an indigenous land acknowledgement, build relationships with members of Native American Nations, including the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohican Tribe, and amplify their cultural and social justice work to our audiences.

In Audiences and Community Engagement, we will:

- Prioritize the empowerment of the group creation process in WAM's Devised Theatre Ensembles, thus relieving the pressure that results when the endpoint is to perform for an audience (especially when the audience is predominantly white).
- Engage in intentional and honest efforts to establish consistent, meaningful and long-term relationships with our WAMily's BIPOC artists and audience members. Moving towards adding "Black Out" performances⁶ to our schedules.
- Continue to develop equitable and affordable ticket price options.
- Expand our anti-racism training to include our volunteer ushers and provide each front-of-house and back-stage staff member (whether paid or volunteer) with a one-page explanation of WAM's anti-racism policies and expectations.
- Create policies and protocols regarding media accountability. To date, we have supplied journalists with anti-racist talking points so that, for example, they are not asking WAM's BIPOC artists to speak for an entire identity group. Journalists will also receive our one-page explanation of WAM's anti-racism policies and expectations.
- Audit our vendors (e.g., printing house, accountant, graphic designer, insurance provider) over the next three years to assess their commitment to anti-racism policies and practices and invite them to join us as accountability partners in our ongoing anti-racism work.
- Carry on our training with our anti-racism consultants to develop skills to intervene in and disrupt racialized incidents that have the potential to harm artists or audience members during a WAM hosted event.
- Continue to deepen our relationships with our community partners and the Mohican Tribe by placing our art in service to the social justice work already taking place in our communities. We pledge to amplify BIPOC calls for social justice with our voices and on social media.

⁶ In Black Out performances attendance is limited to Black and Brown-identifying individuals and groups to create a rare and special space for audience members in the Berkshires.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Thank you, dear WAMily,
for reading our living document,
for holding us accountable,
and for joining us in our
evolving anti-racism work.



Where Arts & Activism Meet

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