

[Draft]

# WHITE ALLIES

.....peers in a dance improvisation context.....

by Karen Nelson

*No More Business as Usual*

Spring 2018 was when I first learned that being a white ally to people of color means understanding the difficulty, danger and violence that people whose skin is not white struggle and live with day in and day out in spaces led, run and populated by white people.

We were a mixed race group involved in a week-long CI and other improvisation dance workshop led by three white cis-gender women teachers, myself being one of the them. During a scheduled class, a clashing intersectional issue arose that created a need to stop the class, gather in a circle, briefly discuss, and finally clear the space for 10 minutes before resuming the class work with those who wanted to continue.

Out of this event people of color in the group requested time for a POC only space in which to explore their affinity, and have an opportunity to freely practice sounding and moving in the context of a safe, self-identified POC only space.

The people who did not self-identify as POC, mostly white people, also held an affinity space to speak openly about this remedial process. The POC leaders had additionally proposed that the two groups come back together in the evening for a POC + allies Jam, to be guided by members of the POC group.

I can only report on the circle of mostly white people talking together in peer learning mode. We shared, mostly without cross-talk or interruption, how we felt about having affinity groups and racial awareness in general. Some people were extremely happy and supportive for POC to have their own space and time together, while others were sad and confused about it and wanted everyone to stay together. We listened and attempted to learn from the truths that were spoken. We tried not to teach, shame or judge each other or get into cross conversations, and mostly succeeded. Then we entered a movement practice to explore the many resonant sensations.

When the whole group came together for the jam later that evening the POC leaders invited everyone to enter the space, and then re-enter in a ritual way which created an atmosphere of care, respect, honor and sacred space. We sat together to hear and listen to what each person felt was important for ourselves in this work. We committed to a time frame to hold the space together, and then we danced mostly in a CI jam mode. I heard later that the finishing included another circle and a dance party.

### *Fissuring*

In Spring 2019 three of us, two artists of color and myself convened a week long dance improvisation workshop with an intention to offer POC only and + allies spaces and jams as part of the workshop. Most of the participants who came were on board with the racial awareness aspect of our proposal. We separated in the evening, after the first full day of classes together, into the two self-defined groups, expecting to share a POC + allies jam space together on the second evening.

In this process we discovered that a third option would have been useful to have offered in creating safe and brave spaces doing work centered on racial awareness. There are people who don't know how they identify or don't wish to make a choice about where to go. We hadn't screened our participants about that exact question in advance and we weren't prepared for someone to want a third option. This difficulty presented challenges to the whole group, and offered learning opportunities for facilitators, the institution that hosted the workshop, all the participants and in my experience, for the white allies, big time.

The white ally group's work became even more focussed in ensuing days of the workshop. We continued with peer learning, and expanded our questions at the same time as honing to one: What can we do to take on the labor (in this very workshop) of white people teaching other white people about racial awareness? Could we call each other in when we noticed behaviors that we white people did that unintentionally harmed people of color? How could we do all that while flowing along in classes that are mixed race?

One ally brought us hand signals developed by young people they had worked with in their home town. A fist punch to one's own heart was a tool that meant "ouch" or "ouch?" depending if it was making a statement to bring attention to some hurtful words or actions having just happened, or asking the question, did someone just get hurt?

This tool was used in a situation on the final night of our workshop. Several of us dancers who happened to be white had been working with an improvisation score using alternative spaces in the building and ended up entering a dance space where others had been moving. Our practice included using verbal calls out loud effecting the sound space. When we entered the already occupied space a white ally made the signal of the fist to the heart and also sweetly explained out loud that we had interrupted someone's (without naming who's) dance space.

As an offending participant, my first response was to be annoyed and resistant to what the ally might be communicating. My habits of long held views of what is permissible in a dance space suddenly became challenged. I approached my ally to find out for sure if it was a race awareness issue, and she assured me it was. The ally had been witnessing a particular person of color as they were soloing in the space and saw a disruption take place in their being when our entrance intruded loudly into the room. She also spoke to the person privately to confirm that had happened.

I treasure this interruption in my own practice, even as I struggled to realize that my unintended action created a hurt. I was able to process the information, and call a "reverse" to our movement (part of our score) causing us to exit the space, and possibly reversing the whole event for everyone (one can always hope!) After speaking about the situation and realizing the impact of our unintentional intrusion, we re-entered the space silently and continued our score. The ally reported later that the room had resumed its flow and the soloing person appeared to be able to continue in their soloing.

Another example of a tool used is to call the word "pause". This is also a call used in improvisational work known as Tuning Scores, which we were studying and in the habit of using. The moment came up during a class when a cultural stereotype was being expressed in sound and movement by a group of white people, and others of us in different groups could see the impact it had on the body and expression of a person who came from that culture. As a bystander, I heard a person of color quietly ask the effected person how that felt to them. I took that as a cue and called a "pause" to the whole group.

The resolution that occurred out of the 'pause' included collective awareness, caring and healing. All the work we had been doing in our classes and in our affinity groups gave us ground do deal with this hurt together. Invited and prompted by a person of color, the white person apologized to the person of color effected by the incident. The apology expressed regret as well as an understanding as to why the actions were harmful. These words were graciously accepted, and we all rose back to our dance work.

There is for me a growing awareness of what being a white ally means in a dance context that is centering racial awareness. We become allies to people of color in awareness and solidarity with the struggle of centuries of oppression in this country and around the world, and we also become allies to our white friends who are with us in the work.

### *Grace*

August 2019 brought a chance to introduce allies practices in a week-long festival of dance improvisation. While a POC only jam was being held, a group of white allies also held a peer learning meeting. Bringing our learning forward from earlier last Spring, a third space was made available for people who didn't wish to join either of the affinity groups.

Our white ally group met once. Starting as 4 people we grew to 20 after a half-hour. We shared about how we do this work, what we could offer to each other as tools, and what the work meant to us. By the end of that sharing we came up with a score. We danced for 8 minutes invoking our ancestors as a solo practice. Then we spent 22 minutes engaging with others in the room, however our dancing invited us to join or not. After the dancing we came together to speak again.

As I've been involved with studying racial awareness in various contexts for some 7 years now, I was excited that our group came up with a movement score to practice. It was a new development in the work.

Invoking my ancestors, which for me started with close family elders and moved on to imagined and spiritual ones including animals, insects, prior dance images and spirits. When I moved to engage with another person, my first partner was for me, an unnamed embodiment of one of my ancestors. With them, I had a felt first-time experience of dancing with awareness of my white skin as something like a nurturing tribal network.

The practice felt like a grace period, something taking place both before race was invented, and also in this our white ally post-colorblind time of waking up to racial awareness in our lives and communities.

