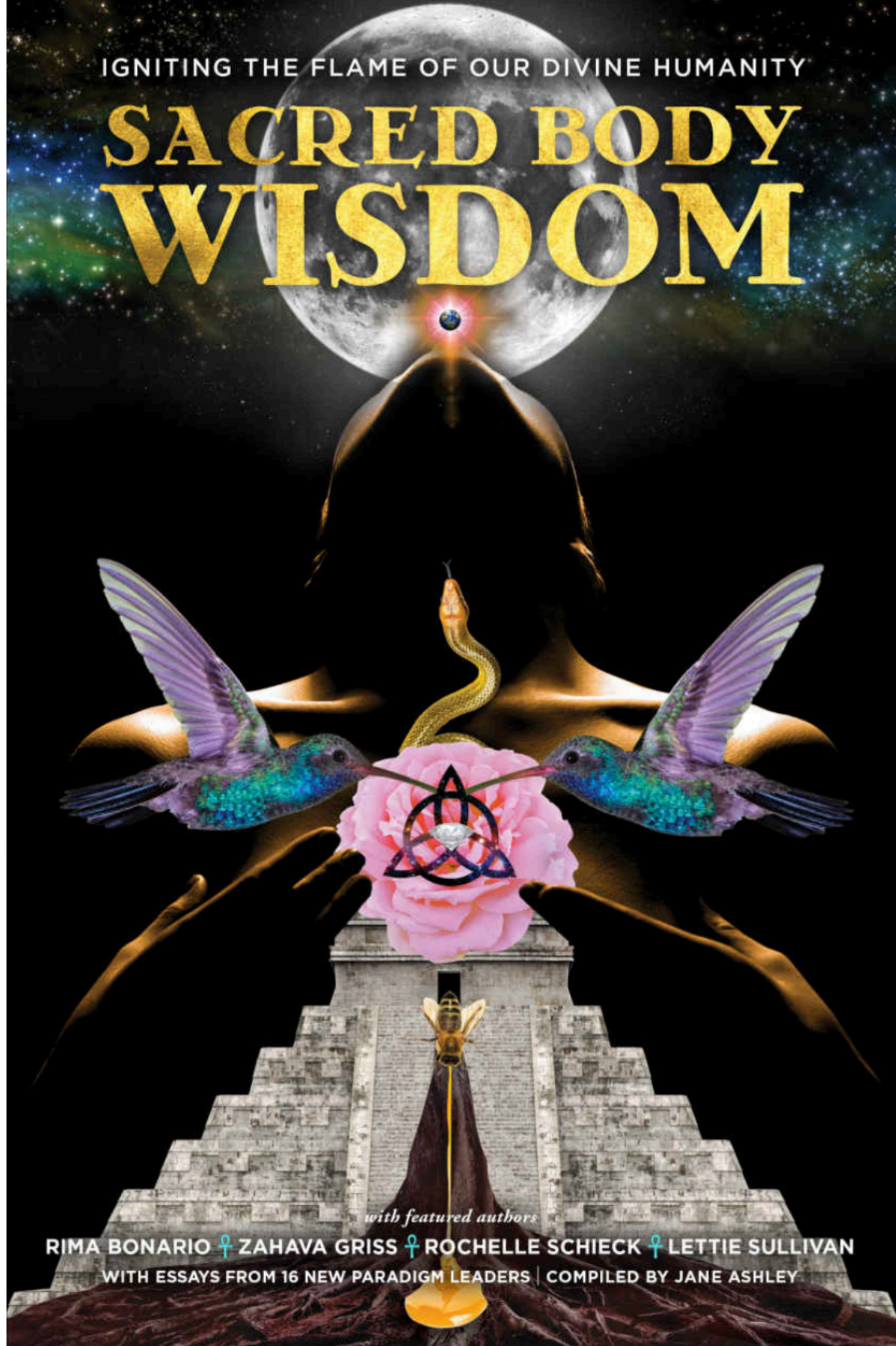


IGNITING THE FLAME OF OUR DIVINE HUMANITY

# SACRED BODY WISDOM



*with featured authors*

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WITH ESSAYS FROM 16 NEW PARADIGM LEADERS | COMPILED BY JANE ASHLEY

# Transforming the Culture of Whiteness in Dance and Sexuality Communities

*By Zahava Griss (Z)*

## HOW INCLUSIVITY MIGHT LOOK IN BODY-CENTERED COMMUNITIES

Imagine you enter a round dance studio in the woods. The sunlight and trees are visible through the enormous windows. 130 people are sitting around the edges of the room, ripe with excitement for the week-long festival ahead of us. You look around and notice that there is no racial majority. There are people of Asian, African, Latin, European, and Native American heritage all gathered in the same space. People's bodies are all different sizes...large curvy bodies...petite muscular bodies...three people are in wheelchairs. One person has ALS, one has cerebral palsy, one has a spinal cord injury. Each of these bodies is in contact with someone. There's a gentle hand on a shoulder of someone, another soft spine nuzzling into a leg of someone in a wheelchair. Each body, no matter it's ability, race, gender, age or size, is connected to the body next to it with the most natural and easeful contact with a few exceptions of people who have asked to not be touched.

There is Mohican music playing as we enter. Most people in the room know it is Mohican music. We know the Mohicans are the People of the Waters that are Never Still who lived on this land before they were removed westward. There is a spirit of deep appreciation for this land and for the people who lived here before us. Our experience of the land is more present as we listen to the music. We notice the baby skunk family running by out the window. We notice the quiet open sound of the woods. We notice the soft wood floor under our bare feet. We notice how precious it is to be on this land in this moment with each other.

We have come together for a festival exploring intimacy, play, and dance. We have come together to acknowledge the emerging expansion of leadership in the U.S. to better include women, trans people, non-binary people, and

people of color. The facilitators who will be guiding us this week are mostly people of color. The few who are white have dismantled whiteness in their own identity and facilitation practice.

We are giddy with excitement as our eyes move across so many loving faces. We are here to PLAY. The people who have been here before are bubbling with joy to reconnect. They are also sharing sweet welcoming gazes to the new eyes in the room. They are grateful to see our community expanding and curious to get to know who is with us this time.

The new people see others in the room who look similar to them. They soften into the kind touch being offered by new friends at their sides. This growing community has come together to practice new ways of building intimacy through dance, kink, and erotic grief rituals to honor our ancestors. We have gathered to create and nourish the partnerships we love. We have gathered to make love through our dances, and to discover new truths about our gender expression. We have gathered to dismantle our beliefs about what relationships are supposed to look like and instead create intentional relationships that honor who we really are.

We have gathered to heal from sexual abuse and past relationships, and to learn from the past. We have come to explore what we LOVE about sex, intimacy, and play! We are here to bring out the joy in each other as we share our desires and receive them. We are here to learn how to voice our intentions, our requests, our hell yes's and our no thank you's. We are here to remind each other that we belong and our truth is a contribution to the community. We are here to explore what a festival of dancers can discover and how we can contribute to the cultural shifts we desire to see in our society around the body, intimacy, and power.

So many parts of the vision I just shared have come from moments that really happened—moments when I noticed, “Oh this is what it feels like to be at a celebration with no racial majority and with so many genres of music and dance! This is what it feels like to co-create the culture of the space together, because there is no ‘dominant’ culture that becomes the norm. This is what it feels like to focus my attention on people I had not been focusing on. This is the felt sensation that what I'm seeing now is a truth I couldn't see before as I turn my attention from my own experience to the experience of others. This is what I notice when I connect with the land and the life growing here. This is what it's like to be part of a group where some people are familiar and some people are not, but we all want to know more about each other.

I'm guessing that if you're reading a book about Sacred Body Wisdom you may be part of a body centered community or you may want to be. Perhaps it's a community that loves dance, yoga, kink, Sufi Dancemeditation, sensual partner dance, play parties, bodywork, or somatic experiencing. These are some of the body centered communities I engage in.

I wrote this chapter because so many of the body centered events and communities I have explored are mostly white people, white leadership, and white culture. What do I mean by white culture? I mean there are certain ways of communicating, an aesthetic of what is valued and acceptable, an unspoken way of framing what being a body is, what "safety" is, what spirit is, what having a body means, what success or beauty means that is familiar to a dominant white culture. There is an often unconscious culture that has been created by those who came before us that does not acknowledge or reflect awareness and respect for people of color, who make up the majority of people on this beautiful earth. While people are often saying they want a more diverse community they haven't yet created a culture shift that supports racial diversity. In 2018, with our current government people are more ready to acknowledge racism is a problem and curious how to make a difference. I wrote this so we could better observe white culture, envision what we want to replace it with, clarify what diversity means to us personally, and take action to create the society we want to live in.

## MY STORY

My parents come from two extremely different cultures. My whole life I've been code switching. My dad is a Jewish New Yorker from a middle-class family that came to the U.S. to escape the Pogroms in Russia and Poland. My mom is an Appalachian woman from Kentucky. She's the first one to go to college in her family who came as indentured servants from the debtors prisons and mental asylums of England to work the coal mines. My parents come from different class, cultural, religious, education, and geographic backgrounds. The only thing they seem to have in common is being white. So I got really curious about whiteness.

My dad was a sociologist studying in Uganda and Nigeria as a student at Princeton. They had a budget cut and sent him to study poverty in Appalachia where he met my mom. I'm the baby of a sociologist and the people he was studying.

I live in the gap between white academia and a culture that is invisible to mainstream America. Raising awareness about white culture is so dear to my heart because it starts to bridge this gap that I live in and so many others live in.

From age two, I was in the dance studio learning how to move my body. I grew up in a dance conservatory culture that felt like a bubble. Our focus on ballet wasn't very relevant to the people outside our community. We would make the shows we wanted to make and hope that people who loved us showed up to watch. My dad would often tell me after watching hours of leaps and turns that he didn't understand how we were making a change in the world. I didn't have an answer for him. I knew I loved dance and I knew I wanted to share my love for it in a way that contributed to society.

By age eleven, I was getting paid to perform with the Joffrey Ballet at the Kennedy Center. I seemed to be on a professional track that was rigorous and prestigious. It was exciting to be supported in my love for dance, but we were doing the Nutcracker. We were memorizing and replicating classical movements without any context for what it meant to us. We didn't really learn much about each other in the process. There wasn't any room for improvisation or even much conversation.

One day when I was training with the Princeton Ballet we had a West African dance class. I remember we all had sore necks for days because we weren't used to letting go in our spine like that. I LOVED it and I wanted more. It was the gateway for me to explore African Diasporic Dance. I was incredibly welcomed into dancing with Urban Bush Women, Katherine Dunham, Ron Brown, Tania Isaac, and Wanjiru Kamuyu. As a teenager into my late twenties I was invited to dance in mostly black spaces, to learn their stories, and to perform their stories on stage and on Black Entertainment Television (BET). This gave me perspective on how culture shapes what dance is, what the body is, and what community is.

I was finally around people who could relate to my experience of living between cultures and who understood the gap between white culture and cultures invisible to mainstream America. I was so relieved to no longer feel alone in this gap. Most of my friendships, romances, and collaborations from age eighteen to thirty-four were with people of color while I was living in New York City. I didn't know how to share what I could see with most of my white friends, but I really wanted to.

I started a dance company called White Folks Soul, By Any Dance

Necessary with three incredible white women who were all doing undoing racism work. We had been working with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond which offered undoing racism workshops. They were really powerful for raising awareness of privilege but they were sitting and talking. We started to partner with them to bring dance into the process. We asked people to dance what breaks their heart and what heals their heart about race. We got vulnerable, we cried, we shook our bodies, we witnessed each other so deeply.

Our dance company visited each other's families and supported each other to see and understand how our parents and our upbringing socialized us to be white. My friendships with these three women became some of my closest relationships and gave me a deeper understanding of the intimacy possible when we question white culture. I still remember when Jesse came with me to Kentucky to meet my extended family and see the house my grandfather built on the side of a mountain. I remember the shame I felt when she saw the poverty of my family and the relief that it was no longer my secret that I came from a part of the white American experience most people never know about.

So many of us who are white in the U.S. don't know our family history or connect to the culture of our ancestors. The more I danced the stories of the African Diaspora the more I wanted to know about my own history and the cultures of my lineage. I didn't really know the dances of my people or who I could learn them from. I started to grieve this missing piece that I didn't even know was missing until I experienced the power of dancing with people who did have a strong embodied cultural lineage.

As I danced with the African Diaspora we were dancing the stories of slavery, the fertility dances to call in new life, the harvest dances to celebrate the earth. These dances connected me to human life in a way that the Nutcracker never did. These dances gave me a way to say thank you to life and a way to be in community. The drummers gave us rhythms that moved us so deeply into a sweat and then eased us into the wisdom of the body that would take over right when I felt too exhausted to keep dancing. My love for life and the power of the rhythm and the connection with the drummers would carry me into a surrendered place. My spine became fluid, my pelvis opened, my eyes brightened, my feet felt so alive on the Earth, my mind was easy and my heart was bursting. My dance community was cheering me on celebrating my soul. It nourished me so deeply and it made me realize how much we were missing this in ballet, in modern dance, in yoga, in white movement spaces. I

thought if dance can perpetuate white culture then it can also transform white culture. I started to teach dance for the purpose of replacing white culture with a culture of inclusivity and wholeness.

Today I'm a dancer, kink educator, and coach. I am the director of *Do Good Things with Power*, a leadership immersion for people transforming our culture around intimacy and power. Most of my clients are dance teachers, yoga teachers, sex educators, kink educators, somatic practitioners, sacred sexuality practitioners, bodyworkers, and performing artists. I support them to lead body wisdom spaces that are inclusive, purposeful, erotically intelligent, and conscious of personal and systemic power dynamics.

My professional training came from certifications in Yoga for Two (prenatal, postnatal, and labor coaching), Pilates, Esalen Massage, Deep Bodywork, Urban Tantra, Coaching from the Academy of Coaching Excellence, 35 years of dance training, and many more teachers who do not live within the realm of certifications and regulated education.

I teach dance, trauma release, and how to access pleasure to anti-racist activists to build their resilience and vitality. I teach sensual yoga and erotic presence practices to cancer survivors and sexual abuse survivors so they can reconnect with their erotic power and have meaningful intimacy. I teach dance communities who want to explore eros how to discover and communicate their erotic desires, gender expression, and power exchanges so they can have more fun and ease creating the relationships they desire. I teach sensual birth dances at midwifery conferences so midwives can support moms to give birth owning their erotic energy as part of their power. I teach entrepreneurs creating social change how to access their passion, vulnerability, and presence through the body so they can lead ventures from their heart.

I collaborated with Deepak Chopra to cross pollinate meditators and activists so we can bridge our personal and social wellness. I teach Naked Yoga so yogis can connect with sensuality and pleasure. I teach Erotic Yoga for Kinky People to acknowledge and consciously play with the power dynamics of the teacher student relationship and to nourish the health of our kink communities.

For fifteen years I guided women to explore the alchemy of sex and spirit through dance so we could have a sense of belonging and ecstasy in our body and our relationships. Then my gender identity expanded beyond woman to gender transcendent and I wrote a chapter in *Queer Magic: Power Beyond Boundaries*. I support many clients who are gender non-conforming, trans, I

kinky, poly, or redesigning their expression of their gender, sexuality, and relationship lifestyle. I teach workshops on race, gender, power exchange, and how to touch your sexy self so we can have more fun and ease loving each other! These are the ways I have found to make dance relevant and to contribute to the society I want to live in.

### **WHITE CULTURE AND SACRED BODY WISDOM**

What does race have to do with sacred body wisdom? Here are some questions to consider:

1. When you think about sacred body wisdom, what image comes to mind?
2. Whose body do you think of?
3. When you remember the last yoga class or dance class or play party you attended, who was guiding it?
4. When you studied health in middle school and high school, were the images in the textbook of white bodies?
5. When you grew up going to health class was your teacher white? Have most of your doctors, dentists, gynecologists (if you have one) been white?

I don't know what your answers are.

However, I do know that many of the people who guided my relationship with my body wisdom as teachers, health care practitioners, and medical models have been white. I also noticed that I hadn't noticed that until I entered a black dance community in high school. The more I started dancing in the African Diasporic dance communities and then later in Senegal the more I noticed how unusually white many body-centered communities are in the U.S.

What is "white culture?" Someone's ethnicity, ancestry, country of origin are all distinctly different than someone's race. Race was invented in the mid 1600s by the elite class in early America in order to divide and conquer the working class so they would not unite around their shared interests. In the beginning white did not include Jews, Irish, or Italians. But over time "white privilege" was extended to these groups to protect against people of color becoming a majority and challenging the systemic power of the ruling class.

The invention of race was designed to interrupt our relationships and segregate people with different experiences. Today many well-intentioned anti-racists are pointing to the problem or calling people out in a way that continues to divide us. Race was designed to create division and until we learn how to build relationships and move forward together as a team, racism is still creating the result it was intended to create. Transforming racism and white culture is a call for us to come back into authentic relationship with each other which includes acknowledging our history.

White culture has impacted all of us in the U.S. I'm not just talking about white people, I'm talking about people of any race who may be living white culture consciously or not. Simply by living in this country created by colonization we are not immune to white culture. No matter how loving we are and how much we might value inclusivity it might be hard to shift white culture until we can observe it. Let's look and see some ways it may show up.

### **HOW WHITE CULTURE SHOWS UP IN BALLET**

I was socialized as a white girl in the U.S. so when I wanted to dance, my family sent me to ballet. From age 2-20, ballet training was central to my life. I'm incredibly grateful for the way ballet gave me a chance to fly, to feel my strength, to express my grace...I had so much energy, ballet gave me a place to harness and direct that energy. It also taught me many things that challenged my humanity—things that are normal occurrences in white culture.

During my "bunhead recovery" I learned that many people recovering from being in the military have had a similar healing process. Whether or not you experienced ballet, some of these may be familiar to you:

1. Your value comes from your ability to follow directions and to look "beautiful."
2. Your beauty and value are defined by being in a skinny, tall, muscular, symmetrical able body, with traditional gender presentation. It's normal for most girls to have anorexia and bulimia given the current standards for weight. I lost my menstrual cycle and fertility due to low body fat when I was training twelve hours a day at the Juilliard School. This is common for ballet dancers and athletes.

3. You are here to perform the director's vision. Your value is determined by your ability to train your body and to be the instrument of the director (or your boss). Your own expression is not valued. In my choreography class at Sarah Lawrence College I asked one of the dancers in my piece if she wanted to show a solo we were working on. The piece was about racism on campus. My dancer was Dominican and the solo was created to explore an emotionally courageous and vulnerable state. I wanted to empower the dancer to choose if this was the moment to share it with the mostly white class. My teacher was white and turned to me and told me, "Don't ask your dancer, tell your dancer what to show."
4. The teacher or director will control how you move, what you wear, and where you put your attention. There is no negotiation or consent process around this power dynamic. It is assumed that you are a *yes* to this hierarchical dynamic simply by being in class.
5. Your value is based on how you compare to others. This is a competition for who can be the best.
6. It is normal to have a class with all white students, a white teacher, and to dance to music composed by (mostly dead male) white people without acknowledging that this is a white space. It is normal to not notice or speak about who is not in the room. This leads to us not noticing or caring about the impact we have on the people who are not in the room with us.
7. While many other cultures dance for healing, for fertility, to connect with the land, to release grief, or to honor ancestors, it is normal for white dancers to make dance performances that have no relationship to our healing, land, ancestors, or current society. I trained at one of the most prestigious dance conservatories in the U.S., Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. My choreography teacher actually told me "Some topics are too controversial to make dances about" when I made a piece about how many dancers were smokers and how the cigarette industries were targeting ballet dancers who hated themselves for being overweight. Beauty and physical virtuosity were celebrated over dances that raised questions about our culture and status quo.
8. It's more important to move and control your body than it is to feel and heal your body. The mind-body relationship parallels a non-consensual master-slave relationship. The mind tends to notice the body to the extent that the body is an obstacle, when it is injured or tight or sick, rather than appreciating how much the body serves us and gives us life!
9. White culture teaches us to be afraid of our sexual power. Our erotic appetite could get us into danger or distract us from having a successful life. In early America black people were hypersexualized and fetishized without consent (like the legendary Sarah Baartman "Hottentot Venus.") On the flip side, white people were desexualized and repressed. A white woman who expressed her erotic desires was often pathologized as having sexual hysteria. Many movement forms including ballet, yoga, and modern dance in the U.S. hide our erotic nature as if sharing it would delegitimize our artistry. I learned clear messages that sexuality should not be part of my dances if I wanted to have a professional career. One of the most talented dancers at our ballet school growing up made it into Juilliard. Shortly after, I heard rumors that she was a drop out and had to become a stripper and she blew her opportunity to "make it." When one of the dance companies I danced for saw my website with sexual empowerment workshops, they disapproved. Many people assumed I was doing sex work and assumed that sex work was something to be ashamed of and could jeopardize my reputation in the professional dance world.
10. If your dance partners touch your pelvic floor or your breasts you should pretend it didn't happen. If you acknowledge that it happened and speak a boundary you could "cause trouble." I was the only one who spoke up in high school when the men in our pas de deux class touched

several of the women. White culture teaches us to not speak about sexuality and that following the directions of the teacher was more important than rocking the boat by speaking up.

Do any of these sound familiar to you? Perhaps you can think of even more that I haven't mentioned.

### HOW WHITE CULTURE SHOWS UP IN SEXUALITY

As a kink educator, play party facilitator, bodyworker, and intimacy coach here are some of the ways I have noticed white culture in sexuality:

1. A lot of tantra teachers do not reference that tantra started as a sociopolitical movement that rejected the caste system in India. Tantra highlighted the power inside us rather than the status assigned to us by our society. This aspect of tantra is still relevant to our society today.
2. Many tantra teachers in the U.S. often do not speak about their own racial identity and how it may impact who's in the room and the way they teach.
3. Many "certified" sexuality programs are led by white people. When I was offering sexual empowerment for anti-racists in the Bay Area, a woman of color told me she could not find a certified training that was run by people of color. Many indigenous practices around sexual empowerment are not recognized yet in our society.
4. Many workshops that teach consent do not point out that consent is cultural. Different cultures have different ways of relating to consent and expressing affection. There is no one right way to do consent.
5. It's normal at a play party for people to share what they would like to get rather than what they would like to contribute to someone. In white culture there is often a focus on pleasure for yourself rather than the pleasure that comes from being generous. I'm not talking about who is giving or receiving touch because you can be in either one of those roles and the pleasure can still be about you. I'm talking about a culture that values generosity and shows up to a play party to be part of a community and contribute to the people you love.
6. White culture focuses on individual gain. At many play parties people consider their personal fantasy. But imagine what becomes possible if we start a party by asking people to share a fantasy for the community! Many people lose attention for the group when their body becomes aroused. In white culture it's normal or even expected that arousal leads to forgetting our impact on others. One of the things I noticed dancing in Dakar, Senegal with the Wolof people was how much the community celebrated the partnerships in it. There was an understanding that partners contribute to community and community supports partnership. We are interconnected no matter how much arousal is present.
7. We are in the #MeToo era where many consent violations are being brought forward. White culture gives people with social rank a sense of entitlement that they can take what they want without consequences. There are many people who have been leaders or in a role of social rank who are only now being held accountable for a history of violating consent.
8. People assume that someone "in power" or in a dominant role cannot be trusted given our history of nonconsensual power dynamics. My definition of kink is "sexual desires, behaviors, and identities that challenge social approval giving you the opportunity to explore your courage, shame, pleasure, and freedom." Conscious kink is an alternative to this history of mistrust and yet most people do not understand kink or are afraid of it. The most popular movie about kink is *50 Shades of Grey* which does not show a healthy power dynamic. Kink gives us the opportunity to replace nonconsensual hierarchy with healthy power dynamics where the leader (or the Dominant) is trustworthy, compassionate, accountable, and committed to the wellbeing of the follower (or the submissive.) The Dominant companions the submissive

through their fears with love while affirming a sense of belonging so the sub can crack through shame. White culture cannot see this opportunity for doing good things with power as a Dominant. It does not see the possibility to replace nonconsensual power dynamics with choice, creativity, intimacy, and shame resilience. Many people who naturally are dominant sexually are afraid to express it or do not learn how to express dominance wisely and constructively.

9. People assume that someone who is sexually submissive must not be powerful. However, surrender is a courageous demonstration that we can trust and be powerful even when we are not in control, which challenges white culture. In conscious kink a submissive cultivates the skills to be responsive, in full choice, self-aware, and enlivened by serving others. A submissive masters the ability to transmute intensity into healing and erotic energy. In white culture a submissive is seen as weak. In an effort to appear strong and independent, many people are afraid to be vulnerable and surrender to someone, thus never exploring this part of their sexuality.

### **YOUR BODY ON WHITE CULTURE**

White culture teaches us that your power does not come from how you contribute to others but how you control others. People often freak out when they feel they are losing control. But the body is not something we can control. The body will age, die, sleep, and heal on its own time. We cannot control what our menstruation or birth or miscarriage will look like. We cannot control our height, our metabolism, our skin color, what turns us on, or which genitals we have (without surgery).

We *can* choose whether or not we accept the truth about our body. We *can* increase our capacity to be present with our body. We *can* shift from *controlling* our body to *contributing* to our body. In these ways, we are transforming the way white culture limits our sacred body wisdom. We are softening and disarmoring to become whole and receptive to our aliveness.

### **WHAT'S POSSIBLE BEYOND WHITE CULTURE?**

White people are a minority in the world and are predicted to be a minority in the U.S. around 2040. Whiteness and humanity are incompatible and we are the ones who have the opportunity to support this transition of leadership to happen in a way that honors our history and restores our wholeness.

In this moment in 2018, as I write this so many embodiment spaces, dance classes, sexuality workshops, and body centered education programs are led by people who have not yet deconstructed white culture for themselves or the spaces they lead. I'm not just talking about white people. Anyone living in a society where white culture is prevalent has likely internalized parts of this thinking. This isn't just about continuing the existing culture of our communities with more colorful faces in the room. This is about transforming white culture, replacing it with a new culture, and supporting each other as a team to live this new culture.

The good news is that we don't have to come up with the answers by ourselves. So many other cultures have wisdom we can learn from around the body, dance, sexuality, nature, and living in community. Many yoga and dance classes frame our relationship with our body as what happens within our own skin. But shifting our relationship with our body is about shifting our culture around us and how we interact with each other! It's connected to our ability to observe white culture so we can replace it. It may be harder for white people to see white culture without exposure to other cultures as a point of reference. Many people of color have more opportunities to be in other cultures such that they can see and interrupt white culture more consistently which better serves us all.

The wisdom and inspiration we receive from other cultures is sacred and we can share it without cultural appropriation by focusing on these things:

1. Building a relationship with the people and the culture we are inspired by.
2. Asking for permission and guidance from people in that culture about how to share what moves us.
3. Crediting the source of where something comes from and the context in which it is traditionally practiced.
4. Learning about our own cultural roots even if they are uncomfortable. This may mean grieving that our family no



longer remembers who we come from. Or they remember but they do not see it as a source of belonging or strength. This grief is sacred and essential for us to feel so we are not impulsively using other cultures to numb this discomfort or fill this hole.

### HOW DO WE TRANSFORM OUR CULTURE?

I want to share with you one of the most inspiring and successful experiences I've had shifting culture and creating inclusivity in a mostly white, hetero, able-bodied, gender conforming dance community. My desire by sharing this is to inspire you to shift the culture of *your* community. And, it takes time. This specific community is one I first met fifteen years ago.

The way I first started to shift the culture was difficult. I felt angry, isolated, and hopeless. I kept focusing on the ignorance of others. Now years later, I'm having so much more fun and success...and I see how important it was that I didn't give up. Just in case you've questioned staying in the game, this is for you. I'm certainly not sharing this because I have it all figured out, because I don't. I'm sharing this because I'm delighting in my community in a way I didn't know how to in the beginning but longed to. It's such a gift to see this not as a burden but as a way to grow with the people I love. These are the words I wish I could have read fifteen years ago when I first arrived in this community and cried because I couldn't express what it meant to me and it seemed nobody else cared. This is what I learned from being the Diversity Outreach and Support person for a festival called Touch&Play.

I started to observe the thoughts that were getting in my way. Some of it sounded like this:

*“They don't care as much as I do. Why don't they understand how important this is? I'm so frustrated I was born as a white person. I shouldn't step into leadership. What can I contribute? I'm white. What if I mess up and the people don't respect me anymore? If I don't get back to the people who gave me critique soon enough they're going to think I don't care and I'm not real. I'm not getting paid enough to do all that it will take. Let's just kick out all the white people in power and start over from scratch. I want to do something but I don't know what to do. It's not going to be enough. I don't think it's really going to change. I tried saying something before and it didn't*

*work. Why would people of color want to come join us anyway?”*

Each time these thoughts would come up, my focus would move away from what's important to me and how I want to contribute. As a result, I would get paralyzed and just stop. I realized I can't shift my focus until I see where my focus already is. So I started to observe when I was focusing on all these thoughts I was sick of thinking. As soon as I could see it, I didn't have to *be* it. I could choose to shift my focus to what was most important to me, what my vision is, what I would love to contribute, and what action to take next.

Martin Luther King said, “I have a dream.” He didn't say, “I have a problem.” Both may have been true, but he demonstrated what it is to see what's possible and to inspire others to see it, too! It's a powerful skill to shift our attention to possibility especially in moments when the here and now isn't working for us. This is a skill I want to nourish in thought leaders like you.

The main question I had to ask myself and ask my community along the way was, “Are you willing to set aside the frustration or resignation around what didn't work in the past in order to focus your attention on what you want to create?” This willingness is what moves us beyond where we have been before and helps us grow.

*Our main medicine is our willingness to be inspired by the vision and to be more interested in the vision than in our frustrations.*

It's essential to learn how to inspire people to join you in this mindset—not in a way that dismisses their frustrations but in a way that demonstrates compassion and presences what's possible, in a way that gets us excited to create it *together*.

First, clarify your own vision of what you want to see happen. What would success look like and what would it mean to you to have it? Share the possibility you see with other organizers and ask for the time and money you want to enjoy making this vision come true! It's important to feel valued and supported by your team. This work takes several hours each week and the income to support it. So if you're joining a team or creating your own budget, look at what you need to thrive. One of the biggest things I learned is that if I'm underpaid or don't have the time to do this work, I don't show up the way I want to show up.

### 9 STEPS TO CREATE INCLUSIVITY IN YOUR COMMUNITY

For each of the 9 steps I will share a **principle in bold** and an *example in italics* from our community. The principles are intended to support you as you come up with the unique vision for your community. The examples are to give you inspiration and possibility. It may or may not look like what we created.

### 1. What's the Shared Vision?

It's so important to create a vision of what success looks like for you and for others in your community, so you can come to a specific shared vision that you all delight in creating together. **Power Loves Precision.** Inclusivity without a specific purpose can lead to a lack of clarity or a weak container. This is the mission statement our team came up with:

*We welcome a diverse community of dancers and somatic visionaries. This is a festival about play, vulnerability, and building community with embodied, emotional, and erotic intelligence. It takes courage, compassion, and consent to play truth or dare with integrity. Sharing one's truth is an act of intimacy. Being daring is about getting outside our comfort zones. If we want something we've never had before, we have to do something we've never done before. This is a space to explore our personal, tribal, and societal desires! What can dance, somatics, tantra, kink, Contact Improvisation, and communication practices contribute to our intimacy? Come ready to cultivate, express, and feel your desires. Let's get compassionate and curious about intimacy, sexuality, consent, emotions, gender, privilege, race, power dynamics, and inclusivity. There's an emerging expansion of leadership in the U.S. to better include women, trans, non gender conforming, and people of color. There's a growing community of people practicing new models of intimacy. We are shifting from an era of sexual abuse to an era of sexual liberation with accountability. What can we, as a festival of dancers, discover and contribute to these cultural shifts?*

### 2. What's the Goal?

**Create something specific, measurable, attainable, relevant to the culture shift you desire, and based in time.** This makes it something you can work on together in physical reality.

*We want our teachers to be 80% poc and nonbinary. We want to only work with white cis teachers who share our vision and values. We want at least 30% of our 140 participants to be people of color, queer, or non gender conforming (ngc) people who are new to our community. We want people returning to our community to see value in expanding our community and to delight in welcoming new people by contributing money and being part of sharing the invitation to new people.*

### 3. Who's Leading Together?

Our focus was specifically to create more racial and gender inclusivity. So we **built a leadership team that reflected the mission.**

*I spent several months researching poc and ngc facilitators who might be a great fit for our festival. I created a database of ninety people by sharing the vision with friends and colleagues and asking for recommendations. I posted on social media. I looked for spaces that I didn't know about yet. I joined facebook groups with poc or ngc intentions and admin to learn about new events and conversations. I attended new poetry and dance performances produced by poc and ngc communities. I looked at the progressive conferences and studios and researched their presenters, wrote to them and shared my vision and asked for recommendations (i.e. Sex Down South, Interfusion Festival, Gibney.) I looked up podcasts by poc and gnc people on sexuality, intimacy, and embodiment.*

**It's important to see who's already leading this work beyond your normal circles and to listen for who inspires you and then, if the inspiration is mutual, invite them to explore the possibility of collaboration.**

This isn't just about finding someone with a specific identity. It's about finding someone who inspires you and who is inspired by you and the opportunity to collaborate. Sometimes that person may be white. What?! **What's most important is to ask them not only how they identify but what their identity means to them and what it means to them to build the specific vision you are inviting them to build with you.**

*For us that looked like asking these questions on the teacher application*

*form: “What is your racial identity? How have you explored this identity? How may that impact the way you facilitate and build a mixed race community? What is your gender identity? How have you explored this identity? How may that impact how you teach and build a mixed gender and gender non-conforming community?”*

It’s important to **be transparent about who the community has included up until now and to ask if they want to be involved and what it would mean to them.** Let them know you want to work with facilitators who would LOVE to be part of this vision. **If it occurs to them as hard work it’s likely not going to be fun to collaborate.** If you’re clear on what inspires you to work together then when things get uncomfortable (as things tend to do when you try things you’ve never done before) you can presence what inspires you.

*For three years in a row we had poc teachers drop out last minute after signing contracts. I got curious about why this kept happening. The poc teachers who did show up were all my friends and beloveds. They had a relationship to someone in the community. They were enrolled in the shared vision. We also had the budget to cover some of their travel costs. For the future I’d love if we could cover all of it! I also have a desire to be able to offer them a guest ticket to bring a loved one.*

**Consider how you can demonstrate that you value their presence at the event.**

#### **4. Money**

Money is energy. When I ask people what they really, really want that they aren’t sure they can have...it’s often something they can’t afford. Money is one of the main ways we stop seeing what’s possible. Many people may see money as the obstacle to joining the community or to manifesting the vision you hold. **Money can be our ally in our mission by giving people a way to demonstrate who and what they value.** Inviting members of the existing community to contribute financially gives you the chance to connect around the shared vision and to not just wish things were different but to take an authentic action that demonstrates what’s important to them. It also

communicates a sense of appreciation and welcome for new people entering the community who receive a scholarship.

**Create a scholarship fund that aligns with your specific mission.**

- *We created a scholarship fund specifically for dancers who:*
- *Are new to Touch&Play and/or new to Earthdance.*
- *Add diversity to our mostly white, hetero, cis-gendered, able-bodied community of American contact improv dancers (by welcoming people of a different race, ethnicity, national origin, gender identity, sexual identity, (dis)ability, or other unique identities we do not know to name.)*
- *Have demonstrated a commitment to exploring building community with embodied, emotional, and erotic intelligence.*
- *Will share their inspiration and wisdom from T&P with your local communities (i.e. educators, practitioners, or facilitators.)*

#### **5. Enrolling the Community in the Vision Before the Event**

What is the existing culture of the community? What do you all love to do together? **Engage the community through what it loves!**

*We started as a contact improv community that loves to connect through dance. Part of the culture of our community is to create a “score”—an improvisational inquiry or guide. For example, a score could be “falling, how many ways can I fall and bow to the Earth?” I created the “inclusivity score” to engage the community in a way that was already familiar. The purpose of the inclusivity score was to deepen relationships specifically around the shared value of inclusivity, to presence the new theme (especially for people who had come in the past who may not be tracking this new intention), to share what we are doing differently so far, and to bring our hearts into the conversation.*

**Engage the community in a heart to heart about what it would mean to them to have more inclusivity in the community.**

*Each person who called shared from their heart what it meant to me to create more inclusivity in their community. It was important to be specific, vulnerable, and truthful. This was not a theoretical conversation. It was essential to take the time and care to listen to what it meant to each person. For some people, the idea of inclusivity was vague or something that the leaders were doing without them, but this “inclusivity score” made it a personal conversation. It created the quality of attention on inclusivity that we would continue at the event. It demonstrated that we were bringing courage, vulnerability, curiosity, creativity, and compassion to this shift. We weren’t making assumptions that we all want the same thing or for the same reason.*

*In some cases we had people who hadn’t thought about it and weren’t interested. This was valuable for us to see now rather than to discover at the event later. It gave us the opportunity to have a conversation about what was important to them and why they wanted to be part of the community so we could look and see if it was aligned for them to join us. It was important not to make them wrong for the reasons they wanted to come and to simply clarify what the event is now and ask if they still want to join. What would it mean to them to be part of the vision we have for inclusivity? Asking and listening is more effective than assuming they want to be part of it or telling them why it should be important to them.*

**Invite them to take specific action that aligns with their desire to create inclusivity. When people see something that’s important to them but they don’t know what to do next they can experience frustration, cynicism, or resignation.<sup>[1]</sup> Giving people specific strategic ways to be in action empowers them to demonstrate what’s important to them and to be part of a team that shares the same intention and willingness to contribute.**

*We gave them 3 specific ways to demonstrate what was important to them.*

1) *Donate to the scholarship fund to support new people to join our community that would add to our diversity.*

2) *We asked, “Who are some of your friends you would love to invite to our event for the first time who are poc, queer, gnc or would bring diversity in another way? Are you willing to call them to invite them??”*

**Be present with them as they brainstorm who they love, that they already have a relationship with, that they would love to be of this event. Ask them if they are willing to commit to invite them and by what date. Consider the timing of the invite will be most powerful if it gives invitees enough lead time to explore the opportunity, apply for a scholarship, and share the invite with their circles.**

3) *We asked if they would call 4 friends this week from our community to have this conversation with them.*

**Focus on inspiring the people who already have friendships to connect with each other around this shared vision for inclusivity. Building a team with people who delight in each other makes it so much more fun. We are a team calling in new people, this is not just about the “leaders” focusing on inclusivity.**

*I offered to email a list of everyone who had been part of our community the past 2 years to make it easy to think about who to contact and to help us track as a community who had already had the conversation. I also gave them a script for the conversation.*

*Some people on the list didn’t want to come back to the event. Those were some of the most valuable conversations. We asked them what would they want future participants to be aware of. It was important to show that whether or not they attended the next event we valued hearing anything they wanted to share about their experience especially things that would help us see things we could not see before. It can be really powerful and healing to have a friend call and have this conversation who is willing to share*

*anything you want back to the organizing team. In some cases we had sweet cries together and it really deepened our friendship or even had them reconsider coming back.*

**Belonging to a community is not just about what happens at the event, it's the way we vision together before the event and how we reflect together after the event. It's important for the budget to cover the time you invest before and after the event in this way.**

## **6. Opening the Event**

**Voice the vision of inclusivity at the opening circle for the event. By now many people are already connected to the vision and naming it in the space affirms the shared value and sets a tone for people who may be new. Ask yourself if you're willing to be grateful, joyous, and loving as you speak the intention of inclusivity in your community. Your way of being impacts the group more than the words you share.**

*"I am willing to be grateful, loving, playful, joyous, and creative," I said to myself before I opened the circle with:*

*"Starting in 1999, I have been in spaces to dismantle oppression. Sometimes as a student, a teacher, a collaborator, an artist, a witness...and I have had moments of struggle, feeling alone, burned out, hopeless, or unable to do enough. I've noticed the magic in spaces that are designed for play, creating art, building relationship, dancing, exploring eros. I've seen how powerful and possible it is to bring our play and creativity to the very things that break our heart. I am weaving a soul family of playmates, a social movement, that has the resilience, the clarity, the ecstasy, the PLAY to transform our lineages and embody love."*

**Ask people to take a moment to reflect on what creating inclusivity in our community means to us now. It's great to have paired shares or small groups. Create the culture of curiosity, love, courage, and play around this together. Bring awareness to not ask poc or gnc to do the work for us.**

*For example in our opening circle I said, "We are exploring inclusivity to be more human, more connected, more clear that we belong here. There are many workshops and containers exploring this during the festival. Be mindful that during our 'free time' or unstructured time together we may want to continue exploring. Take a moment to consider if you talk about it with someone will it put one of you in an 'educator role?' If so, ask if they want to have the conversation so it's consensual and something that builds intimacy rather than feeling like 'work.'"*

## **7. Visibility and Belonging at the Event**

**When people are new to a community how can we support them to feel seen in the way they want to be seen? Not just visible as a new poc or new gnc person, but how can they be visible for who they are, what's important to them, how they want to be welcomed, how they want to contribute? Some people don't like the attention of the whole group and it's more supportive to introduce them to people one on one and share what you love about them. Other people thrive with group attention. Create a way for them to design how they want to be seen like a performance, a story, a panel conversation.**

*I created a panel to explore inclusivity in our community and featured 5 voices who expanded the group awareness around their specific identities. It was also important to feature voices of people who have a skill set to focus on what's possible rather than only focusing on the problem. This way their voices can be part of the inspiration.*

*I chose people of different races, genders, and neurodiversity. I also chose people who were both new to our community and familiar. I chose people who were teachers and who were participants so we could bring awareness to these different experiences.*

**There's often an unspoken social rank that gives more visibility to people based on who's already been here and who's in a leadership position. By choosing people across these spectrums we were intentionally focusing on them because of who they are as a**

**person, and not just their social rank.**

**Gathering in this way gives the community a chance to practice listening around inclusivity and possibility. It also creates visibility for new people and acknowledges and celebrates the successes we've had so far.**

*During our panel several new people said they had never felt so welcomed to a community before. It was so energizing for the community to hear this feedback and build on the momentum.*

### **8. Witnessing Team**

**Create a team of people who are available to support inclusivity. Teachers may or may not have this awareness. The role of this team is to witness the things that have historically been a blind spot in the community so that more people experience being visible. Rather than having poc and gnc people be the ones to point out blind spots in the moment, educate a team to look out and offer support. What do you look for? Ask people who have been and are currently part of the community what they want us to see.**

*During the "inclusivity score" I compiled a list of many things our poc and gnc wanted us to focus on. This way they don't have to be "on duty" during the event because they have trained us for what to look for in advance. During the training it was important to not make people think they should already know this, but to focus on learning it together now.*

*Some examples of what our community brought up:*

- *You don't know what you don't know. Cultural humility is easier than cultural competency.*
- *Privilege separates us and seeing privilege together can bring us back into relationship.*
- *Anger can be a basis for dismissing someone. If someone is angry or upset it does not mean what they are saying isn't valid. Anger can be a wise and useful response that a boundary was crossed. How anger is expressed can be healthy or unhealthy but it's a wisdom response to a*

*boundary being crossed. Let the person you are supporting know they have a right to feel angry. Be mindful that some people may be socialized to feel scared or vulnerable expressing anger.*

### **9. Waters of the Soul: Getting Vulnerable and Wet Together**

The body has sacred wisdom. We cannot heal racism with strategy alone. We must grieve together and embody our love for each other. The body knows how to laugh, cry, orgasm. Each of these is a way to tremble, release, and come home to our truth. Laughter, crying, and orgasm are all ways that our involuntary nervous system reorganizes and we let go of whatever our body was holding on to so we can now be more present, more whole, more connected. This trembling deepens our capacity to be present together during discomfort.

Shifting the culture of our community is not an intellectual thing. As my grief teacher Sobonfu Somé would say, "We are here to finish the unfinished business of our ancestors." This is bigger than us. When we are willing to connect with our lineage, we see how we are supported by those who came before us who give us strength and insight. We also see that we are contributors to those who have come before and who will come after.

Sobonfu would tell us that we breathe with the ancestors, just like trees give us oxygen and we give them carbon dioxide. The ancestors give us strength and perspective and we offer them our grief to acknowledge the truth and our willingness to take authentic actions. The ancestors have sacred wisdom but they don't have a body anymore. That's where we come in! **We have bodies to transform emotion and to take aligned action in the physical world in a way the ancestors no longer can.**

The ritual is mostly without words so attention can focus on sharing presence together (not ideas.) We are being present with each other as each person activates their body wisdom to release.

*I co-lead an Erotic Grief Ritual with Taina Lyons inspired by Sobonfu's grief rituals of the Dagara Tribe in Burkina Faso. Sobonfu's life intention was to bring this wisdom to the west where she felt it was more needed than back home. She died January 14, 2017. I had the honor of being in ritual with her several times and she asked us to share this and to acknowledge its roots.*

*When we asked her about cultural appropriation she said, “If you borrow your neighbor’s pot to cook dinner, enjoy dinner, and tell everyone at the dinner that you borrowed your neighbor’s pot.” It gives me tremendous joy to share her magic through these rituals. I hope that you will one day join us. We have expanded beyond the traditional ritual to include eros. When I first started attending Sobonfu’s grief rituals I would go to play parties at night and discover that my orgasms were the same deep trembling as my grief at the altar. I shared this with Sobonfu and she smiled and said yes.*

Now Sobonfu didn’t bring eros into her rituals but I could tell from this moment we shared that she knew what I knew. Later after her death she came to me and guided me to continue this work in a way that connects to our wholeness (including our eros). She told me to call it “Waters of the Soul.” This has since become the name of my performance ritual and the erotic grief rituals I lead. I would love to share both of these with you and your community.

This ritual is not just about emotional expression, it is about being a village that loves unconditionally. We are still here with you as you release. The rhythm of the drums and the community singing continues for hours sometimes days. It is about being present with each other in a way that communicates “all is well” even as we tremble with grief or eros.

It is a ritual that acknowledges grief doesn’t really happen on the level of the individual, it’s collective. It gives us a chance to feel our personal grief, “I feel disconnected and alone,” and to see the bigger picture, “I’m grieving the ways racism has disconnected us and interrupted our experience of belonging together on this Earth.”

This healing ritual increases our resilience to look, see, tell the truth, and take authentic action that restores our aliveness, our compassion, and ability to live our life’s intentions. Our bodies are nature. Our bodies know how to transform grief, pain, disappointment, and loss into connection, presence, and creativity.

### **What’s Next?**

My wish is to inspire awareness and what it can look like to transform a white culture into a culture that honors the body, eros, and grief as our allies

in being human together. What would you love to contribute to this cultural shift? I offer workshops and coaching to support you to get clear on the contribution you’d love to make, building a team, and staying focused as you take the next small sweet steps. You can learn more about working together at [www.EmbodyMoreLove.com](http://www.EmbodyMoreLove.com).

### **Thank Yous**

Thank you to the many people who supported me in writing this chapter and who have been my allies over the last 19 years of transforming white culture. Thank you to my fellow organizers of Touch&Play, Alyssa Lynes, Béu Tornaghi, Daniel Hayes, and Moti Zelman for supporting this inclusivity work and to the whole community that participated in calls, fundraising, showing up at the panel, and having compassionate conversations. Thank you to the Earthdance Diversity Scholarship team. Thank you to Coaching for Social Change and the Academy for Coaching Excellence including Zo Tobi, Mazin Jamal, and Rachel Fryke. Thank you to the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, Re-Evaluation Counseling, Ruth King, Chelsea Gregory, Sobonfu Somé and to the incredible friends who co-founded our dance company White Folks Soul by Any Dance Necessary, Jesse Phillips-Fein, Alexis Halkovic, and Alyssa Lynes. Thank you Victor Lee Lewis, Anurag Gupta, Teeni Dakini, Nehemoyia Young, Maketa Wilborn, Tamilla Woodard, Will MacAdams and Kaitlin June for co-facilitating spaces to end white supremacy with me over the years. It’s an honor and joy to love with you in this way! Thank you Heather Box for supporting me to tell my story in a way that helped me know myself and my role more deeply. Thank you Rha Goddess for being a spiritual guide in my soul work. Thank you to more people than I can name and especially to YOU for reading this.



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Z directed Spiritual Nourishment for Conscious Activism in collaboration with Deepak Chopra and has been listening to, speaking in, and facilitating spaces to transform white privilege since 1999, including work with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Sarah Lawrence College, the Re-Evaluating Counseling community, and the national White Privilege Conference.

Z currently directs Do Good Things with Power, a leadership immersion for facilitators who are transforming our culture of intimacy. Z has been touring workshops, erotic grief rituals, and dance performances across the U.S. and Europe. Learn more and join the newsletter for upcoming events at [www.EmbodMoreLove.com](http://www.EmbodMoreLove.com).

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