

## E|MERGING

A letter addressing racism and instigating change at Earthdance

### Introduction

**Earthdance** is an artist-run workshop, residency, and retreat center located in Western Massachusetts. Each February since 2010, Earthdance has hosted **E|MERGE:**

**Interdisciplinary Collaborative Residency.** This two-week residency encourages “risk taking and the interchange of ideas by exploring and challenging modes of creation and collective decision-making.” Coming from different disciplines, most of us in E|MERGE 2016 were drawn to Earthdance and to E|MERGE out of a desire to be in an environment where we could collectively and individually express ourselves and also create new work through engaged collaboration.

During E|MERGE 2016, there was a moment when one of the white participants used a racial epithet in a creative context, and it brought to focus accumulated hurtful incidences experienced by a number of people of color over the previous 12 days of cohabitation at Earthdance. In the days that followed, the usual schedule and project focus of E|MERGE shifted dramatically. Groups met to discuss, debate, and reflect.

Each person responded in a different way; many meetings ended without resolve. There were tears, anger, fear, resentment, and regret. There was also opening, listening, and adjustment of perspectives.

The events made evident that no one is a bystander to racial oppression; the oppression of one affects all. As white-identified artists in white-dominant spaces who believe in racial equality, we must learn to contend with the emotions that accompany recognition of racism while also learning and applying strategies for real structural change.



E|MERGE Residency 2016 at Earthdance, Plainfield, MA, March 2016.

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We presented the following letter to Earthdance as the tangible outcome of our effort to address the perpetuation of oppression in this organization. It was composed by white participants and undersigned by a small, multiracial group of E|MERGE participants. This letter urges people in the Earthdance community to engage in a dedicated long-term process toward personal responsibility, proactive organization, and compassionate action when conflict arises. By publishing this letter in *CQ*, we hope to inspire more direct involvement and action in other somatic and arts-based communities. As we begin to recognize the embodied histories of oppression and privilege that exist and construct new language and methods of support, we can enable one another to be more fully awake in the midst of this struggle.

Janna Meiring and Paul Rogé  
E|MERGE 2016 Participants



## Letter to Earthdance (abridged)

Date: March 14, 2016

Subject: Anti-Racist Agenda at Earthdance

Dear Sarah Young (Earthdance Executive Director)  
and Mark Messer (Earthdance Operations Manager),

This letter is written by members of the 2016 E|MERGE Residency who stand with the people of color (POC) in our cohort who experienced racist behavior during the residency. The focus of this letter on racism is by no means intended to ignore other "isms" that exist, including sexism and ableism. We encourage Earthdance to clearly state its position on racism (and other "isms"), schedule ongoing trainings for staff members, and implement guidelines for how such issues are addressed.

The POC at E|MERGE provided insight into what they would need to feel safe at Earthdance so that they might choose to return in the future. Their suggestions:

1. A statement by Earthdance and E|MERGE of zero tolerance toward racist behavior.
2. A clear understanding of how issues that arise are handled (e.g., a mediation process).
3. A statement from Earthdance/E|MERGE that recognizes the contributions made by people of color, and expresses its commitment to creating a space where all individuals feel welcome, if they choose to participate.

We support the suggestions above. Commitments and clearly stated positions make space for personal and political change.

In addition, we have reviewed the Strategic Plan for Earthdance, including its vision statement. We highlight the following language:

- Under VISION, there is a commitment to being vibrant, curious, and equitable.
- Under VALUES, there is a commitment to participation across social difference.
- Under CULTURAL EXCHANGE, there is a commitment to inclusive and pluralistic community.
- Under SOCIAL JUSTICE, there is a commitment to nonviolence and social justice.
- The term "zero tolerance" is not included.

What follows are suggested changes to the language used in the vision statement that would help communicate Earthdance's position on racism (and other "isms"). Please note that we reached no universal agreement on these points but are comfortable collectively putting them forward.

1. We suggest a PERSONAL SAFETY AND WELL-BEING section, with guidelines for how Earthdance is committed to protecting physical and emotional safety.
2. We suggest that the SOCIAL JUSTICE section include language such as "a willingness to understand injustice within our own community and to identify, recognize, and seek to change it." This section could include language on proactive inclusivity, such as: "Our communities are actively fighting to dismantle racism. We seek a world free of racism, where everyone is seen and treated as equals and with the utmost respect." [The original letter offers examples of anti-racist language, including from the employee handbook of a New York-based dance organization that states that it maintains "zero tolerance" of harassment.]
3. We suggest an EQUITY section, with information about how equity is being pursued, including resources and go-to people when issues arise. Guidelines are needed for a proactive, clear, and swift response when core values are violated, compromised, or questioned. Documentation of incidences is also recommended for future reference.
4. Finally, we suggest that guests, including E|MERGE participants, sign a pledge when arriving at Earthdance agreeing to uphold these values.

The undersigned request that Earthdance continue to give attention to the issues raised during the E|MERGE Residency. We acknowledge that this work could not and did not conclude with the end of our shared time at Earthdance. We have a continued interest in contributing to this process.

With many thanks for your attention to these concerns,

**[SIGNED BY 12 of the 30 PARTICIPANTS  
FROM E|MERGE 2016]**

## What Now? A Response from Earthdance

As Executive Director of Earthdance since 2013, it has been sobering to recognize that despite ongoing efforts and intentions to be an inclusive community, people of color have not felt supported and welcome at Earthdance. The disillusionment reveals the necessity of increased action and sustained collective effort to dismantle embodied and institutionalized racism in the organization.

I was humbled by the grace and strength with which many involved in E|MERGE 2016, including residency participants and members of the wider Earthdance network, held a tenacious willingness to stay with the difficulty and uncertainty of the experience. At any given moment, we were in the midst of a total failure and an exceptional moment to bring awareness, compassion, and action to reckon with inequity.

What was exposed during E|MERGE—as well as before and since—will continue to transform into more informed ways of thinking, being, and doing that are proactive in the face of difference and inequality. Earthdance has renewed efforts in coalition-building toward racial justice. We're developing anti-oppression trainings as a board and staff. We are committing to “calling in” one another to shift our actions away from those that perpetuate inequality, and choosing behaviors, practices, and programming that contribute to human connections that are equitable and just.

I commit to trying, failing, learning, and then trying again to realize Earthdance's Vision and Values in regard to racial and social justice. Earthdance already has the agency, resources, and heart to make a meaningful impact. I encourage others to help hold us accountable and to collaborate with us in building and sustaining organizations free of racism.

Sincerely,  
Sarah Young  
Executive Director  
Earthdance Creative Living Project  
Plainfield, MA  
sarah@earthdance.net

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