

A Statement in Solidarity with Emily Johnson & Our Calls to Action

INTRODUCTION

This statement is written collectively by arts workers in solidarity with Emily Johnson, in relation to her Open Letter published in Medium on January 22, 2021 entitled, [A Letter I Hope in the Future, Doesn't Need to Be Written](#), detailing her experience as a Yup'ik womxn and artist with Jedediah Wheeler, Executive Director of Arts and Cultural Programming at Montclair State University (MSU) and its Peak Performances series.

This statement is directed to the following specific people at MSU: Susan Cole, President, and her successor; and Dan Gurskis, Dean of College of the Arts. And it is an invitation to the general public, higher education and cultural institutions and the broader performing arts field to consider the calls for action listed below.

We understand that power functions through institutions and in this case, we are witnessing the abuse of power by both institutions and individuals. This abuse was first revealed by Emily's Open Letter and has been exacerbated by a series of institutional wrongs including MSU's [response](#). MSU's response is an expression of settler colonialism. It is not an outlier. We cannot stand by while it continues.

Signing this letter calls for 1) solidarity with artist Emily Johnson, in response to unethical, oppressive behavior defended by Montclair State University and Peak Performances, and 2) accountability from higher education and cultural institutions and the broader performing arts field to dismantle the oppressive colonial and racist systems that continue to hurt all of us.

MSU and Peak Performances are examples of field-wide problems. Your signature will help engage collective action toward recognition and repair.

STATEMENT

We begin in the same spirit as Emily's Open Letter: we all hope for a future in which this statement does not need to be written. However, we do need to write it because MSU recently published a statement in defense of Jedediah Wheeler that misrepresents the circumstances of Emily's engagement with Peak Performances, and which is itself constitutive of white supremacist culture. The MSU statement fails to live up to its [own mission](#); their statement does not promote "tolerance and openness in the exploration of ideas." MSU and Peak Performances have not, in this instance, been a place "to cultivate the ability to think critically, to act ethically, and to become informed citizen-participants."

A [solidarity statement written and signed by performing arts presenters](#) supports Emily and her long standing work with cultural institutions to enter a process of decolonization. We encourage you to read it.

It is clear to us, that as Emily shared in her open letter, "[decolonization is not a metaphor](#)." This is a concept of Unangaꝥ writer, activist and academic Eve Tuck and settler scholar K. Wayne Yang. The signatories call on all of us, and specifically higher education and cultural institutions, and the broader performing arts field, to an ongoing commitment to decolonization as a forever process. The labor of decolonization should not further burden Indigenous and Black arts workers. This is settlers' labor — but on Indigenous and Black peoples' terms — in service of building safety and support in both material and immaterial resources for Indigenous and Black arts workers and communities.

The injustices that Emily describes in her Open Letter are violent and oppressive, but they are not isolated. Rather than empty pledges of diversity, we are calling for MSU and Peak Performances to take concrete steps toward solidarity, anti-racist action and education, reparations to Black and Indigenous peoples, and an ongoing engagement with decolonization as a material process of returning land and resources to the people from whom it was stolen.

We are writing in solidarity with Emily, in response to a specific abuse of power, to foreground the need to dismantle the oppressive colonial and racist systems that continue to hurt all of us. To quote Emily, we are “publishing so that we — arts workers, audiences, presenters, funders, and a broader public — can build processes and relationships forward that are equitable, justice-centered and decolonized, rather than stay in systems and experiences that perpetuate violence and extraction.”

Our Call to Action addresses three parts: 1) The Public, 2) MSU/Peak Performances, and 3) The Broader Performing Arts Field

In all of these calls, we also call on ourselves to be active participants for meaningful change. We are all implicated.

1) A CALL TO ACTION: THE PUBLIC

We invite all of us to consider our participation with Peak Performances, until we each self-determine if and when sufficient reparative action has been taken.

Possible actions include:

- not patronize or attend performances or activities
- not partner with or fund Peak Performances
- if you are in contract or negotiations with Peak Performances, invite open conversation with them about MSU's response and Peak Performances' actions in relation to Emily Johnson's Open Letter
- If you have been harmed by Peak Performances or any other institution, you can share your own story (anonymously if you fear retaliation) on social media using the following hashtags: #NoMoreHarm #NoMoreHarmMSU #NoMoreHarmPeak

We support individuals making their own decisions about how to best be in solidarity. We do not wish for any artist, staff or faculty member, or student at the university to be harmed. We are not asking for any particular individual to engage in any particular action. We are in allegiance with you. We recognize that we all have varying relationships to seeking safety and security while acknowledging and recognizing privilege. It is of the utmost importance that people make their own decisions freely about how to best be in relation to this call to action.

2) A CALL TO ACTION: MSU/Peak Performances

It is not just MSU and Peak Performances; all higher education and cultural institutions have work to do.

We acknowledge our own failings. This statement is an opportunity to commit to the work ourselves. We see this specific incident as a catalyst to embrace field-wide change.

In Solidarity with Emily's Open Letter, we call for:

1. MSU to publicly apologize to Emily Johnson for the abuse she was subjected to, and Peak Performances for engaging her labor without full payment or a completed signed contract;
2. MSU/Peak Performances to provide Emily Johnson the full \$100,000 commission fee promised;
3. MSU/Peak Performances to commit to adopt a living Land Acknowledgement statement ("living" as in unfixed and in constant draft), to be built in relation with the Lenape diaspora and the Land Acknowledgement subcommittee of the Faculty Senate, and be actionable toward equitable relationships with the Indigenous peoples to whom the land in Montclair belongs.
4. MSU and its Colleges and Departments to commit to follow the lead of their Land Acknowledgement subcommittee and support their processes and defer to their leadership in developing relationships with local and diasporic Lenape peoples, as well as other First Nations individuals, community, and leadership. We understand these conversations need to be guided by relationships and that this takes time and must be done with deep care.
5. MSU and Peak Performances to commit and follow through with anti-racist and decolonial processes and training.

Possible actions include:

- a thorough self-assessment of how organizational protocols and workplace culture uphold white supremacy;
- staff cultural competency trainings with Indigenous leaders;
- adding First Nations / Indigenous representation to board, partnership councils, and staff;
- hiring and supporting Black, Indigenous, and faculty, staff and curators of color;
- engaging the work of Indigenous artists each season in conversation with their Black, Indigenous, students of color;
- providing full scholarships for Black, Indigenous, students of color;
- creating equitable relationships with the local Indigenous community and in Lenapehoking, specific pathways that address and make reparations for the current and forced displacement of Lenape peoples;
- setting up a reparations plan with Indigenous and Black peoples;
- setting up a real rent fund with Indigenous peoples; and
- as a [public land grant university](#), MSU needs to return public lands to Indigenous peoples through [Land Back](#) processes.

We recognize that these processes require deep time, economic and emotional investment. It is a forever process. As a [Hispanic-serving institution](#) where the [majority of the student body is Black, Indigenous, people of color](#), and where "student tuition and fees account for approximately 77% of the University's total revenue budget," MSU should be in conversations with its own students, and address their needs within these processes.

In Solidarity with People within MSU, we call for:

In solidarity with the public and anonymously shared grief by MSU and Peak Performances staff members, faculty and students, past and present, we're calling for accountability in the following ways:

1. An independent, third-party inquiry of MSU's relationship with Emily Johnson to be undertaken via an Equity Audit or equivalent. That this be done in a transparent and timely manner and the conclusions be made public. That all those involved in this and any related incidents be contacted and interviewed. We echo the [solidarity statement](#) written by university faculty and staff to speak on behalf of the campus community, with initial signatures from the Land Acknowledgement subcommittee of the Faculty Senate and the Office for Social Justice and Diversity at MSU.
2. Suspension of Jedediah Wheeler until an independent, third-party inquiry into his behavior with staff, former staff, students, and artists is conducted. That this be done in a transparent and timely manner and the conclusions be made public. That all those involved in this and any related incidents be contacted and interviewed. Those wishing to file an official complaint with the Office of Opportunity/Affirmative Action and Diversity can [follow this link](#). If upon conclusion of this inquiry, Wheeler is removed from his position, that position should be filled by an Indigenous, Black, and/or Latinx presenter.
3. An independent, third-party inquiry into any prior complaints within Peak Performances concerning the conduct of Executive Director Jedediah Wheeler and the adequacy of MSU's response to them.
4. For Peak Performances to create a five-year strategic plan to address immediate and long-term goals with staff and key community collaborators. This plan should include surveying all stakeholders — students, staff, artists, and community members — on current practice and gaps as it relates to mission and commitment of intent, creation of and commitment to a public land acknowledgement, a plan for addressing staff demographics, as well as an analysis of how resources are currently spent. It should include a timeline with deadlines and made available to the public for the sake of accountability and transparency.

3) A CALL TO ACTION: THE BROADER PERFORMING ARTS FIELD

The list below is not exhaustive of the changes that need to be made in the broader performing arts field. This list is specific to Emily's experience with Peak Performances and which, we know, are not isolated.

1. Emily's Open Letter was addressed to The NEA but the following can be applied to many funding/presenter relationships. The NEA currently has no clear avenue for recourse when an individual artist, whose work is meant to be supported with grants from the NEA, is met with unethical and harmful situations with the presenter or institution who is granted the funds. This must change. The artist should not be penalized for the wrongs of the institution. The artist should be entitled to those funds when they break with the harmful institution. This means that the NEA should clarify jurisdictional authority, including who has decision making power over funds. It should also clarify procedural issues such as how complaints and grievances can be addressed in a transparent, timely, and material way.
2. Transparency in the funding process. Artists should know when their name and work is being utilized by organizations to seek funding, and what those numbers are, and how those funds are being used.
3. No labor (residencies, performances, classes) without a contract. Contracts must include payment details, schedule outline, and exclusivity clauses. Exclusivity will not be honored until contracts are duly signed.

4. Separate agreements for planning fees to artists to negotiate contracts. Planning agreements ensure everyone is at the table in good faith, and when negotiations stretch for months or do not come to fruition, artists are still compensated.
5. When engagements are postponed or cancelled, the cancellation or postponement must be done in writing, noting said loss of funds so that the artist can apply for relief.

IN CLOSING

We call for accountability. We call for care. We call for a deep investment from our institutions, our universities, our theaters, and our funders. It will take all of us supporting each other, creating ways to be in solidarity. The calls to action above are robust precisely because the problems are daunting. Still, that must not stop us from pursuing the work that **must be done**.

We end, as we began, with a quote from [Emily's Open letter](#): "We are powerful together, powerful enough to change the racist, unjust, inequitable and harm inducing systems and power structures in the performing arts world and the world at large."

We, the undersigned, are hopeful for a just future: where institutions enact accountability for harms done; where collective solidarity is a field-wide mandate; and where decolonization is no longer just a metaphor.

Blessings,

Alexis Convento	<i>Producer & Curator, the CURRENT SESSIONS</i>
Ali Rosa-Salas	<i>Curator, Abrons Arts Center</i>
Alicia ayo Ohs	<i>Artist + Activist</i>
Angie Pittman	<i>Artist</i>
Anna Martine Whitehead	<i>Artist and Performance-Maker, School of the Art Institute of Chicago</i>
Annalisa Dias	<i>Groundwater Arts</i>
Anthony Hudson	<i>Independent performing artist, writer, & community film programmer, Hollywood Theatre</i>
Anthony Sims	<i>Performer, Artist, Director, School of the Art Institute of Chicago</i>
Antuan Byers	<i>Dancer, Creative Entrepreneur, Arts Advocate, Black Dance Change Makers</i>
Benedict Nguyen	<i>Freelance Dancer, Writer, Administrator, and Curator (#softbods)</i>
Benjamin Akio Kimitich	<i>Artist and Producer, Independent, also affiliated with Danspace Project</i>
Candace Thompson-Zachery	<i>Dancer, Choreographer, Director, Administrator, Dance Caribbean COLLECTIVE</i>
Cannupa Hanska Luger	<i>Artist, STTLMNT.org</i>
Carlos Motta	<i>Artist</i>
Crystal Wei	<i>Arts Admin, Mount Tremper Arts</i>
David King	<i>Actor, Director, Curator, Facilitator, Arts-in-education Administrator</i>
Deborah Goffe	<i>dance maker, educator, and performance curator, Hampshire College/Scapegoat Garden</i>
devynn emory	<i>Indigenous Choreographer and Performer</i>
Edgar Miramontes	<i>Deputy Executive Director & Curator, REDCAT</i>
Edisa Weeks	<i>Choreographer / Educator / Maker, DELIRIOUS Dances / Queens College</i>
Elisa Harkins	<i>Artist, Composer, Curator, 6 Moon Indigenous Concert Series</i>
Eva Yaa Asantewaa	<i>Writer/Curator/Editor -- Senior Director of Artist Development and Curation; Editorial Director, Gibney</i>
George Emilio Sanchez	<i>Performance Artist, Abrons Arts Center/Brooklyn Arts Exchange</i>

Ishmael Houston-Jones	Board Chair, Movement Research; Choreographer, Author, Curator
IV Castellanos	Performance artist and sculptor, Director of a performance space, curator, panelist, freelance performer and laborer
Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste	Artist
Jonathan González	Artist
Joseph M. Pierce	Writer and Independent Curator, Associate Professor, Stony Brook University
Joy-Marie Thompson	Performer, Choreographer, Dance Artists' National Collective
Joyce Rosario	Curator
Julie Tolentino	Interdisciplinary Artist: Movement-based Installation & Performance
jumatatu m. poe	artist, performer, independent arts administration and production
Larissa Velez-Jackson	Artistic Director, Independent Choreographer, Interdisciplinary Artist, Movement Educator, LVJ Performance Co.
Leslie Cuyjet	choreographer, performer, dance artist
Lu Yim	Artist, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art
Maria Bauman-Morales	Choreographer & Community Organizer; Co-founder, Artists Co-creating Real Equity (ACRE) Artistic Director, MBDance, Core Trainer, People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB)
Mariana Valencia	Choreographer and Performer
Martita Abril	Performer, Choreographer, Organizer, Arts Admin, and Teaching Artist
mayfield brooks	Freelance choreographer, dancer, performer
Michael Sakamoto	Dance theater artist, photo/media artist, educator, scholar, curator, arts manager, UMass Amherst Fine Arts Center
Miguel Gutierrez	I make shows, Princeton University
Ms. Shawn Rene Graham	Arts Administrator/Dramaturg, The Field/The Classical Theatre of Harlem
Nelida Tirado	Artistic Director/ Artist/ Teacher at Nelida Tirado Flamenco
Nicole Wallace	Managing Director of The Poetry Project, Poet, Archivist
Nora Alami	Independent Arts Project Manager + Dance Artist
Okwui Okpokwasili	Multidisciplinary Artist
Patrick Jaojoco	Director of Programs, writer, curator, FABnyc
Peggy Cheng	Arts Administrator; Performer
Raja Feather Kelly	Artist
Remi Harris	Freelance performer, performance curator, programs manager
Rika Iino	Producer, Manager
Rosana Cabán	Educator, Columbia University
Roya Amirsoleymani	Artistic Director & Curator, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art
Seta Morton	Associate Curator at Danspace Project, Arts admin, Artist/Writer
Stanlyn Brevé	Program Director, National Performance Network
Stephanie Acosta	Interdisciplinary Artist, Director, Dramaturge
Tara Sheena	Freelance Dancer and Independent Manager for Performing Artists
Yanira Castro	Artist, a canary torsi
yoshiko chuma	Artistic Director of The School of Hard Knocks, Conceptual artist, Activist, Choreographer, Director, Mentor, Dancer, Actor, Visual artist
zavé martohardjono	Performance & Dance Artist, Filmmaker, Poet