

GASPING

ORGANIZING TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS



1/31/21

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW	3
GRATITUDE AND CREDITING	3
INTENDED AUDIENCE	3
PARTNERS	4
ON CASTING YOUNG PEOPLE	6
MONEY & FUNDRAISING	7
ON SUPPORT FROM OUR TEAM	7
STRUCTURE	8
MASK & DOLLS	9
A NOTE ON SAFETY / PUBLICITY	9
PARTICIPATORY ART PROJECT	10
A FINAL NOTE	10
<u>APPENDIX</u>	
POST-PLAY WORKSHOP OUTLINE	11

Mask of *Gasp*ing Whiteness by Angela Davis Johnson

O V E R V I E W

Gasping explores white supremacy, parenting, and silence in progressive, middle class communities. The play and workshop were created as a labor of love and resistance in multi-racial, cross-generational partnership between 2016 and 2020. This process included collaborations with over 100 ensemble members, organizing groups, and accountability partners, many of whom participated in the 2019 community tour. Part play readings, part community dialogues, and part fundraisers, these events were presented in homes and community spaces throughout New England and New York. The tour engaged over 1000 people in dialogues about white supremacy and help raised over \$20,000 for the Black, Indigenous & people of color-led, multi-racial, cross-class movement for racial justice. The notes, below, describe best practices developed over the course of this tour as well as additional notes to support on-line readings.

G R A T I T U D E A N D C R E D I T I N G

As noted above, a large number of people participated in *Gasping* workshops, readings, post-play discussions, and community conversations. Their ideas, provocations, and support made the play possible.

A number of people were directly involved as performers, designers, and members of the contributing ensemble. For crediting purposes, a full list of these individuals will be provided to communities who present the play.

I N T E N D E D A U D I E N C E

Although the intended audience was specific, people from many identities and backgrounds have found this play useful: white parents of many genders; people of color who have been relieved to see white people demanding reckoning of each other and who have also found it a useful way to reflect on their own internalized white supremacy; children and youth; theater artists who are looking to engage more deliberately with organizing work; and many others.

That said, after many years of writing plays for diverse audiences, the playwright wrote this play specifically to invite white, progressive, middle class families - and particularly white men - into grounded, heart-centered, accountable conversations about power, privilege, and liberation. It is not intended to speak to the complexity of experiences within poor or working class white communities or to the many complex, intersectional experiences of people of color. In short, this play is a tool and we know that, for systemic change to occur, it takes many tools, many voices, and many points of pressure. We hope that this play can serve as one small part of this larger movement.

PARTNERS

Forming a partnership

Performances of *Gasp*ing can be shared for free, provided that the proceeds benefit the Black, Indigenous & people of color-led, multi-racial, cross-class movement for racial justice. Our dream is that this work will benefit small, local groups, in particular groups who are placing arts and culture at the center of their practice). We are particularly hoping that the work can support groups who may not have access to mainstream funding streams and/or groups for whom a relatively small amount of support will be impactful (they do not need to be 501(c) 3 groups). The 2019 tour supported work in Indigenous performance as well as racial justice work in the areas of parental incarceration, community dialogue-building, early childcare, educational justice, and more. They included:

- BRIDGE (Lee, Massachusetts)
- CTCORE Organize Now! (New Haven, CT)
- First Nations Dialogues (New York, NY)
- The Root Social Justice Center (Brattleboro, VT)
- Sisters Unchained (Boston, MA)
- Sow Well Tots (Bernardston, MA)
- Students for Educational Justice (New Haven, CT)
- The Reparations Campaign of Western MA SURJ

Although it is not always possible, we recommend you partner with groups that you know and/or with whom you are already collaborating, so that you can deepen an already-existing relationship. We encourage you to reach out to potential partners early, as the process involves trust-building that takes time.

Deepening the relationship

Most of the groups with whom we worked have significant experience being approached by white-led organizations using a partnership for their own public relations purposes without doing rooted, transformative work - so they were rightfully wary. Although our ensemble was multi-racial and grounded in years of cross-racial accountability, the play was conceived and written by a white playwright and its intended audience is largely white. For all of these reasons, we took many steps to foster trust and transparency and to be reflective about our inevitable missteps. These steps included:

- We researched potential partners (if we didn't know them already) and articulated in writing specifically why we thought we would be good partners in this process.
- In letters to potential partners, we described our goals, process, and background and we shared the script with enough time for folks to read it before deciding to partner (in some cases, this involved sharing the script with their constituents).
- As most of the groups were small organizations doing vital work with limited resources, we tried to arrange meetings around their schedule and at their own sites.
- We created transparent, accessible fundraising procedures and the money raised at the sites and through on-line sales went directly to our partners. See "*Money and Fundraising*" (page 7).
- We asked groups how they wanted to be listed in public relations materials and ran all public relations materials by them.
- We listed partners (and their website) on posters, emails, and on the ticket website.
- A representative from each partner organization spoke about their work before every performance and we included the group's written materials in our program. When possible, we also offered space for volunteer sign-up tables in the community spaces where we were performing.

We centered our organizing on the premise that play and workshops would be most impactful if they could galvanize people around racial justice and then introduce them to groups doing transformative work *in their own communities*, which they could support in the long term by volunteering, organizing, and sharing resources. In short, the work was built on the idea that raising money at the events was vitally important but that the relationships we helped foster were potentially of more lasting impact.

Additional Note

The process of talking through your ideas about partnership is a key part of the process, as it is a way to learn from one another and explore solidarity, accountability and how to support structural social change. This has been true for our team as well. As part of our own process of learning and discovery, for example, we have been asked if proceeds from the play might support poor or working class white-led racial justice organizing work. After thinking through this question and talking it over with many partners, we've decided that the answer is yes - following the lead of visionary organizers who are building bridges between poor and working class communities across lines of race.

That said, if you choose to do the play in collaboration with white poor or working class racial justice organizing groups, please choose groups who are doing work in accountable partnerships with Black, Indigenous, and people of color-led groups. As a statement of solidarity and equity, please also consider splitting the funds so that 50% goes to poor or working class white-led racial justice groups and 50% to Black, Indigenous, and people of color-led groups.

ON CASTING YOUNG PEOPLE

Our ensemble did readings of the play for 2 ½ years before casting young people to play the roles of Maya and Sky. We cannot overstate the importance of that decision: involving young actors (they were 10 and 11 when we started, 10 and 12 when we ended) made the play more joyful and its message more urgent – and the conversations with the young people and their families were a daily reminder of our reason for working. In short, we highly recommend that communities cast young actors for the child roles in the play.

On-line readings create both challenges and opportunities for young people’s involvement. *Please do not share the images and names of child cast members on-line unless you have talked it over with their families and have full consent to do so.* If the children and their families do not choose to have their images shown, we encourage you to imagine creative ways for them to be present in on-line readings. Examples might include: performing in silhouette, so that audience members see their shadows but not their faces; performing with their dolls as their digital likeness (depending on availability, we may be able to provide the dolls from the 2019 reading tour for this purpose); encouraging the children to draw their digital likenesses (perhaps different images for each scene) or create images of themselves in sand. And, of course, engage young cast members in this process as their ideas will no doubt far exceed what we can imagine.

Two other notes about young people’s participation:

- We held auditions for young actors and created audition posters that were explicit about the themes of the play, so families could make conscious, informed decisions about getting involved. The full script was also made available to families before auditions and the audition process included conversations about the issues raised in the script.
- The tour’s co-director trained our young actors in dialogue facilitation so that they could facilitate post-play workshops for the tour’s final show (which we knew would attract a large child audience, as it was in our home community). See “*Post-Play Workshop Outline*” (page 11) for more details about this process.

MONEY & FUNDRAISING

As noted above, any community can do the show provided that the proceeds benefit grassroots groups that are part of the Black, Indigenous & people of color-led, multi-racial, cross-class movement for racial justice. Ideally, the play will benefit groups working in your community so that the play can build a relationship that can be sustained over the long term.

In the 2019 tour, we set up systems so that money raised at readings went directly to our partners on the day of the show and the funds from on-line tickets went directly to them as well – we encourage you to set up similarly transparent systems.

We believe that artists should be paid (unless they choose not to: in our production, all performers were paid apart from the playwright/co-director, who chose to donate his labor to support the goals of the project). In this vein, we ask that you pay all performers, *including the child actors*. Rehearsal schedules may vary widely but, as a basis for your planning, a typical process might include 8-10 hours of rehearsal and 4 hours of work on the day of the reading itself. We recommend a fee of \$200 per actor.

Please **do not** pay actors out of the funds raised on the day of the reading. Instead, we encourage you to find sponsors or other funding sources for performer stipends so that **100 % of the funds raised at the readings support the movement work of the BIPOC-led organizing groups described above**. This will help avoid the impression that the piece is being used to support the overhead costs of the show. (Our tour was funded by a mixed income stream that included modest foundation support and three shows that were sponsored by the hosts as training opportunities, including a training for staff and parents of a racial justice-oriented pre-school).

Given the open-source nature of this website, we do not have the mechanisms to enforce these guidelines. That said, we ask that you honor them and the exchange of trust that they are intended to foster.

ON SUPPORT FROM OUR TEAM

As noted above, we hope to disseminate this work broadly, without cost, to maximize its accessibility and impact. That said, we recognize that communities may want support in organizing the tour and, in particular, in facilitating the sensitive post-play workshops that are the heart of our process. Depending on the level of interest, we may be available to support this process with technical assistance. For more information about this, fill out this form: <https://forms.gle/d3yxDDXtJH7J9RDG9>.

Please note that this is by no means a requirement – and we have created this document so that you could do this work entirely without our support.

STRUCTURE

In-person

Our tour was built on a decentralized structure that allowed us to do what was an extensive tour (9 shows in 8 cities in 5 months) with minimal resources. Readings were organized by local hosts who identified performance sites and did outreach for potential audiences, with our support. Events were structured to be dynamic and participatory while bearing in mind the demands on parents' time (who made up a good percentage of the audience). Events lasted approximately 2 ½ hours, including:

- **A brief welcome from the reading host(s)**, including a land acknowledgment (a great resource about why this is important can be found at <https://usdac.us/nativeland>).
- **Brief remarks from the organizing partner(s) about their work.** As the event was intended to bring new people to their work, this was particularly important. At some sites, we also put flyers about their work on every seat.
- **The show** (1 hour)
- **Food, if provided.** This was not a requirement, but some found it a useful tool to build community. Soup was an inviting and low cost option.
- **Post-play workshops in small groups of 8-10 people**, grouped randomly according to numbers pre-printed on their programs. Given the sensitivity of the topic, we **do not** recommend groups larger than this (In some sites, this meant up to 8 or 9 groups). Each performance should also include a self-selecting Indigenous & people of color caucus group. *See more about this under "Post-Play Workshop Outline" (page 11).*
- **Closing**, which included a very short movement exercise to re-ground people in their bodies and a final appeal from the organizing partner for donations and volunteers.

On-Line

For on-line readings, the above elements can be streamlined but **we do not recommend you do the show without a post-play workshop.** The play raises complex issues and the heart of the process lies in the reflection on them as well as the action steps supported by that reflection. For on-line readings, we recommend that you divide the audience into random breakout groups of 8-10 people plus a facilitator, then return to the main meeting room at the end of the session for a final closing.

On-line readings may require a longer break between the reading and the workshop than we encouraged during in-person readings (in fact, for in-person readings, we discouraged an extended break at that point as we found it could diffuse the tension raised by the play, which could be a dynamic and generative energy). You know your community best; structure a process that best supports your needs and accessibility concerns.

M A S K & D O L L S

The play features two, large dolls (one for each child) and a mask for the character of *Gasping Whiteness*. In the original production, these items were designed and built by Angela Davis Johnson, a visionary Black artist who worked in collaboration with our ensemble to create them - a partnership funded by the *Network of Ensemble Theaters* and developed at the *Ko Festival of Performance* (Amherst, MA). (To hear an audio interview about cross-race collaboration and the creation of the original mask, go to <https://www.ensembletheaters.net/macadamsspring17>).

Readings can be done without these items but, if you have the resources, we encourage you to commission a local artist of color to create the mask and the dolls. Please note that the mask, in particular, is as much a ritual object as it is a prop and the care and intention in creating it is at the heart of the piece.

A N O T E O N S A F E T Y / P U B L I C I T Y

We were keenly aware of potential backlash from doing a piece that addressed white supremacy so directly. While we were conscious of this, we remained committed to sharing this play, so we took time to strategize about how to do so with care - particularly as we were involving children.

On a practical level, this meant that we regularly asked each other and our team about our needs in terms of emotional and physical safety. In addition, we never used the names of the children in any outreach materials or in any other material associated with the show (and their families decided to use stage names in the program). We also did not use any of our images in our outreach materials.

We were also thoughtful about PR (for example, we asked sites *not* to send out press releases). This might seem counterintuitive, but we felt confident that the horizontal organizational structure would encourage buy-in and interest, and we would sufficiently fill the rooms – which was true (almost all of the performances, which ranged in audience capacity from 50 to 125, were sold out).

We also didn't want to distract from the work *in the room* through conversations in newspapers or in other media sources that we could not respond to, and which would almost certainly flatten the complexity of the work (and might actually do damage to our partner organizations by mischaracterizing our intentions and theirs, by association).

None of that is the rule, of course – and your needs and the needs of your community might be different. That said, we ask that the way you reach out and spread word about the project is in the context of a deeply rooted partnership with the host and the group you are supporting, as this dialogue and communication will help build a strong foundation for all of the work.

PARTICIPATORY ART PROJECT

For the reasons mentioned above, we created a poster image that did not identify us visually. To create this image, our co-director asked the children and the adults in the ensemble to take photos of how racism impacts our bodies, that did not feature our faces. A collage of these images became the visual identity of the show and was on all of our posters, social media announcements, and marketing materials (you can see this image on the first page of this toolkit).

To extend this work, we are asking ensembles of every reading of *Gasp* to do the same: ask every member of your ensemble to take photos of yourselves (not featuring your faces) that express how racism impacts your bodies. We will combine all of these images into an ongoing visual collage on our website expressing the community we are fostering together.

A FINAL NOTE

Although we are confident in the integrity of our process, we are always learning – and we know that perfectionism (and puritanism, its ancestor) is a foundation of white supremacy. All that is to say that, as you share the piece, we encourage you to be accountable, transparent, and honest in the most radical way possible – and generous with yourself, too.

Thank you for considering sharing the play.

Sincerely,
The *Gasp* ensemble

A P P E N D I X 1 :

P O S T - P L A Y W O R K S H O P O U T L I N E

Overview

Encourage people to be in their bodies, particularly if you are on-line. Facilitators might start with a body check-in (“How are you feeling?”, “Are you breathing?” etc.). Remind people that silence is welcome. Remember that we are not seeking answers – but to be present, even (and especially) when we don’t know, are unsure, or are uneasy.

Set up

Immediately after the show, the audience is invited to take a few moments of quiet reflection. Afterward, the host separates them into groups of 8-10 people. It is preferable that they are randomly selected, to allow people to connect with people they don’t know. For in-person readings, this can be done with pre-printed numbers on programs, which can also help facilitate an efficient transition. For on-line readings, it can be done with random breakout room assignments.

As noted below, all post-play conversation should include an optional, self-selecting Indigenous & people of color caucus or (if possible) separate caucus groups for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color.

Part 1: Intro

Facilitators gather groups into circles (for in person groups) and a breakout room (for on-line groups). They then ask participants to say their names, their pronouns (if they choose to), and to briefly share one moment or phrase from the play that stays with them.

Part 2: Writing

Facilitators then guide people through a series of two-minute writing prompts. *Note that participants are invited to share after all three prompts are complete.*

First prompt: With the themes, stories, images, and words from the play in mind, consider your own life and experiences and reflect. Your prompt is:

I remember... (facilitators give participants two minutes to write)

Second prompt: With the themes, stories, images, and words from the play in mind, consider some possibilities for your life, community, and your world. Your prompt is:

The world I’m dreaming into life is.... (two minutes)

Third prompt: With the themes, stories, images, words from the play in mind, and perhaps inspired by your previous writing, consider what you need from *yourself* or from *your community* to realize the world you are dreaming into life. Your prompt is

I need.... (two minutes)

Part 3: Sharing

Facilitators ask people if they’d like to volunteer to share any part of what they wrote. (Encourage folks to resist explaining or giving further details prior to sharing. Body checks throughout, as needed).

Note that sometimes people feel the need to comment on each other’s writing. This is natural but encourage them simply to listen and to feel the impact of each other’s words.

A P P E N D I X 1 :
P O S T - P L A Y W O R K S H O P O U T L I N E (c o n t .)

Part 4: Action Steps

Facilitators ask participants to imagine the world they are dreaming into life. They then guide them through the following steps:

- Write down three obstacles that are in the way of making that world real
- For each obstacle, write down one action step that you can take in response
- Now that you have done that, circle the one action step you commit to taking and write down a list of skills, resources, and relationships you bring to taking that step

Part 5: Closing

Facilitators bring all the groups back together and form a large circle (in person) or one on-line meeting room. Every person then shares a gesture that expresses what they are feeling in that moment, immediately followed by the group repeating their gesture together. *Note: this exercise is a useful barometer for how the play/workshop has landed and a way for audience members to see each other, hear each other, and ground themselves back in their bodies. It can also be quick – even in groups of 50-60 people, we facilitated this process in 3-4 minutes.*

The post-play session ends with the partner organization/group sharing practical ways that audience members can offer resources and support.

Caucus Groups

As noted above, every performance of *Gasping* should include a caucus group for people of color & Indigenous audience members or (if possible) separate groups for Black, Indigenous, and people of color audience members. These groups are vital spaces to process the complex issues in the play. In our tour, the structure for these groups was open, often beginning with the outline, above, and organically evolving according to the desires of the group.

Child-Facilitated Post Play Workshops

At one show, child members of our ensemble facilitated a post-play workshop for other children. The structure for this group was based on this outline, but adapted with them to be more engaging for young audience members (for example, including drawing as well as talking). We highly encourage you to support a child-facilitated group, and adapt this outline in any way to support this.

As noted above, members of the *Gasping* team may be available to offer technical assistance about the process of facilitating these workshops, if it is of use. For more information, fill out this form: <https://forms.gle/d3yxDDXtJH7J9RDG9>.