

## **BROWNING OUT: THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WORKS BY AFRICAN AMERICANS AND LATINOS ON AMERICAN STAGES (2012)**

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## **Introduction**

In 2009, the Theatre Development Fund came out with a study entitled *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*. Its controversial findings shocked many people in the theatre industry. Some of the findings included how little the average playwright is compensated, how few of their plays are receive full productions, and what they and their peers feel about the development of new dramatic works in American theatre today.

However, as a Latina theatre management and producing student, I was more shocked by the study's lack of attention to playwrights who are of African-American and Latino descent. When I saw that the book only specifically discussed these playwrights and their works in a couple of pages and a footnote, and that most of the playwrights that participated in the study were white, I knew there had to be more research done regarding the African-American and Latino perspective on these issues.

According the a CNN report based on the 2010 United States Census data, Blacks make up 12.6% of the U.S. population while Latinos make up 16.3%<sup>1</sup>. These numbers combined amount to 28.9% of the total U.S. population. We must also remember that the percentage of Latinos in this country is probably much higher than reported due to the fact that there are so many undocumented immigrants living in this country, and this population will continue rise. According to the United States Census Bureau, the minority population will be the majority population by 2050.<sup>2</sup> Statistics of what race the playwrights surveyed by *Outrageous Fortune* identified as did not even align with the

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<sup>1</sup> "People QuickFacts." U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 15 Sept. 2011  
<<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Brought. "Minorities expected to be majority in 2050."  
CNN.com. 13 August 2008, 25 May 2010.  
<<http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/08/13/census.minorities/index.html>>.

U.S. Census Demographics at the time the book was written in 2009. “The greatest disparity appears in the percentage of African-American playwrights (7.2 percent), whereas African Americans account for 13.4 percent of the country’s total population, and Hispanics of any race (9.2 percent), who make up 14.8 percent of the nation.”<sup>3</sup> One would expect that at least 28.9% of the plays produced at major regional theatre companies across the country and Broadway would be written by and/or African-Americans and Latinos, given this demographic information. Because specific data on this subject does not currently exist, I was required to conduct my own research.

The October 2011 issue of *American Theatre* was devoted to diversity of all kinds in the American theatre industry. It included the 2011-2012 season preview,<sup>4</sup> which listed all the productions, both plays and musicals, which were being produced by the nearly 700 Theatre Communications Group (TCG) member theatres that had submitted their seasons by press time. As such, the list did not include all the member theatres or all of their productions, but it is a good snapshot of what will be on major regional not-for-profit stages this season. In looking at each production and researching the playwright and subject matter of the production, I came up with some disappointing figures. Out of the 1,915 productions currently listed in this Season Preview, only 109, or 5.69% of all productions are written by and/or about Latinos, and 129, or 6.73% of all productions are written by and/or about African-Americans. Of the 6.73% of productions written by and/or about African-Americans, 20.15% are written by white playwrights, which include 7 productions of *Race* by David Mamet and 5 productions of *Clybourne*

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<sup>3</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss, Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Playwright (New York, New York: Theatre Development Fund, 2009) 69.

<sup>4</sup> "Season Preview 2011-12." American Theatre. Oct. 2011: 59-104.

*Park* by Bruce Norris. There are also 6 productions of *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry and 8 productions of various August Wilson plays. *The Whipping Man*, by Latino playwright Matthew Lopez, which received its New York premiere at Manhattan Theatre Club in 2011, is receiving 6 productions this season.

I also researched all 445 plays and musicals that appeared on Broadway from 2001-2011. Out of these productions, there were 38, or 8.54% of total productions that were either about African-Americans or prominently featured African-Americans. Eighteen, or 47.47%, of these productions were written by African-Americans. There were 15, or 3.37%, of the total productions that were either about Latinos or prominently featured Latinos. Six, or 40%, of these productions were written by Latinos.

These statistics demonstrate that American theatre does not reflect the cultural makeup of the country as it stands today and that we are not adequately supporting and producing African-American and Latino playwrights. This stands in stark contrast to other industries in America (such as television, film, and magazines, as I will discuss in Chapter Four) that have changed the constitution of their management, their products, and how they market their products to a much more diverse consumer base. The theatre industry overall has not made these changes.

Back in 1995, TCG sponsored an event where members of the theatre community met to discuss the state of American theatre. Some of the issues they grappled with included: “Audiences are often polarized over social and racial issues;” and “...many feel that theatres have not yet learned how to make these new audiences feel welcome. Many of the structures of institutional theatres – subscription plans, increasing ticket prices,

even programming – can discourage nontraditional audiences from attending.”<sup>5</sup> And yet, we face the same issues today. Why has American theatre been so resistant to change over the past 17 years?

In this thesis, I will investigate what causes dramatic works by and about African-Americans and Latinos to be underrepresented on American theatrical stages, specifically at Theatre Communications Group and League of Regional Theatres members and on Broadway and how we can improve this situation. I will also argue that there are major obstacles to the development and production of dramatic works by and about African-Americans and Latinos.

Chapter One of this paper will discuss the different ways in which plays reach the desk of the Artistic Director and how this affects African-American and Latino playwrights. Chapter Two will then discuss how playwrights are compensated for their work and what difficulties this imposes on African-American and Latino playwrights. Chapter Three will analyze how theatres decide what plays are produced each season and what current industry practices affect these decisions. Chapter Four will then go on to analyze how plays written by and/or about African-Americans and Latinos are marketed and advertised and why this is affecting what plays are produced and how often they are produced. Chapter Five will analyze how the lack of African-American and Latino leaders in the theatre industry add to this issue. And lastly, Chapter Six will discuss the lack of African-American and Latino actors in the theatre industry and how this is also affecting this issue.

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<sup>5</sup>Douglas Langworthy, “Theater at the crossroads. (conference on the state of US theater),” American Theatre 1 Nov. 1995: 2-3.



I am positive that by the end of this study, I will have put forth solid ideas of how we can increase the representation of dramatic works by and/or about African-Americans and Latinos on theatrical stages, as well as attract a much more diverse audience to the theatre, thus creating a much more artistically rich, financial viable, and stable industry.

## **Chapter 1:** **How Works Reach the Desk of the Artistic Director**

*Outrageous Fortune* states that most literary offices of not-for-profit theatre companies find the works that they produce primarily through relationships with M.F.A programs, through existing relationships with playwrights and directors who have previously worked with the theatre.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I will discuss the obstacles that African-American and Latino playwrights face that prevent them from building relationships with the decision makers at theatres and keep them from getting their work to the artistic director's desk. These obstacles are education, the submission process, artistic development, and "second staging".

### **Education**

To understand why there are so few audience members of color in our theatres, we have to understand why there are so few works by artists of color in our theatres, which in turn means we have to understand why there are so few artists and administrators of color in our offices, and why our boards look so homogenous, and why almost all of our major theatre companies are historically white-run and produce historically white work from a historically white canon. But to address any of those things we need to push past all of it, pull away from the immediate inequities of our field and try and access the root. And for a lot of experts, that root is within the activity held in common by almost every child in this country: going to school.  
– Clayton Lord<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Todd London with Benn Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 98-113.

<sup>7</sup> Clayton Lord, "What Inequality Looks Like and Where and When It Starts," Arts Journal 12 Dec. 2011, 12 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.artsjournal.com/newbeans/2011/12/what-inequality-looks-like-and-where-and-when-it-starts.html>>

Clayton Lord hits on a very important issue that affects me personally. Education has always been a major part of my life, particularly in the arts, but I am lucky that I was introduced to the arts in school and that I had supportive parents who always encouraged me to pursue what I was most passionate about. However, throughout my entire education, I have been either the only one or one of a few Latinos in my theatre classes. I have also had very few African-American class mates, in fact so few that you can count the number of Latinos and African-Americans in the theatre classes I attended each year, from elementary school through graduate school, on one hand. I know that I experienced this because African-American and Latino children face several institutional obstacles that prevent them from receiving a better education and even less education in the arts.

Most people I know that are involved in the arts state that they first learned about theatre in their schools. However, according to a 2008 survey of arts participation by the National Endowment for the Arts, since 1982, the number of young people who have had any arts education in school has fallen by between 30% and 50%.<sup>8</sup> The results are even bleaker for African-American and Latino children. Past and current budget cuts cause the lack of arts education in U.S. schools, particularly public schools, in less affluent neighborhoods which are mostly populated by African-Americans and Latinos.<sup>9</sup>

What happens to these children once they graduate from high school? According to a Pew Hispanic Center Report in 2002 on Latinos in Higher Education, 1.9% of Latino high school graduates and 3% of African-American high school graduates were enrolled in graduate school in 2000, compared to 3.8% of their white counterparts. I am positive that these percentages have increased since 2000, as the number of Latinos and African-

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<sup>8</sup> “2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” National Endowment for the Arts Nov. 2009: 49.

<sup>9</sup> Clayton Lord.

Americans enrolled in college has risen substantially since. In 2000, 35% (or 1.3 million) of all Latinos and 30% of all African-Americans who are 18-24 years old were enrolled in college.<sup>10</sup> In 2010, 31.9% (or 1.8 million) of all Latinos and 38% of all African-Americans who are 18-24 years old are enrolled in college<sup>11</sup>. However, even though these numbers have increased, Latinos and African-Americans notoriously have low retention rates, mostly due to the economic constraints and the lack of resources and support that they need to succeed in college. So what is the possibility that these students will wind up getting a graduate degree, much less in playwriting, when only 6.5% of African-Americans<sup>12</sup> and 1.5% of Latinos<sup>13</sup> overall have Masters degrees? As Clayton Lord states, “Matriculation rates, paired with a lack of background and formative experience in the arts, mean that a disproportionate number of the students who get degrees in, and pursue a career in the live arts, are white.”<sup>14</sup>

*Outrageous Fortune* discovered that, over the past few years, a new professional career track has begun to manifest itself among playwrights that are produced in this country: The M.F.A. What is even more fascinating is that three-quarters of the playwrights that were surveyed who received MFAs obtained them from either one of the following six institutions: Columbia University, Yale University, New York University, University of Texas-Austin, University of Iowa, and Brown University (in order by the

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Fry, “Latinos in Higher Education: Many Enroll, Too Few Graduate,” Pew Hispanic Center 5 Sept. 2002: 8.

Richard Fry, “24% Growth from 2009-2010: Hispanic College Enrollment Spikes, Narrowing Gaps with Other Groups,” Pew Hispanic Center 25 Aug. 2011: 4.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Fry, “24% Growth from 2009-2010: Hispanic College Enrollment Spikes, Narrowing Gaps with Other Groups,” 4.

<sup>12</sup> United States Census Bureau, Table 3. Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex, for Black Alone and White Alone, Not Hispanic: 2010 (2011).

<sup>13</sup> United States Census Bureau, Table 1. Educational Attainment of the Population 18 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2010 (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Clayton Lord.

number of graduates).<sup>15</sup> When asked if his institution has a tendency to choose to develop and produce playwrights who come from these six academic programs, Alex Barron, Play Development Assistant at the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC) in New York City, a not-for-profit theatre company that also produces on Broadway, states “The picture that occurs is that there is this pneumatic tube that goes from my office to the deans’ offices at the drama schools of Brown and Yale.”<sup>16</sup>

Given how competitive the theatre industry is, if graduating with an M.F.A. in playwriting, especially from one of the above stated six academic institutions gives a playwright a major advantage, how can playwrights of color compete with their white counterparts?

Many not-for-profit theatre companies have educational programs that provide arts education to public schools and many of these programs cater to students of color from urban areas and employ many teaching artists of color. Lou Moreno, Artistic Director of INTAR Theatre, a not-for-profit, Off-Broadway Latino theatre company, states, “I think it’s shameful that these big, ‘white’ theaters hire artists of color, go to the public schools, which are comprised mostly of people of color, and pay them to be their educators and the face of their institutions. The students then go to the theatre and don’t see these artists they work with on these stages. If these theaters don’t hire their teaching artists for their productions, then these artists don’t get the chance to develop their craft because they just stay in that teaching artists box.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 74.

<sup>16</sup> Alex Barron, Personal Interview, 12 May 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Lou Moreno, Telephone Interview, 2 Dec. 2011.

## The Submission Process

If more than a third of produced playwrights in the *Outrageous Fortune* sample pool received an M.F.A. from one of six academic institutions, what are other playwrights doing to get their plays developed and produced? Through direct submissions? There are several ways playwrights can submit their plays, including through an agent or self-submission. If the playwright does not have a previous relationship with the theatre, he or she can submit through open submission. However, theatres rarely produce work that was sent to them through the open submission process.<sup>18</sup> In a post on *Parabasis*, which is a multi-authored, critically acclaimed blog about theatre, culture, and politics, the anonymous author states, “when was the last time you found a play through an open submission? My guess would be a decade, if ever.”<sup>19</sup>

In 2011, Arena Stage, a major not-for-profit theatre company in Washington, D.C., and the former Cooperator of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) New Play Development Program, was involved in an online controversy about its open submission policy. This controversy was heightened due to Arena Stage’s high profile, and thus proved to be instructive in the discussion regarding open submission policies. Starting in 2010, the theatre stopped its open submission policy and only accepted plays that they had invited the playwrights to submit. As to why they decided to make this change, David Dower, then Associate Artistic Director of the theatre stated:

The thing about the submission process, *everywhere*, is that there are way, way more plays submitted than there are resources for supporting them. And, like many producing theaters, we couldn’t devote the resources to having artistic

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<sup>18</sup> David Dower. “Dear Hal Brooks,” *New Play Blog* 24 July 2011, 8 Dec. 2011.

<sup>19</sup> “Overdue Dark Confessions (Lets’ Try This Again),” *Parabasis* 31 July 2009, 8 Dec. 2011. <<http://parabasis.typepad.com/blog/2009/07/overdue-dark-confessions-lets-try-this-again.html>>.

staff read each of the submitted plays... When the submission policy was open, writers and agents had the *impression* that they were getting their plays to me by putting them in the mail (or, increasingly, e-mail) addressed to me. Or to our Artistic Director. But they weren't. They were getting plays to a corps of non-staff readers with no real avenue to impact planning decisions.<sup>20</sup>

As *Outrageous Fortune* perceives, one of the single greatest obstacles playwrights feel they face is lack of access to the one person who has the power to plan what theatres will be producing every season: the artistic director. *Outrageous Fortune* also observes that artistic directors and producers claim that the ability of playwrights to have access to them doesn't make much of a difference, as their plays should speak for themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Mr. Barron of MTC states:

The writers that we [previously] produced have access to [Artistic Director Lynn Meadow] ... but for a writer looking to be developed or produced for the first time at MTC, no. In the best of circumstances, that is why I'm here, to be the playwrights advocate in the room. To be the writer's voice in our institution . . . All I have to worry about is writers and plays. Lynn has to worry about running a company. It's really for the writer's sake. Better for them to have me worry about Lynn than for them to have to worry about her.<sup>22</sup>

Mr. Barron illustrates that even if the literary manager of a large theatre institution believes that a play belongs on its stage, the artistic director is still the only one making the final decision, and if the artistic director does not have a previous relationship with the playwright, the play may not be produced.

What is the typical process of how most plays are chosen to be developed by most large not-for-profit theatre companies? MTC, a large and very respected not-for-profit

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<sup>20</sup> David Dower.

<sup>21</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 98.

<sup>22</sup> Alex Barron.

theatre company, oftentimes chooses its work through the following process: the plays are submitted either through the agent, from a producer or from another theatre; plays are almost never submitted directly by the playwright, unless MTC has a previous relationship with him or her. For plays submitted by playwrights that have no previous relationship with the theatre, the process is as such:

1. The play is sent to the literary department.
2. A first low level read of the play is done by an employee in the literary office.
3. The play then passes higher and higher up the ladder until it receives a priority read by the Literary Manager.
4. The play is then given to the Artistic Director or Associate Artistic Director who makes the final decision if it will be produced.<sup>23</sup>

As you can see, the first person that reads the play is an employee in the literary office (or as in the case of the former open-submission policy at Arena Stage, by volunteer readers), not the literary manager or the artistic director. Also, the work is usually read from the point-of-view of whether it will be something that will appeal to the artistic director. This begs the question --how does an artistic director even get to read a work written by an African-American or Latino playwright if they have neither produced nor interacted with them in the past, and how does this differ from the experience of white playwrights?

The open-submission process is vital to the theatre industry because, as director Hal Brooks states, “Having a literary department that reads submissions (and not just the invited kinds) should also be about familiarizing one’s theater with new voices that are

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<sup>23</sup> Alex Barron.



out there.”<sup>24</sup> It is also the job of the literary managers and their staff to actively seek out new voices and plays about cultures that they are not familiar with. And, since most literary staffs are almost all white, you can see by what stories theatres choose to tell what cultures they are most comfortable and familiar with. Donna Walker-Kuhne, President of Walker International Communications Group and known as the nation’s expert on audience diversification, and Victoria Bailey, Executive Director of the Theatre Development Fund, both question the networks and voices artistic directors of not-for-profit theatre companies and their staff surround themselves with. They suggest that playwrights of color usually do not have their works developed or produced because there are almost no managers of color running these companies.<sup>25</sup> This is a crucial issue will be discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis.

## **Development**

The development process of a play is very different from the open submission process. In an open submission, the playwright normally doesn’t know anyone at the theatre company and the theatre company has not requested that the playwright send his or her play to be reviewed. The development process allows a playwright’s work to be entered into a theatre company’s radar through craft building workshops or programs.

Mr. Dower states that since discontinuing Arena Stage’s open submission policy, his artistic team has redirected its energy “to scouting work by attending new play

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<sup>24</sup> Hal Brooks. “A Needle in a Haystack,” New Play Blog 14 Oct. 2011, 8 Dec. 2011. <<http://newplay.arenastage.org/2011/10/newplay-hot-convos-a-needle-in-a-haystack-by-hal-brooks-halbrooks.html>>

<sup>25</sup> Donna Walker-Kuhne, Personal Interview, 28 May 2010.  
Victoria Bailey, Personal Interview, 30 May 2010.

festivals and conferences, hosting gathering of writers, and focusing on developing *relationships* more than plays.”<sup>26</sup> Let us tackle the first part of Mr. Dower’s statement: how can playwrights of color get their work into these developmental programs or the various new play festivals across the country?

There are several new play development festivals and programs that exist across the country that have a tradition of developing works of many new or less experienced African-American and Latino playwrights, such as the Emerging Writers Group at The Public Theater, the Lark Play Development Center, and New Dramatists. Many successful African-American and Latino playwrights, such Kristoffer Diaz, are alumnae of these programs and state these companies helped jumpstart their career and become the writers they are today.<sup>27</sup> These groups are some of most prestigious and most sought after programs for playwrights all over the country.

However, just because more people of color are participating in these programs, that doesn’t mean their participation will lead to an actual production of their work. The second part of Mr. Dower’s statement is that Arena Stage is more focused on “developing relationships, not plays”. This brings up a major issue among African-American and Latino playwrights: “developmental purgatory”. Many playwrights of color feel that their plays are never fully produced on stages across America, but are instead frequently presented as staged readings or workshop productions.

According to several playwrights surveyed in *Outrageous Fortune*, playwrights of color feel that, whenever they are commissioned by theatre companies or developmental programs, the theatres are only trying to look like they’re diversifying their programming.

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<sup>26</sup> David Dower.

<sup>27</sup> Kristoffer Diaz, Personal interview, 13 Dec. 2011

One surveyed playwright states that theatre companies are doing this “without doing it in a real or substantive way...No-strings money is great, but if your pieces never get done, what’s the point?”<sup>28</sup> Ms. Bailey agrees with this statement. “The only way to develop new works is by production. A play is meant to live on the stage. That is what makes it different than all other forms of writing. It must be performed. A workshop for the sake of just saying that they workshopped a play by a person of color is a cop out.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Second Stage**

Another issue that affects works by African-Americans and Latinos is that if their plays receive productions, they are usually produced on a theatre’s “second stage”. The second stage is the venue that has a smaller seating capacity, usually has a smaller production budget and is sometimes given less attention than works that are produced on main stages. Many times, this is because producers do not believe that these plays will be able to attract a larger crowd because they are “risky” or that their main audience demographic will identify with the work. As stated in an article in *American Theatre* in 2008, “Actors and practitioners of color often find themselves at work on the second and third stages at theatre companies where their ‘potential’ can be developed over time. While there is nothing wrong with training and nurturing artists and keeping the development wheels turning, it is troubling when so many actors of diverse ethnicities

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<sup>28</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 134.

<sup>29</sup> Victoria Bailey.

find themselves relegated almost exclusively to the arena of never-ending development: their potential exercised but rarely granted full realization.”<sup>30</sup>

Many of the issues that cause theatre companies to produce plays by playwrights of color on their secondary stages are directly connected to the marketing mentality that exist in the theatre industry when it comes to audiences of color. This will be discussed in Chapter Four.

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<sup>30</sup> Ephraim Lopez, Caridad Svich and Debra Cordona. “Mainstream remix: Frank talk about casting, training and presenting actors and works of color. (CURRENTS)(Discussion),” American Theatre 1 Apr. 2008: 43.

## **Chapter 2:** **Compensation**

In the last chapter, I discussed the obstacles African-American and Latino playwrights face in getting their works noticed by theatre companies. But once the work is noticed and produced, the compensation that the playwright receives (or doesn't receive) impacts their career massively. The economic situation is dismal for playwrights of all backgrounds; however, I will discuss the economic situation of African-American and Latino playwrights in this chapter.

### **Earned Income**

It is a widely accepted and universal opinion in the theatre industry that our artists and other theatre practitioners are not paid enough for the work that they create.<sup>31</sup> I believe that African-American and Latino playwrights are affected even greater by this than their white counterparts. In regards to playwright compensation, one literary manager that was part of a group of prominent new play theatre professionals that attended the 2009 Special Guests Weekend of the Actors Theatre's Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays stated, "this undervaluing of the playwright's work also limits the work and the diversity of voices we are hearing from. The whole field suffers when low compensation forces the exclusion of so much talent."<sup>32</sup>

The average playwright in the group studied by *Outrageous Fortune* will earn between \$25,000 and \$39,000 annually, most of which is not related to playwriting, but

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<sup>31</sup> Caroline Anderson, "A Day Job in the Theatre," Theatre Bay Area 2 April 2012, 8 April 2012. < <http://theatrebayarea.org/editorial/A-Day-Job-in-the-Theatre.cfm>>.

<sup>32</sup> Ben Pesner, "Today and Tomorrow: New Play Development Before and After Opening Night," The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation New Play Investigation Nov. 2009: 11.

comes instead from related activities such as teaching writing for television.<sup>33</sup> Now, who is the average playwright? According to *Outrageous Fortune*, the average playwright is white. Of the 250 playwrights that were surveyed, 76.7% self-identified as Caucasian, 9.2% Latino, and 7.2% African American.<sup>34</sup>

The median incomes of Americans as of 2010 are \$54,620 for whites, \$32,068 for blacks, and \$37,068 for Latinos.<sup>35</sup> From this data, we can deduce that the average playwright, who is white, makes about the same amount of income as the general population of blacks and Latinos do annually. Since I am discussing the underrepresentation of dramatic works by African-Americans and Latinos on theatrical stages, I am arguing that since white playwrights receive more productions than playwrights of color, then we may deduce that he or she is earning a higher income than their African-American and Latino counterparts and that playwrights of color earn an annual income that is substantially lower than that of the general population of Americans. That being said, if a white playwright can barely make a living off of what they earn today, how can a playwright of color survive, continue to write and take advantage of the development programs mentioned in Chapter 1? How can an African-American or Latino playwright continue to earn a living as a working playwright when their works are constantly produced on a theatre's second stage, which normally compensates the playwright less? As David Dower states in his 2009 study, "The Gates of Opportunity",

. . . only those people who have some level of personal subsidy can stay in the field long enough to develop and, eventually, emerge. What is the impact on diversity, then? Where are the working class, working poor, and middle-

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<sup>33</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 51.

<sup>34</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 69.

<sup>35</sup> United States Census Bureau. "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010", Sept. 2011: 9.

class voices in our American theater? How can we expect to develop audience diversity when there are so few opportunities for artists of diverse perspectives and experience to contribute to the cultural dialogue?<sup>36</sup>

Many playwrights are also turning away from theatre and writing for TV and film because the compensation is much greater.<sup>37</sup> As Richard Peña, Program Director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and Director of the New York Film Festival states, “If one examines the credits of many Hollywood films or TV shows, I think you’ll find a surprising number of Hispanic names.”<sup>38</sup> And it’s not just the unproduced playwrights that are writing for TV and film, so are the successful playwrights. As playwright Kristoffer Diaz states, “Once you have a play that gets some good reviews, film and TV come calling pretty quickly.”<sup>39</sup> As *Outrageous Fortune* states, many playwrights feel they have more creative freedom in their playwriting because of the generous compensation they receive from writing for television.<sup>40</sup> The compensation and artistic freedom of playwrights must be addressed before we begin to lose all of our talented writers to TV and film.

### **The Dramatists Guild**

When discussing the compensation of playwrights, we cannot ignore the Dramatists Guild. The Dramatists Guild is the only professional association which advances the interests of playwrights, composers, lyricists and librettists writing for the living stage. The Guild’s mission is to assist playwrights in being compensated fairly and

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<sup>36</sup> David Dower, “The Gates of Opportunity,” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation New Play Investigation Dec. 2009: 23.

<sup>37</sup> Todd London with Benn Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 53.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Peña, E-mail Interview, 3 Dec. 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Kristoffer Diaz.

<sup>40</sup> Todd London with Benn Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 87.

adequately by producers that are licensing and producing their work. It has over 6,000 members nationwide, which are represented on Broadway, Off-Broadway and in regional theaters. How many of these 6,000 members are African-American or Latino? Unfortunately, this information is unavailable. Many theatre unions and trade associations, as I have found from personal discussions with employees of Actors' Equity Association and The Broadway League, do not normally study or disclose the demographics of their members due of the enormous lack of people of color that are in their organizations. But if the Guild has a lack of playwrights of color in its membership and no people of color leading its organization, are they adequately meeting the needs of playwrights of color?



### **Chapter 3:** **Deciding What Plays to Produce**

It appears that substantive treatment of issues about minority oppression is taboo. While American theater was able to address issues of homosexuality in the acclaimed *Angels in America*, where is the incisive social critique surrounding racism and white privilege? While many theater artists see themselves as progressive and can often be at the forefront of change in our society, it appears that few actually seem capable or willing to engage consistently in a constructive effort to explore Latino audiences. Currently our chances for constructively discussing race in a public space seem to hold more promise with an American president than with a director of a regional theater. Given the theater's historical role in addressing taboo subjects, we look forward to an even more progressive social art. – Marcos Martinez<sup>41</sup>

In a majority of not-for-profit theatre companies, it is artistic director's responsibility to create the season of plays and musicals that their audiences and patrons will be purchasing tickets for and supporting each year. The audiences and patrons of not-for-profit theatres trust that these leaders will showcase work that will be both challenging and entertaining. However, it is obvious, based on my analysis of plays and musicals that are being produced this season on pages three and four that the work that these artistic directors are choosing is not representative of the different peoples that live in the United States, and oftentimes, of the communities that these theatres are located in. What criteria do artistic directors have in mind when they are creating their seasons and how is this decision making contributing to the lack of works by African-Americans and Latinos being produced in America?

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<sup>41</sup> Marcos Martinez, "Still Treading Water: Recent Currents in Chicano Theater," The State of Latino Theater in the United States ed. Luis A. Ramos-Garcia (New York, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2002) 25.

## Slot Programming

In 2007, the national theatre alliance No Passport and the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts presented a two-part panel entitled “Brownout,” discussing casting, actor training, and plays reflective of diversity. An article reporting the discussion in *American Theatre* states that the panel stemmed “from a significant and perhaps controversial claim that a white majority aesthetic continues to govern the programming at many of the country’s major producing theatres.”<sup>42</sup> I have observed through my discussions with theatre artists of color that many of them feel that when mid to large-size not-for-profit (oftentimes referred to as “mainstream”, which can be synonymous with “white”) theatre companies create their season for the year, they usually choose only one spot for a work by a playwright of color. Works by African-Americans (oftentimes August Wilson or Lorraine Hansberry, as you can see from my analysis on pages three and four of what plays are being produced this season) are usually produced in February, during Black History Month, and works by Latinos are usually produced during September and October, during Hispanic Heritage Month. As Mr. Diaz states, “When a big not-for-profit puts together a season, they might not have a problem with three, four, or five white male playwrights whose work is similar all getting slots; they seem to be a lot more unlikely to program even two Latino shows into the same season. The flashier show is likely to get slot – so what happens to that second show? Do you have to be big and loud and exceptional to succeed as a writer of color, and is that the same standard to which white writers are held?”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ephraim Lopez, Caridad Svich and Debra Cardona 42.

<sup>43</sup> Kristoffer Diaz.

Mr. Diaz's statement also brings about another topic: the belief that you have to be exceptional (i.e. a star talent, better educated, etc.) as a playwright of color. There is a joke that Chris Rock says in his stand up special "Kill the Messenger" that I believe sums up this issue:

My house cost millions of dollars. In my neighborhood, there are four black people. Who are these black people? Well there's me, Mary J. Blige, Jay-Z, and Eddie Murphy. So let's break it down: Me, I'm a decent comedian; Mary J. Blige, one of the greatest R&B singers to ever walk the earth; Jay-Z, one of the greatest rappers to ever live; Eddie Murphy, one of the funniest actors to ever, ever do it. Do you know what the white man that lives next door to me does for a living? He's a dentist. He ain't the best dentist in the world...he ain't going to the dental hall of fame...he don't get plaques for getting rid of plaque. He's just a yank-your-tooth-out dentist. See, the black man gotta fly to get to somethin' the white man can walk to.<sup>44</sup>

The working playwright of color has to be a much more talented writer to be able to be produced the way that his or her white counterparts are produced. As Mr. Diaz states:

I'm not sure about that middle area – the working playwright, the writer who doesn't write big, loud shows or folklorico shows or shows intended for Broadway. I don't know if a Latino playwright has as many options to just stake out a small space for his or herself as a white playwright might.<sup>45</sup>

I am not saying that a theatre company should produce a playwright just because he or she is African-American or Latino, I am only stating that it seems that a playwright of color has to be better-educated, better-skilled, and have an overall better star talent than his or her white counterpart to receive productions.

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<sup>44</sup> Chris Rock: Kill the Messenger – London, New York, Johannesburg, dir. Marty Callner, perf. Chris Rock, DVD, HBO, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Kristoffer Diaz.

Some theatres take the color-blind approach and only produce the best, regardless of the ethnicity of the playwright. Edgar Dobie, Managing Director of Arena Stage, states, “We are not doing any favors with affirmative action. We got eight shows in a season, eight opportunities to produce a show and everything else is equal, honestly equal, and we are not doing anyone any favors by producing a work that is not ready to be produced only because it is by a person of color. So we’re working on the works [by playwrights of color] and the artists that are represented here are the best.”<sup>46</sup>

Mr. Diaz’s statement on play slots also suggests that not every play by an African-American or a Latino playwright is about the same thing or even the same culture, the same way in which each play written by a white playwright is completely different than the next. People of color come from many different ethnicities and backgrounds. The American theatre needs to showcase the richness of these cultures and the different stories of African-American and Latino experience. Racial tension in America is always in the news, but has peaked recently since the 2008 Presidential campaign. We have seen state governments encourage racial profiling of Latinos. We have seen the murder of a teenage African-American male because of the color of his skin and what he was wearing. If Americans were exposed to different stories about African-Americans and Latinos, we could all have a better understanding of each other, and maybe we would no longer judge and fear each other.

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<sup>46</sup> Edgar Dobie, Personal Interview, 14 Jul. 2011.

## Economics of Production

The economics of producing a play are another influence on how artistic directors choose plays for their seasons. Many theatre professionals feel that not-for-profit theatre companies choose not to produce a work because they believe it to be too “controversial” and that it will not be supported by government or foundation grants, or they believe that it will not do well in the box office.<sup>47</sup> Or, on the other hand, as I have heard from my discussions with theatre professionals in my internships and classes, they specifically may choose to produce a play because they received a special grant to increase diversity in their programming.

Another question that has been posed is whether the producing of works by playwrights of color should be left to the culturally specific theatre companies. And, what roles do these theatre companies have given the greater economic advantages that mainstream theatres have? “You shouldn’t only get your work produced at culturally specific theatre companies,” states Ms. Bailey. These theatre companies are usually the first place that playwrights of color submit their work, as they will almost always cultivate a playwright’s work and help develop it on an artistic and personal level that most mainstream theatres will not. However, in the current American theatre culture, it is the mainstream theatre companies that can provide them with a higher profile production and greater compensation. This may be in part because culturally specific theatre companies usually have to compete with mainstream theatre companies for funding and

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<sup>47</sup> Caridad Svich. "TF Forum: Re-Mapping Latino Theatre: American Playwrights on the Edge of the Edge." TheatreForum- International Theatre Journal. 1 Sept. 2005: 95.

press<sup>48</sup> or they are advised to apply to grants that foster diversity as opposed to grants that sustain artistic excellence.<sup>49</sup> This can lead to culturally specific theatre companies to produce less successful productions.

Playwrights sometimes feel that their work is not produced by large, mainstream not-for-profit theatre companies because they genuinely feel there is a need to produce more work by playwrights of color, but instead they produce the playwrights' work to fulfill a diversity requirement established by current funders, or to diversify their programming in order to look attractive to future funders.<sup>50</sup>

Theatre companies may also decline to produce a play because of economic concerns or they may only produce a certain kind of play by a playwright of color. They sometimes feel that their subscribers or single ticket buyers will not purchase subscriptions or tickets for a certain kind of production. This becomes important as many theatres are becoming more and more dependent on earned income. It is suggested that a healthy theatre should have a 50/50 earned to unearned income ratio, meaning that 50% of their income should be unearned, or donated via grants or donations, and earned, via subscriptions and/or ticket sales.<sup>51</sup> However, most theatres are more like 60/40 or 70/30 (or 75/25 in the case of Arena Stage)<sup>52</sup>, which makes them more dependent on ticket sales

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<sup>48</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 172.

<sup>49</sup> Ben Pesner, "Where are we now? TCG calls together theatre pros to take the pulse of the field," American Theatre 1 July 2006: 36

<sup>50</sup> "Race and relationships. (the role of theater in a culturally diverse society)(Panel Discussion)." American Theatre. 1992: 28.

<sup>51</sup> Barry Grove. "The Development Process: Building Relationships in the Community." Columbia University, Theatre Management and Producing MFA Program. Manhattan Theatre Club, New York, New York. 17 Sept 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Edgar Dobie.

therefore more concerned as to whether their productions will be interesting for their primary audience.

So what are some solutions to the issues that pertain to funding? In 1994, Samuel A. Hay proposed the “National Endowment for African American Theatre, Inc.” (NEAAT). He stated that the purpose of this initiative would be to “support community, educational, regional, and touring theatres with matching grants. These organizations must be not-for-profit, and they must perform plays that deal principally with the African and African American experiences.”<sup>53</sup> The new organization would accomplish this goal by raising and investing \$25 million over 25 years and the interest would be used to match funding [from] endowments, planning grants, and budgets. The NEAAT would include participants from every sector of the country, from ministers and community leaders, to CEOs of corporations, to athletes and government officials. It essentially makes everyone in the community invested in keeping African-American theatre on American stages. The same initiative could be used for Latinos. However, the NEEAT was only a proposal and there are no sources to indicate that he or anyone else pursued this endeavor.

Funding is also the reason why some shows hoping for Broadway productions go unproduced. Not only does the lack of Broadway producers of color affect funding, but also the lack of investors of color. As Mance Williams states, “The major problems faced by the Black producer, therefore, are those that have always plagued Blacks in the arts – economic inequality between Blacks and Whites, cultural bias, and the lack of a

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<sup>53</sup> Samuel A. Hay, African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 230.

cultivated, sustained Black interest in art and theatre.”<sup>54</sup> If there were more investors of color for Broadway productions, there would then be more investors interested in work by playwrights of color and therefore more willing to finance these productions.

Several past all-Black productions have made it to Broadway stages despite difficulty raising funds. For example, Carol Fineman, Vice-President, Theatre at Scott Sanders Productions and Press Agent for *The Color Purple* said, “It took ten years to mount that show, because there was a lot of resistance from the investors.”<sup>55</sup> Other productions, such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Raisin in the Sun*, and *FELA!* found that they could not raise funds from traditional Broadway investors. The producers of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Raisin in the Sun* relied on non-traditional theatre investors instead of the tight-knit circle of Broadway investors. Stephen Hendel, the producer of *FELA!* largely funded with the production with his own money because investors felt the production was difficult to market to a viable audience.<sup>56</sup>

These examples show that there are other funding sources out there, besides the circle of usual Broadway investors. I would encourage producers of all-Black, all-Latino, or multiracial productions to start thinking outside the box. New funding sources need to be research and developed. If we intend of evolving what is produced on Broadway, then we need to evolve how we finance these productions.

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<sup>54</sup> Mance Williams, Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 104.

<sup>55</sup> Eden E. Woldearegay and Paula Rogo. “Breaking Barriers: Why It’s Tough to Produce All-Black Shows,” In the Shadows of Broadway 2012, 4 April 2012  
<<http://www.shadowsofbroadway.com/business-producers/>>.

<sup>56</sup> Eden E. Woldearegay and Paula Rogo.



## **Chapter 4:** **Marketing and Advertising**

But a glance around the lobby of any Broadway show reveals who *isn't* there: any of the city's readily identifiable minorities – blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and the young. – Thomas Disch<sup>57</sup>

Mr. Disch stated the above quote twenty-one years ago. And when I glance around the lobby of any Broadway show I attend, I still notice who isn't there. After twenty-one years, why aren't there more people of color in Broadway theatres? The same goes for TCG/LORT and Off-Broadway productions.

Marketing is one of the most important components of the theatre industry that directly impacts on the production of works by African-American and Latino playwrights on American stages. One of the main arguments producers make in regards to producing African-American and Latino works is that they do not have a large enough audience base to support these works and that the traditional theatregoer is not African-American or Latino. In this chapter, I will discuss why the African-American and Latino demographic is one of the most powerful in the nation and will make the case that the theatre industry must stop ignoring this audience.

### **The Stats**

Before I speak about the major issues that affect the marketing and advertising of plays to African-Americans and Latinos, I want to first show the amount of power this

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas M. Disch, "The Death of Broadway," Atlantic Monthly March 1991, 98.

demographic has not only on the theatre industry, but also on the United States as a whole.

Because Latinos are now the “minority majority”, they are the most coveted demographic by most industries in the United States (based on how much these industries have been spending on advertising over the past few years).<sup>58</sup> Their population has grown by 43% from 2000 to 2010, more than any other demographic in the U.S. As a matter of fact, Latino population growth accounted for all the population growth in the following states: Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island.<sup>59</sup>

Frances Negron-Muntaner, an award-winning filmmaker and writer and the Director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University, states that Latinos consume more media than any other demographic in the United States.<sup>60</sup> And the media industry has taken note. In 2010, Hispanic media advertising spending grew by 8.49% while it only grew by 6.59% for all other groups.<sup>61</sup>

One assumption that many theatre managers and commercial producers make is that Latinos don’t speak English. This has been implied to me on numerous occasions while creating Latino marketing strategies for theatrical productions. However, 75% of Latinos consume media (which includes TV, radio, magazines, newspapers, and the internet) in both English and Spanish, and 14% consume media in English only.<sup>62</sup> If 89% of all Latinos consume their media in English, either partially or completely, then they

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<sup>58</sup> Hispanic Fact Pack: Annual Guide to Hispanic Marketing and Media, 2011 Edition,” Advertising Age 25 July 2011: 6.

<sup>59</sup> “Census 2010: 50 Million Latinos, Hispanics Account for More Than Half the Nation’s Growth in the Past Decade,” Pew Hispanic Center 24 Mar. 2011: 1, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Frances Negron-Muntaner. Telephone Interview. 22 Dec. 2011.

<sup>61</sup> “Hispanic Fact Pack,” 6.

<sup>62</sup> “Hispanic Fact Pack,” 18.

must be bilingual, either somewhat or completely. The amount of bilingualism among Latinos is highly contributed by the fact that they have the largest percentage of youth (younger than 18) out of any other group in the country<sup>63</sup> and majority of this population are first or second generation. Young Latino adults who are 18-25 years old also consume media at a higher rate than any other demographic in their age group.<sup>64</sup>

One industry that understands what languages Latinos speak the most is the magazine industry. Several American magazines have Spanish language versions, but they are now also making English versions of their magazines that specifically cater to Latinas. *Cosmopolitan* will start publishing a magazine aimed at “American-born Latin women who are bicultural and bilingual.” As the senior vice president of *Cosmopolitan* states, “A lot of marketers understand that they need to invest with the Latino market [and many Latinos] are digesting their information in English.”<sup>65</sup>

The buying power of African-Americans and Latinos is extremely substantial in the U.S. Latinos’ buying power totaled \$1.1 trillion in 2011, or about 9.5% of the U.S. total.<sup>66</sup> African-Americans have also reached a buying power of \$1 trillion, as the number of their households earning more than \$100,000 grew 88% from 2000 to 2010.<sup>67</sup>

African-Americans and Latinos also contribute greatly to the amount of discretionary spending by consumers in the United States. Latinos account for 9% and

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<sup>63</sup> Mark Hugo Lopez, “The Latino Electorate in 2010: More Voters, More Non-Voters,” Pew Hispanic Center 26 April 2011: 1.

<sup>64</sup> Frances Negron-Muntaner.

<sup>65</sup> Tanzina Vega, “Marketers, and Media Companies, Set Their Sights on Latin Women,” The New York Times 8 Dec. 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Brian Bueno, “The Growing Hispanic Population Means Big Business for These 7 Sectors,” IBISWorld 2011 August: 1.

<sup>67</sup> Matt Carmichael, “What’s Left of the Middle Class Is More Diverse, Harder Working – and Still Shrinking,” Advertising Age 17 Oct. 2011, 30 Nov. 2011. <<http://adage.com/article/special-report-american-consumer-project/vanishing-american-middle-class/230455/>>

African-Americans account for 8% (a combined 17%) of all discretionary spending in the U.S.<sup>68</sup> What is even more impressive is that Latinos account for a large amount of discretionary spending in some of the most active theatrical cities in the country, including 21.6% in Los Angeles, 9.8% in New York, 10% in Chicago, and 7.5% in Washington, D.C.<sup>69</sup>

To demonstrate just how substantial African-Americans and Latinos are in these cities, I have also included graphs from the 2010 U.S. Census in the appendix at the end of this thesis.

Table 1 and Figure 1 show us that the largest amount of African-Americans and Latinos live in some of the most active theatre communities in the industry. Table 1 shows that the largest population of African-Americans, alone or in combination (meaning they identify as black alone or in a combination with other races, such as white or Native-American), live in New York City and Chicago, with Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. coming in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> place respectively. The 2010 U.S. Census also states that, “The top 5 metro areas that had the highest proportion of the non-Hispanic Black alone population [meaning Blacks that are not Hispanic] living inside their respective largest principal cities were New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA (61 percent).”<sup>70</sup> Figure 1 shows that a majority of the Latino population lives in California, Texas, and all other states besides some states in the Eastern, Southwestern, and Midwestern U.S. And just like the African-American population, Latinos are also heavily concentrated in the Tri-State Area, an area which is in close geographic proximity

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<sup>68</sup> “The 2011 Discretionary Spend Report,” Experian Simmons 2011: 5.

<sup>69</sup> “Hispanic Fact Pack,” : 46.

<sup>70</sup> The Black Population: 2010: 15.

to Broadway, with their population constituting 17.7% of New Jersey, 17.6% of New York, and 13.4% of Connecticut.<sup>71</sup>

Figure 3 demonstrates just how large the African-American and Latino population is. In 2000, this population was almost a quarter of the population of the U.S. and by 2010, it had grown 28.5% of the population.

### **Other Industries**

Other industries in the U.S. have not ignored the 28.5% of the pie that this population occupies. In particular, Latinos have become a big focus. IBISWorld, the largest provider of industry information in the U.S. states that, “[Advertising] agencies offering Hispanic-centered services are already gaining momentum as large corporations increasingly set aside advertising budgets for Hispanic outreach efforts.”<sup>72</sup> But there are two industries that have shown a huge increase in the amount of consumption by Latinos: Film and Television.

A recent report by the Motion Picture Association of America states that Latinos are “more likely to go to the movies than the general population, and they tend to go more often and in larger groups” and that “over the next five years to 2016, Hispanic contribution to the Movie Theaters industry is projected to record average annual growth of 5.0% to \$1.2 billion.”<sup>73</sup> Filmmakers Frances Negrón-Muntaner<sup>74</sup> and Richard Peña<sup>75</sup> agree with this estimate. Ms. Negrón-Muntaner adds that Latinos are most interested in

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<sup>71</sup> Census 2010: 50 Million Latinos, Hispanics Account for More Than Half the Nation’s Growth in the Past Decade

<sup>72</sup> Brian Bueno 2

<sup>73</sup> Brian Bueno 7

<sup>74</sup> Frances Negrón-Muntaner

<sup>75</sup> Richard Peña.

the following film genres, in order: action, comedy, and drama.<sup>76</sup> IBISWorld agrees, stating that, “The 2009 release of Fast and Furious, for example, earned about 46.0% of its opening weekend revenue from Hispanic audiences.”<sup>77</sup>

Ms. Negron-Muntaner also states that because Latinos already consume so much film without having specific campaigns created and marketed towards them, producers don’t feel that they need to do this, especially since the Latino market is so complex. Latinos come from all different countries and backgrounds and marketing campaigns work best when they are tailored to specific groups of Latinos, such as Puerto Ricans and Cubans. This level of specificity can become very expensive.

But the TV world has come up with better solutions on how not only to market TV to Latinos, but also to include them in more of their story lines. For example, the ABC program “Ugly Betty” created marketing campaigns for all different groups of Latinos and held a block party for the residents in the Queens, NY neighborhood that the show’s main family lives in.<sup>78</sup> The show also featured Latino actors and characters prominently and these characters were fully integrated into a multi-racial cast. Unlike African-Americans, who respond more to all-black casts, Latinos respond better to stories that feature Latinos in a multi-racial cast.<sup>79</sup> They also prefer when the storylines of the Latino characters are not based on their heritage.<sup>80</sup> “Ugly Betty” and another ABC program “Grey’s Anatomy” did this well with their Latino characters. The character Ugly Betty’s heritage is always hinted at, but is almost never the core of every story. In “Grey’s Anatomy”, Sara Ramirez’s character, Callie Torres, is a lesbian Latina surgeon

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<sup>76</sup> Frances Negron-Muntaner.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Bueno 7

<sup>78</sup> Frances Negron-Muntaner.

<sup>79</sup> Frances Negron-Muntaner.

<sup>80</sup> Frances Negron-Muntaner.

whose heritage is almost never a part of the storyline but is hinted at whenever she discusses her family.

Latinos want to see their lives portrayed on screen as they genuinely live them. They live in a multi-racial world and their heritage does not always impact their day-to-day lives. They are American, with a twist, and respond best to TV shows and films that show that.

One example of why all Latino casts are not as successful with Latino audiences is “The George Lopez Show”. This program featured Mexican-American and Cuban-American characters. Even though they had two different Latino groups featured, the majority of the viewers for the show were Mexican-Americans and it did not perform well with other Latino groups, such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. This demonstrates the statement earlier that Latinos are such a complex group and should feature characters and story lines that are fully integrated into a multi-racial world.

All of these examples show that film and TV industries have produced enough films and television programs that feature Latinos that they have begun to understand what Latino audiences want and don't want. They have realized how important this demographic is to their continued success and have completed studies to see how they can best reach this audience. In my experience, the theatre industry has not yet put forth the same effort in understanding the Latino audience, thus leading to a misunderstanding of what this audience wants. What I have heard over and over again in my discussions with theatre professionals is that this audience traditionally does not buy tickets and it's just a waste of money to try to target them. This leads to my next topic of discussion: Audience Development.

## Audience Development

Every year, TCG hosts summits that bring together theatre professionals and leaders from all around the country to discuss the current state of American theatre and the issues it is facing. In 1995, 2004, and 2006, one of the main topics of these summits was race and ethnicity and how it pertains to audience development and marketing.<sup>81</sup>

Audience development is the most important solution of getting more African-American and Latino audiences to the theatre. Commercial theatre producers rely solely on single ticket sales for a single production, while most not-for-profit theatres rely on a combination of subscriptions and single ticket sales for multiple shows over multiple seasons. This greatly affects how they market their productions and what audience development strategies they may apply.

Most mid to large-sized theatre companies are subscriber based, meaning that a substantial portion of their earned income from ticket sales comes from a predetermined audience source. It has been argued that one of the main reasons why many not-for-profit theatres do not produce more work by playwrights of color is that they do not believe their subscribers will purchase subscriptions because they cannot relate to the subject matter. As Keith Josef Adkins, playwright and Artistic Director of New Black Fest, states, “I’ve heard this hundreds of times, ‘Yes, great, love the play, love the idea of the

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<sup>81</sup> Ben Pesner, “Where are we now? TCG calls together theatre pros to take the pulse of the field,”

Douglas Langworthy,

“Theatres of Color Continue Discussion,” American Theatre Dec. 2004: 64.



play, but I really want you to think about our audience, who our audiences are, they're mostly white and very conservative. Just think about these things."<sup>82</sup>

As August Wilson stated in his speech "The Ground on Which I Stand", delivered at the 1996 TCG National Conference, "the subscription audience holds the seats of our theatres hostage to the mediocrity of its tastes, and serves to impede the further development of an audience for the work that we do."<sup>83</sup> The question is, should you listen to your audience or should your audience listen to you?

Theatre companies have come to expect that their audiences want to see a certain type of production: something that is very similar to their backgrounds and has been proven to entertain them. As Mr. Barron states, "Risk aversion is an unfortunate reality of programming. It's hard to hit that target or give your audience something they will come to see. You don't want to alienate them but you don't want to give them something that will make them feel comfortable, but overall, we're supposed to be responding to our audience and resonate with them."<sup>84</sup> However, these expectations can lead to a complete disregard to the diversity that exists in our communities today. In a recent blog on the TCG website, titled "What If... Theatres Played Moneyball?" author Shawn C. Harris states:

Oftentimes what we call intuition, gut feeling, or instinct confirms rather than challenges our biases and habits and expectations. What this can lead to is a narrowness of vision that, instead of seeing what's really there, can only recognize what it already knows. How does this play out in today's theatrical landscape? A theatre community that is overwhelmingly White, males, and middle to upper class. Naturally, this is not a result of some moral failing on our

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<sup>82</sup> Keith Josef Adkins, Personal Interview, 14 Oct. 2011.

<sup>83</sup> August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand" Chicken Bones: A Journal 8 Dec. 2011, <<http://www.nathanielturner.com/groundonwhichistand.htm>>

<sup>84</sup> Alex Barron.

part, but because the norms which have shaped our lives become the default that we work from unless deliberately and consistently challenged. For someone like me, who cares very deeply about the fact that despite the reality of diversity in New York City, our stages reflect only a narrow subset of the people who live here.<sup>85</sup>

Most not-for-profit theatres were founded because they saw that something was missing in their community and they wanted to become the leaders of the kind of work that they wanted to produce in their communities. Mr. Dobie from Arena Stage agrees with this statement, “A producer should lead their audience. The audience trusts you. So if you do give them something challenging, they will see it.”<sup>86</sup> Ms. Bailey also agrees, “It is incumbent on theatres to help their audiences listen to the stories they don’t know they want to listen to. As a not-for-profit institution . . . they need to think a little teeny bit about what they produce and not just spoon feed people what they think they want to see.” However, as time has progressed, due to dependence on funding and fear of alienating audiences, theatre companies have instead allowed their audiences to lead them.

One statement that troubled me recently was a comment by playwright Bruce Norris in the October 2011 issue of “American Theatre”. As I stated before, his production *Clybourne Park* has 5 productions across the U.S. this season. This play features both black and white families. He stated that he writes plays with white middle-class characters because, “Why should I write something that is not germane to audiences’ lives? Theatre has always been an expensive middle-class pursuit. It is a

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<sup>85</sup> Shawn C. Harris, “What If...Theatres Played Moneyball?,” Theatre Communications Group. Oct. 2011, 20 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.tcgcircle.org/2011/10/what-if-theatres-played-moneyball/>>

<sup>86</sup> Edgar Dobie.

precious, pretentious thing for precious, pretentious people.”<sup>87</sup> As it is widely known, class and race are directly connected in this country. It is also known that theatre has not always been an activity for the middle-class, as, up until 30 years ago, it was an inexpensive form of entertainment. I understand that this is the statement of only one playwright, but I think he is saying something that most people in the theatre industry think but will never admit. If the theatre industry continues to think like this, they will completely alienate the various communities that live around them. Ms. Walker-Kuhne states:

One of the roles of a theatre is to be able to engage the various communities that are around us. Theatres have to include that in their thinking and planning. Audiences should be given the right to choose. There shouldn't be an expectation that I will like everything you do or that I'll go see my ethnic specific play and then I'll go see Shakespeare, or a play from this person and that person. That shouldn't be the measure of success. That doesn't indicate if I'm a serious theatregoer or not. If I want steak, I only want steak. I don't want your chicken or fish. So does that mean you don't want my money as a customer? I think we need to be a little more broad-minded when it comes to expectations.<sup>88</sup>

One assumption as to why African-Americans and Latinos will not come to the theatre is that audiences of color are not ticket buyers. Ms. Walker-Kuhne argues in her book *Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture, and Community* that through her extensive work in audience development at The Public Theater and Dance Theatre of Harlem, she was able to make audiences of color into huge ticket-buyers. She argues that an audience development plan that a theatre company creates should not vary

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<sup>87</sup> Beatrice Basso and Dan Rubin, “Bruce Norris in the Danger Zone,” *American Theatre* Oct. 2011, 29.

<sup>88</sup> Donna Walker-Kuhne, Personal Interview.

from production to production over a short period of time, but rather that the theatre should work for years to develop relationships with various groups of people. By using this strategy, the theatre is then creating life-long audience members who will understand that their presence is appreciated in the theatre and that the theatre is not just marketing to them on a one-off basis to sell tickets to a production that just happens to play to their demographic or cultural background.<sup>89</sup> As one playwright states in *Outrageous Fortune*, “You can’t just invite a black audience for a black play and say good-bye to them. You have to make them part of the community.”<sup>90</sup>

Michael Reed, Senior Director of Cultural Participation and Programming at Arizona State University-Gammage, a large university-based performing arts presenter located in Tempe, Arizona, agrees whole-heartedly with this statement. He states:

You have to be a part of your community if you are a LORT theatre. There is a respect that gets formed, but they know they can trust us to treat material with respect and knowledge. LORT theatres don’t do a good job of this. There is a real disconnect in the minds of the administrators of these companies. They say ‘We put this up and they didn’t come’. Well of course they didn’t, they don’t know you from uncle and they rarely see people like them on your stage.<sup>91</sup>

While working at The Public Theater as the Head of Community Affairs, Ms. Walker-Kuhne felt that the audiences of the theatre should reflect the communities they serve. She worked extensively in recruiting groups of new audience members to the theatre by creating a variety of plans that were tailored towards the particular group she felt the theatre company needed to attract. She greatly helped the development and

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<sup>89</sup> Donna Walker-Kuhne, Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture, and Community. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005).

<sup>90</sup> Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 230.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Reed, Telephone Interview, 21 July 2011.

production of new works by playwrights of color during her tenure by making The Public Theater invest an immense amount into its audience development efforts and by making suggestions to the artistic director at the time, George C. Wolfe, on what works by playwrights of color should be produced.

Another strategy that theatre companies have used to attract more audiences of color is to educate them on the subject matter of a production before, during, and after it is performed. For example, ASU-Gammage is constantly providing opportunities for their surrounding community to become engaged with the work that they present. As Executive Director Colleen Jennings-Roggensack states:

One of the things you have to do is prepare the community for the work. I have discussions with the community so that they don't rail against something that they don't know about. It's making the unfamiliar familiar. Every work needs a content guide, because that gives them the right to decide if they want to come or not. If you educate people, you make a better place for the next work that will take an even greater leap. It's all about building, teaching our patron, and that has to be the business that we are in.<sup>92</sup>

These same tactics can be extended to Broadway. According to the most recent edition of The Broadway League's Broadway Audience Demographic Study, the average Broadway theatregoer is 44 years old, white, female and has an annual household income of \$244,100.<sup>93</sup> This is the demographic that Broadway producers spend the most time and money on.<sup>94</sup> It is also widely assumed in the industry that this special woman also lives in the suburbs and has a bachelor's degree and, more than likely, a graduate degree

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<sup>92</sup> Colleen Jennings-Roggensack. Telephone Interview, 15 July 2011.

<sup>93</sup> The Broadway League, "The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2010-2011," November 2011: 5.

<sup>94</sup> Chris Boneau, Personal Interview, 6 July 2011.

as well.<sup>95</sup> This description is so specific, but when it comes to marketing to audiences of color, Broadway producers and marketers often lump them into one big “Latino” or “African-American” pile. I know this from my experience of creating the African-American and Latino marketing strategies for the Broadway production of *The Motherf\*\*ker With the Hat*. Sandie M. Smith, a marketer who designed the multicultural outreach for Broadway shows such as *The Color Purple*, *Memphis*, and *The Scottsboro Boys* understands that this approach no longer works. She states that “there’s no cookie-cutter way of approaching a multicultural audience.”<sup>96</sup>

One example of how unspecific marketing is to Latinos for Broadway productions was the marketing campaign for the Broadway Musical *In the Heights*. This musical is set in the Upper Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights, which has a diverse Latino community, but is mostly comprised of Dominicans. However, as a resident of Washington Heights, I never saw a single poster or other advertisement for the production in my neighborhood, and despite being a regular Latina theatregoer, was never personally marketed to. How could the marketing team have completely missed out on a demographic of people that the production is actually based on? They had TV commercials and spent thousands of dollars on ads in Spanish-language newspapers, but why didn’t the producers spend the amount of time and money that they spent on the people that wander around Times Square on the residents of Washington Heights, which is only a 25 minute train ride from Times Square? I once asked a well-known commercial producer why Broadway producers don’t send street teams, similar to the ones they have in Times Square, that are comprised of English and Spanish speaking

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<sup>95</sup> The Broadway League:13, 28.

<sup>96</sup> Gordon Cox, “Scottsboro courts black auds,” *Variety* 16 Oct. 2010, 8 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118025750>>.

Latinos, up to the neighborhoods that have a large Latino demographic, like Washington Heights and Spanish Harlem. His response was “We don’t do that for insurance reasons, those neighborhoods are not safe.” I was very puzzled by his statement because in that same year, there was a shooting near the Marquis Theater, that shot out a window of the theatre’s box office, and a failed bombing attack that occurred feet away from several theatres in Times Square, which I may add all happened during daylight. His statement showed me what producers assume about these neighborhoods and the people that live in them.

In April of 2011, I was brought in as an unpaid intern to help cultivate the Latino and African-American audiences for the Broadway play *The Motherfu\*\*er With the Hat*. This was an enormous job for one person, much less a part-time, unpaid intern. I was honored to be working on the production, but the fact that they hired me as an unpaid intern showed me just how much they cared about extending the audience for this production (whose five member cast included three Latinos and one African-American, Chris Rock). As Chris Boneau, one of the leading press representatives on Broadway and Co-founder of Boneau/Bryan Brown states, “When people say something like community outreach, people will roll their eyes because they think ‘Oh, that’s just somebody’s project’. Well it should be everybody’s project.”<sup>97</sup>

Since it is known that the best marketing tool is word of mouth, I decided to invite influential Latino and African-American tastemakers to see *The Motherfu\*\*er With the Hat*. If they liked the performance, they would tell their constituents and the word of mouth would spread to people who almost never see a theatrical performance. I invited people who have never been invited to see a Broadway production, such as members of

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<sup>97</sup> Chris Boneau.

the infamous break dancing troupe, Rock Steady Crew, Times Square based Latin American restaurant owners, various influential Latino and African-American bloggers, and radio D.J.'s. These people are part of very specific demographics within communities of color who have masses of people that follow them and care about their opinions. They all loved the production and informed all of their communities through their blogs and through word of mouth about the play and how to get tickets.

Mr. Boneau also states “unless a producer is convinced that we’re actually going to be successful in attracting a different audience or a diverse audience, they’re not going to do it, and it’s only because they either have no historical data proving that the audiences show up and have any impact at all.” He also agrees that Broadway producers do not spend enough money on marketing and advertising to African-Americans and Latinos, “We don’t do that, not because we’re lazy, it’s because there’s not enough advertising money to spend to reach all the communities that come. We reach national and international tourism, but when it comes to exploring within our own communities, we are not very good at it.”<sup>98</sup>

The Broadway League does understand that funding is one of the main reasons why Broadway producers don’t market to a more diverse audience. During my internship with The Broadway League, they decided to create an initiative called “Viva Broadway”. This initiative would help bring more Latinos to Broadway. This is, in my opinion, a very vital step that Broadway must take to start expanding its audience.

Another aspect of audience development that theatre companies and producers must be aware of is making the audience comfortable in a theatre. There are many educational programs that introduce children to the theatre. However, there are almost no

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<sup>98</sup> Chris Boneau.



programs that introduce adults to the theatre. Many African-Americans and Latinos state that they do not go to the theatre because they don't feel comfortable in it. I have to admit, even though I have been involved with theatre since I was 8 years old, I felt very uncomfortable stepping into a Broadway theatre for the first time when I was 22 years old. I was surrounded by wealthy, white patrons and, up until that moment, I had never had a moment in my life when I interacted with this specific demographic. People of color just don't feel welcome in our theatres. They have no way of knowing the etiquette of the theatre, such as how to dress or how to act during the performance, because most of the time we were never exposed to this. So they would much rather just ignore the theatre than put themselves in an unknown and uncomfortable situation and place.

Mr. Boneau has come up with one good example of how to solve this issue. For the past 10 years, he has been trying to get Broadway producers and theatre owners to do something he calls "Broadway Open Houses". This initiative would invite people to Broadway theatres when performances are not happening to see "what happens when you enter through the front door, you go to the box office, buy your tickets, and find your seat. You can also see your seat and decide if you want to purchase that ticket. It's not just the price or a mean box office person [that is intimidating], it's the whole experience."<sup>99</sup>

According to a study conducted in 2008 by the Maricopa Partnership for Arts and Culture, an Arizona based organization whose mission is to develop and implement entrepreneurial partnerships that advance arts and culture in the Greater Phoenix area,

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<sup>99</sup> Chris Boneau.

bilingual Latinos are “cultural experimenters in the process of re-defining themselves and identifying cultural forms with which they want a relationship.”<sup>100</sup> The study also states:

There is great potential for Latino audience development because the Latino interest in arts and culture outpaces actual attendance by as much as two to one. Many factors enter into the attendance decision such as cost, the perception of a casual, inviting atmosphere and weekend availability for families. The attendance decision is usually spontaneous and close to the time of the event.<sup>101</sup>

This study suggests that producers need to redefine what they believe about Latino consumers and how they should tailor their marketing strategies based on the Latino consumers purchasing habits.

Playwright Kristoffer Diaz also feels that theatre companies and producers should reach out to younger audiences, “To me, it’s more important to reach out to younger people (younger, in theater, being under 40). I tend to think that when you go younger, you get a more ethnic diversity as a matter of course.”<sup>102</sup> As already discussed, Latinos have the largest amount of youth in the country, which consume more media than any other group. Theater audiences are notoriously made up of a much older age group and if the theatre industry intends on surviving for at least the next 20 years, it needs to start producing and marketing theatre for a much younger demographic. The hope is that if they experience theatre in their youth, they will continue to be patrons throughout their entire lives.

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<sup>100</sup> Maricopa Partnership for Arts and Culture, “Arts, Culture and the Latino Audience: Latino Arts and Culture Participation in the Greater Phoenix Region,” 2008: 5.

<sup>101</sup> Maricopa Partnership for Arts and Culture, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Kristoffer Diaz.

## Ticket Prices

As stated before, many commercial producers and not-for-profit theatre companies claim that audiences of color are not ticket buyers. One aspect that can greatly affect what audiences are attending theatre is ticket prices.

Can an African-American or Latino audience member who is a first time ticket buyer afford a ticket to a Broadway production? The median annual household income is \$32,068 for African-Americans and \$37,068 for Latinos, and the average family size for African-Americans is 3.32 and 3.96 for Latinos.<sup>103</sup> How is it possible for a family of four to purchase tickets to a Broadway production when tickets prices can range from \$49.50 for one ticket to *A Streetcar Named Desire* to \$156.25 for one ticket to *Wicked* (The Broadway League's Demographic report for 2010-2011 states that the average paid admission for a Broadway ticket was between \$94.89 and \$108.90<sup>104</sup>)? If the prices of Broadway tickets increase any more, the audience will continue to become even more homogeneous than it already is.

Even though statistics show, as stated above, that Latinos and African-Americans combined have buying power of \$2.1 trillion, that Latinos spend a significant amount of discretionary income, and that the number of African-Americans earning over \$100,000 has increased 88% over the ten-year period from 2000-2010, this doesn't mean that they will choose to spend between \$94.89 and \$108.90 on a Broadway ticket. This is because Broadway producers do not market and invite people from these communities into their theatres.

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<sup>103</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "AVG2. Average Number of People per Family Household, by Race and Hispanic Origin/1, Marital Status, Age, and Education of Householder: 2011," Nov. 2011.

<sup>104</sup> The Broadway League, 56.

If they have never felt welcome, why would they spend their discretionary income on a Broadway ticket?

Not-for-profit theatre companies all over the country have adapted reduced ticket price policies that have been very successful and have allowed younger and more diverse audiences be able to attend their productions. In 2005, Signature Theatre in New York City reduced their ticket prices from \$65 to \$15. Other theatres have also created “pay what you can” or “pay your age” programs. Pregones Theater, a Latino theatre company located in Bronx, NY, even has a reduced price ticket policy for people that live within their zip code. But one theatre company may be changing the way theatre companies set ticket prices altogether. The Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis has started a program called "Radical Hospitality" which offers free admission to all of their productions for the next three seasons. This program is funding by foundations, individuals, and the Minnesota Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment. All of the tickets are on a first-come, first-served basis. As Artistic Director Jack Rueler states, “It’s a whole game changer. The audience will change drastically. It will demonetize the whole experience. We are giving them maximum quality and it will cost nothing. We will reeducate people and provide them with a new definition of value.”<sup>105</sup>

Another argument is that we can create newer and more diverse ticket buyers in the classroom. Anyone that has attended public schools in American knows that the plays that are usually read in public schools across the country are works by white men, like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Perhaps, if students in American public schools were exposed to more works by playwrights of color, like Jose Rivera, Nilo Cruz, Lynn Nottage, and Universes, more people of color would become playwrights or

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<sup>105</sup> Jack Reuler, Telephone Interview, 27 July 2011.

directors or actors or producers, or even more importantly, ticket buyers, and works by playwrights of color would receive a larger following from the mainstream public, thus increasing overall ticket sales.

The Theatre Development Fund has several programs that expose young people to theatre professions, critical thinking in theatre, and performances. All of these programs also offer reduced ticket prices for Broadway productions. The goal of all of these programs is to build audiences and theatre professionals for tomorrow through today's teenagers. Unfortunately, the Theatre Development Fund does not record the demographics of the students who participate in these programs,<sup>106</sup> so I cannot analyze how these programs are affecting the young African-American and Latino participants.

### **Critics**

Another issue that affects the marketing of plays that is almost never spoken about is the lack of theatre critics of color. In November of 2011, David Cote, theatre editor and chief drama critic for *Time Out New York*, wrote a piece for TCG that profiled what he considered to be the 12 most influential theatre critics across the country.<sup>107</sup> None of these critics were African American or Latino. I also asked the American Theatre Critics Association, the only national association for professional theatre critics, how many of their members were African-American or Latino and they stated that they “have no data on the race or ethnicity of their members.” As I stated before, almost all

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<sup>106</sup> Patrick Berger. Phone Interview. 30 Apr. 2012

<sup>107</sup> David Cote, “Critical Juncture: As theatres and audiences face a brave new digital world, 12 of the nation's most influential theatre critics talk about their towns and their changing roles,” Theatre Communications Group Nov. 2011, 27 Nov. 2011. <[http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/nov11/critical\\_juncture.cfm](http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/nov11/critical_juncture.cfm)>.

theatrical unions and associations do not have this information, and if they do, do not publicize it because of the embarrassing lack of people of color among their membership.

Even though theatre critics don't have the same power they did 10 years ago, due to the new world of internet bloggers, having African-American and Latino critics is vital to theatre industry because they provide an educated, official, and respected opinion for the work they see. A person's cultural background and their knowledge of a diverse cultural history directly impacts how they will view a play, especially a play about their own specific racial/cultural background. As August Wilson once stated, "A stagnant body of critics, operating from critical criteria of 40 years ago, makes for a stagnant theatre without the fresh and abiding influence of contemporary ideas. It is the critics who should be the forefront of developing new tools for analysis to understand new influences."<sup>108</sup>

How many African-Americans and Latinos are normally on the press list for a Broadway production? Usually, this depends on whether the production is African-American or Latino. But, normally, you can probably count the number of critics of color that are on these lists on one hand. White critics go to see everything, black, white, Latino, or Asian. But critics of color are normally only invited to the productions that pertain to their racial/cultural background. How can you expect to increase the audiences of color if you don't provide clear and educated opinions and descriptions of these productions in their own voice?

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<sup>108</sup> August Wilson. "The Ground on Which I Stand,"

## **Chapter 5:** **Leadership**

The biggest issue that I have encountered throughout all of my research and in every single discussion with the people I have interviewed is that work by and about African-Americans and Latinos are lacking productions because there is an enormous lack of African-American and Latino producers, managers, and others in decision-making positions.

*Outrageous Fortune* states that the artistic directors and managing directors of mid to large-sized theatre companies are as homogeneous as their audiences: white and from a similar social and cultural background.<sup>109</sup> To see just how homogeneous these managers are, I researched the artistic directors and managing directors of all the LORT theatres. Out of all 75 LORT theatres, there are only three African-American artistic directors. There are no Latino artistic directors and no African-American or Latino managing directors.

Ms. Bailey states one reason as to why this may be: “We are so far behind companies and corporations in America because there are almost no managers in the [not-for-profit] institutions that are of color. While I was touring *Outrageous Fortune* around the country in six different cities, there were maybe twenty people of color at all of the events combined. How can you get into the business if you are already at an economic disadvantage and don’t have access to the same tools that their white counterparts have? It is rare that a person of color can turn to their parents and ask them

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<sup>109</sup> Todd London with Benn Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 121.

to support them financially because they want to take a full-time unpaid internship at a theatrical institution to further their career.”<sup>110</sup>

Ms. Bailey points out that not only are playwrights of color disadvantaged in their career tracks due to education and economics, but so are the managers and leaders. Ms. Walker-Kuhne states, “We need to start training the next generation of people of color into becoming the next managers and executives. We don’t need any more receptionists, we need more leaders. They need to understand that there are other careers, good careers that you can have in the arts.”

Ms. Walker-Kuhne also points out that another issue that may affect why playwrights of color are not getting their work produced at not-for-profit theatre companies across the country is that the leaders in culturally specific theatre companies are sometimes white. “When I was working at the Classical Theatre of Harlem, all of the managers were white. The company was founded by white men.”<sup>111</sup> It is in no way suggested that white managers cannot run culturally specific theatre companies in a more efficient manner than managers of color, but as Ms. Walker-Kuhne suggests, managers of color are more sensitive to diversity and have a better grasp of how to bring diverse audiences to the theatres, which, in turn, would allow more work by playwrights of color to be produced.

But the lack of people of color in influential positions doesn’t only pertain to the managers; it’s even more evident in the Boards of the not-for-profit theatres. As playwright Katori Hall states, “Look, for instance, at the regional theater system. Upper-middle class white people primarily run it. I’m speaking, specifically, of the major

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<sup>110</sup> Victoria Bailey.

<sup>111</sup> Donna Walker-Kuhne. Personal Interview.



institutions. But then, you look at the boards of these groups and it's the same. We cannot expect real change until the top is changed. The question should be how do we create a system that allows for true diversity from top to bottom? Only then will these writers be produced. Only then will there be more roles."<sup>112</sup>

In a typical established not-for-profit theatre company, the Boards of Directors hire the artistic directors and managing directors, who then hire the rest of the staff. Ms. Jennings-Roggensack from ASU-Gammage, who is also an African-American woman, states:

What happens is predicated on those who chose those who choose. Those who choose the board of directors are those who choose the leaders are those who choose what goes on stages. Just finding new voices will open up doors. When you come to my theatre, you will be greeted by people who look like you. It gives people permission to say that it is ok for them to be here. I am the only person of color on the Board of Directors for the Broadway League. I look around the room and say 'Wow, we have a lot of growing to do'.<sup>113</sup>

People of color are more inclined to hire people of color because they work around and with these groups more often than their white counterparts.

Many theatre professionals also believe that it's not just more managers of color that are needed. The entire staff of these institutions needs to be diversified. As Mr. Diaz states:

If no one in a position of power can recognize/speak to the traditions from which the work comes, how can they accurately assess it? August Wilson talked about being not only a student of Shakespeare and Shaw, but also Dubois and Hurston. There needs to be a concerted effort to fill

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<sup>112</sup> Abdul Ali, "Mountaintop creator Katori Hall wants to show human MLK," The Griot 20 Oct. 2011, 20 Nov. 2011 <<http://www.thegrio.com/entertainment/mountaintop-creator-katori-hall-wants-to-show-human-mlk.php>>

<sup>113</sup> Colleen Jennings-Roggensack.

literary and production offices with folks who can speak to those traditions, to understand when a writer is influenced by Foyles, to understand how to market to complex ethnic groups or when ethnic distinctions aren't the important distinctions. Diversity is a goal that all theaters claim to be striving for onstage, but unless there's a commitment to that diversity behind-the-scenes, those efforts are doomed to ring false.<sup>114</sup>

As Ms. Jennings-Roggensack states, Broadway is even more devoid of managers of color. There are very few African-American and no Latino commercial producers. There are also very few African-Americans and Latinos working in the general management offices, press offices and advertising offices. The Broadway League has also taken notice. They have created a "Diversity Task Force" to expand diversity among its membership.

One way of getting more people of color involved in Broadway and the theatre industry as a whole is through internships and mentorship. Many African-American and Latino students that are in theatrical educational programs are exposed to the world of playwrighting, directing, and acting. Fewer are introduced to the world of design, producing, marketing, or management. They simply do not know that there are other careers in theatre. One program that is doing this is "Impact Broadway", New York City based program that introduces young high-school students and introduces them to the behind-the-scenes careers that exist on Broadway. They meet people who work in these careers, learn about the history of Black and Latino theatre, visit Broadway theatres and see how backstage works, and see performances of all the Black and Latino productions on Broadway that year.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Kristoffer Diaz.

<sup>115</sup> "About Us." Impact Broadway. 8 Apr 2012.  
<<http://www.impactbroadway.com/about/>>.

Mentorship is also very important in getting more people of color to work as managers in the theatre industry. As Mr. Diaz states:

Mentorships are great – finding ways to get people of color into rooms where they wouldn't normally be found. It's important that we look at all the skills people bring to the table and find ways to utilize them; sure, it's nice that someone has graduated from a fancy school and studied the classics for years, but can he/she speak Spanish? Does he/she have real deep connections with potential audience members? If we look at new ways to value new skills, we should be able to diversify our employment pools, and, I think, put ourselves in a position to create and sell more complex/interesting work.<sup>116</sup>

Because of the lack of Latino managers that work within the Broadway industry, I myself am having a hard time finding a mentor. I find that I am usually the only person of color in a room full of theatre professionals and/or I am usually only brought on a project when it pertains to Latinos. I understand that I am among the first generation of commercial Latino theatre managers and only hope that the older generation of producers and theatre managers will start to take notice of our skills and us.

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<sup>116</sup> Kristoffer Diaz.

## Chapter 6: Casting

The final issue that I will be discussing in this thesis is casting. Casting is often the last piece of the puzzle when it comes to a production but is also one of the most important.

Many times, casting is one of the many reasons why works by an African-American or Latino are or are not produced. Alan Eisenberg, former Executive Director of Actors' Equity Association, used to say that roles for African-Americans on Broadway depended on whether or not August Wilson wrote a new play.<sup>117</sup>

It is understandable if a theatre company does not produce an all-black play because their community lacks black actors, but many theatre companies that live in relatively diverse communities have chosen not to cast people of color in productions that have roles specifically written for them.

In most recent news, TheaterWorks in Hartford, Connecticut, has come under fire for the "color blind" casting of their production of *The Motherfu\*\*er With The Hat*. The playwright, Stephen Adly Guirgis was extremely upset that the African-American director, Tazewell Thompson, cast two white actors in their 20's to portray two lead characters, who are Nuyorican and in their 30's.<sup>118</sup> He wasn't the only one that was upset. The Hispanic Organization of Latin Actors was also distraught because the production had casting calls in New York City, a place that is not at all lacking in trained

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<sup>117</sup> Robert Hofler, "Obama visit flags dearth of black plays," *Variety*, 5 June 2008, 8 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118004595>>.

<sup>118</sup> Stephen Adly Gurgius, "TheaterTalkback: Diminishing the 'Hat'? About That Casting Controversy," *The New York Times Arts Beat* 9 Dec. 2011, 9 Dec 2011 <<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/theater-talkback-diminishing-the-hat-about-that-casting-controversy/?ref=theater>>.

and talented Latino actors. During these casting calls, the character descriptions did not mention that these two characters are Latino and as a result, Latino actors did not audition for the roles. Hartford also has a large Latino population, so much so that even its mayor is Puerto Rican.

In defense, the Executive Director of TheaterWorks, Steve Campo, stated that, “the actors that ended up being cast are, from the perspective of the director, the two best actors for the roles.”<sup>119</sup> How does Mr. Campo know that they were the best actors for the roles if no Latinos ever auditioned for these roles? These actors also happened to be former students of Mr. Thompson at New York University’s graduate acting program. Because of this, Mr. Guirgis believes that they were just easy and convenient to cast because Mr. Thompson had already worked with them.

Mr. Campo defended the casting by also stating that there are Latinos who have blonde hair and freckles. In response to this comment, Mr. Moreno, Artistic Director of INTAR Theatre, states, “We all know that there are Caucasian-looking Latinos. But what do I do? When a play calls for a Caucasian character, I cast those Caucasian-looking Latinos because I don’t want to not give that opportunity to a Latino actor, so if that’s the look they were going for, then they should have done that.”<sup>120</sup>

When Mr. Guirgis saw the production, he felt that the “while the two actors were talented and dedicated, the production was dangerously close to a minstrel show.” He also states, “I wrote a play where the two leads are clearly Latino, and Latino actors were completely shut out of the casting process for those two roles. TheaterWorks –

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<sup>119</sup> Patrick Healy, “Playwright Criticizes Casting in Hartford for ‘The \_\_\_\_\_ With the Hat’,” The New York Times Arts Beat 30 Nov 2011, 30 Nov. 2011. <[http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/30/playwright-criticizes-casting-for-production-of-the-\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_-with-the-hat/](http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/30/playwright-criticizes-casting-for-production-of-the-_____-with-the-hat/)>.

<sup>120</sup> Lou Moreno.

intentionally or unintentionally – practiced de facto discrimination against Latino actors who get too few opportunities to compete for roles in the industry to being with.”<sup>121</sup>

Varin Ayala, the only Latino in the cast (as the character description for the character of “Cousin Julio” stated that he was Latino), briefly spoke with me about his reaction to the play at a gathering at INTAR Theatre. He stated that he was very distressed about the casting decision they made and didn’t feel comfortable to bring it up until Mr. Guirgis announced his disapproval. He stated that the white actors playing the lead roles couldn’t understand why everyone was so upset. One of them stated, “It’s not like we are in blackface or anything like that.” Mr. Ayala responded, “Blackface is when people paint their faces to look like they are black and get on stage and pretend to be black by acting like what they perceive a black person acts like. How is this any different?” He also stated that the director, Mr. Thompson, contacted him and asked him to write a response that TheaterWorks could use to defend their casting decision, since he is Latino. Mr. Ayala refused as he said he did not agree with their decision and could not defend it. Even though he felt very conflicted about the production and on many occasions wanted to quit, Mr. Ayala chose not to leave as the chance to play the amazing role of “Cousin Julio” was much more important to him, as many Latino actors don’t come by roles and opportunities like this very often.

Actors are the most important piece of the puzzle because they are literally the faces of productions. They, and the characters that they portray, demonstrate the progression of playwriting by African-Americans and Latinos. The future generation of playwrights and actors just will not feel inspired if they don’t see people that look like them on the stage. If a playwright writes roles for actors of color, especially because he

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<sup>121</sup> Stephen Adly Gurgius.

or she understands that there are not many opportunities for African-Americans and Latinos to play lead roles on stages, why would a producer in turn give that role to a white actor? I know that the same argument can be made for plays that have roles that were written for white actors, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but, many theatre artists of color just feel that color-blind non-traditional casting should not apply until the day that African-American and Latino actors have the same opportunities that white actors have.

## Conclusion

For writers of color, theatre lives and production can be complicated in ways that go beyond finances. All but the most conscientiously experimental white writers tend to be seen as ‘mainstream.’ So-called mainstream theatres, many say, produce predominantly ‘white’ plays, by white writers, about white people, for white audiences. For writers of color, fitting in the mainstream, as defined by a largely white theatrical establishment, becomes an aesthetic issue. Can their work fit into this ‘mainstream’? Do they want it to? How does the mainstream theatre accommodate, or fail to accommodate, a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and modes of expression, across bodies of work? Do these theatres, once they have accepted a writer, allow that writer to change and grow, even if that growth leads them to tackle race in different ways, including dropping the subject altogether? When theatres consider their work what judgments do they make about universality that differ from how they view the work of white writers? How does race itself become an issue in their work in ways that do not apply to white writers? – *Outrageous Fortune*<sup>122</sup>

The above paragraph was the most profound statement that *Outrageous Fortune* made in regards to playwrights of color. It asks many questions that I have asked myself throughout the entire research process for this thesis. In this thesis, I have expressed what other theatre professionals and I believe are the current issues (which also seem to be the same as in the past) that affect works written by and about African-Americans and Latinos. As you can see, it is a very complicated and complex issue that touches every area of the theatre industry and beyond; from education, to development, to funding (governmental and foundational), to marketing, to management and, finally, to casting. Because of this, it is almost impossible to develop an all-encompassing solution to this troubling issue. I have heard it said that it will take a few generations to have American

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<sup>122</sup> Todd London with Benn Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss 71.



theatre truly reflect the face of America. I personally believe that even one generation is too long.

I would advise leaders of TCG/LORT theatre companies and Broadway producers to make diversity a priority in their theatres, and the most important way to do this is audience development. Theatre cannot be theatre without its audience, so we first need to focus on this group. Focus on creating new opportunities for audiences of color to discover your theatre. African-American and Latino audiences live in a diverse world and have diverse tastes in entertainment. They don't just want to see their stories; they want to see everyone's stories.

Theatre managers need to stop making assumptions about African-Americans and Latinos and actually engage with them and see what they want to see and what will keep them coming to your theatre. One way to reduce assumptions is to hire African-Americans and Latinos on your staff. Theatre managers should also study other industries and see how they are reaching out to these communities and what campaigns are successful.

For instance, a recent survey has shown that Latinos and African-Americans are more active on social media websites than whites.

The findings are shown below<sup>123</sup>:

Facebook

Latinos: 60.7%

Blacks: 60.3%

Whites: 53.7%

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<sup>123</sup> Rieva Lesonsky, "Who Rules Social Media? The Answer May Surprise You," AT&T Small Business InSite, 21 Mar. 2012, 21 Mar. 2012  
<[http://smallbiz.att.com/OSB/IdeaExchange/Rieva-Lesonsky-Detail.page?type=LiveSite:News&dcr=templatedata/LiveSite/News/data/Who\\_Rules\\_Social\\_Media\\_The\\_Answer\\_May\\_Surprise\\_You.xml&contentId=gzmdmawc](http://smallbiz.att.com/OSB/IdeaExchange/Rieva-Lesonsky-Detail.page?type=LiveSite:News&dcr=templatedata/LiveSite/News/data/Who_Rules_Social_Media_The_Answer_May_Surprise_You.xml&contentId=gzmdmawc)>.

Twitter

Latinos: 35.4%

Blacks: 28.9%

Whites: 12.6%

LinkedIn

Latinos: 15.5%

Blacks: 10.9%

Whites: 4.8%

Google+

Latinos: 27.1%

Blacks: 25.6%

Whites: 13.8%

Foursquare

Latinos: 13.2%

Blacks: 25.6%

Whites: 2.8%

Pinterest

Latinos: 13.2%

Blacks: 7.3%

Whites: 5.3%

Perhaps theatre marketers, press agents and advertisers would have better success in developing audiences of color by using targeted campaigns to them on social networking sites. As Shane D. Hudson, a social media consultant for arts organizations states, “Social media is about building relationships. Theatres should look at social media as an outreach tool, as a way to connect with patrons and potential patrons, and as a way to listen to what others are saying.”<sup>124</sup>

I have heard from marketers that niche marketing does not have a rich return of investment, but in this day in age, word of mouth is the most stated reason why someone purchases a ticket to a show. Niches are the ones that spread this word of mouth because

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<sup>124</sup> August Schulenburg, “The Future of Engagement,” TCG Circle 1 Apr. 2012, 1 Apr. 2012 <<http://www.tcgcircle.org/2012/03/the-future-of-engagement/>>

people are normally members of several different groups, whose members are also part of different groups and the chain just keeps on going. I, myself, am part of so many different and diverse social networks and I am always contacted by my friends to see what productions they should see. We live in a world where you have 2,000 friends that follow your every move every second of the day and they are interested in hearing what you have to say.

Theatres and producers need to take advantage of this and put a Latino and/or African-American twist on it. Find out who are the most influential people in these groups and see how they can help your production. You must get people engaged in the conversation so that they can start to take ownership of the production. Results may not show overnight, but they may show in a month or two or maybe even in the next year, but you will gain a much more active audience that is known for its passion and loyalty. This is a constant activity and needs to be upheld if a theatre company wishes to continue to attract a much more diverse audience.

We, as a theatre, also need to take a proactive step towards mentoring young people of color in theatre management. As I stated in Chapter Five, people of color are extremely underrepresented among the ranks of theatre decision makers and professionals. I myself have always felt like a pioneer in everything I do because of the lack of Latinas in any theatre company or production I have ever worked with. It has taken me three years to find a mentor, but I have finally found one, and this is very vital to development of my career. It is vital because learning from someone who has a similar cultural and socioeconomic background as mine will help me make well informed decisions in my career; because she was once in my exact footsteps as well.

Everyone in the theatre industry, white, black, and Latino, needs to put an effort into solving all of the issues that were presented in this essay. Playwrights of color cannot think and believe that they do not have to work as hard as their white counterparts to develop their art and have their works produced because they deserve it due to the color of their skin. Audiences of color need to start supporting their playwrights. Mainstream theatre professionals and audiences need to stop feeling threatened by how the country is evolving, open their eyes, and be conscious of the changing definition of what an American is. They need to embrace the immense amount of diversity that America has almost no other country in the world does.

An incredibly powerful stepping stone to produce more works by playwrights of color would be to focus on positive race relationships in America. There needs to be a true acknowledgement, by both people of color and whites, that even though we are a multicultural society, that we are all Americans and we must therefore present all Americans' stories and experiences to the world through our art.

Appendix

**Table 1**

**Ten Places With the Largest Number  
of Blacks or African-Americans: 2010 (in order)**

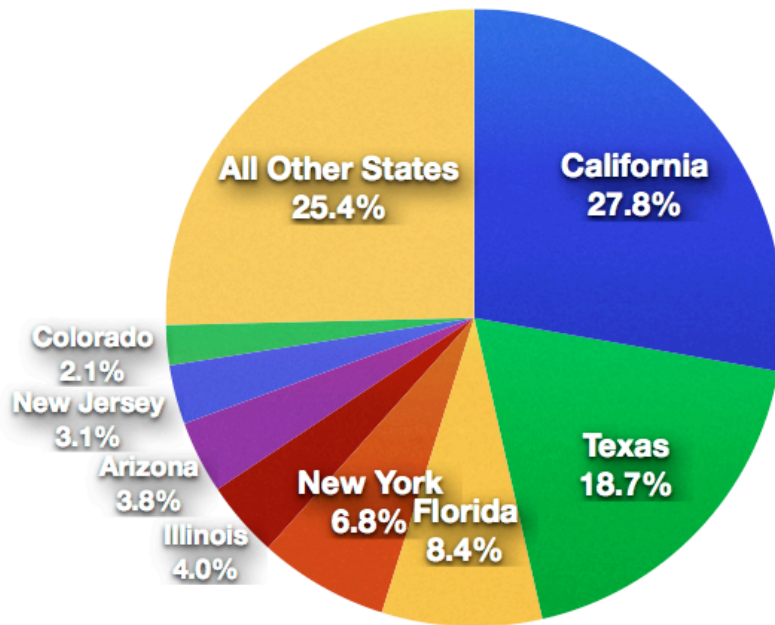
<b>Place</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Black or African-American alone or in combination (with another race)</b>
New York, NY	8,175,133	2,228,145
Chicago, IL	2,695,598	913,009
Philadelphia, PA	1,526,006	686,870
Detroit, MI	713,777	601,988
Houston, TX	2,099,451	514,217
Memphis, TN	646,889	414,928
Baltimore, MD	620,961	403,998
Los Angeles, CA	3,792,621	402,448
Washington, DC	601,723	314,352
Dallas, TX	1,197,816	308,087

Source: Sonya Rastogi, Tallese D. Johnson, Elizabeth M. Hoeffel,  
and Malcolm P. Drewery, Jr., "The Black Population: 2010,"  
U.S. Census Bureau Sept. 2011: 14.

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**Figure 1**

**Percent Distribution of the Hispanic Population by State: 2010**



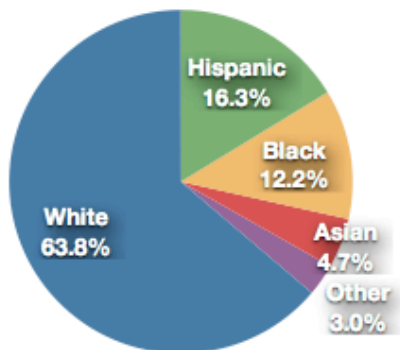
Source: Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Ríos-Vargas, and Nora G. Albert, "The Hispanic Population: 2010," U.S. Census Bureau May 2011: 7.

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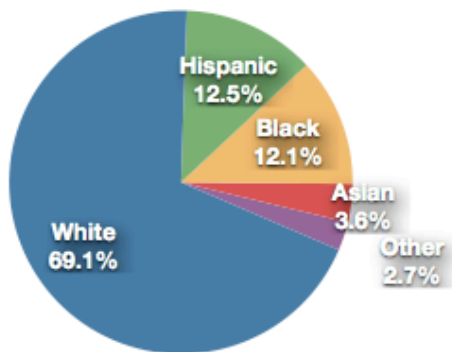
**Figure 2**

**U.S. Population by Race and Ethnicity, 2010 and 2000**

**2010**



**2000**



Source: Census 2010: 50 Million Latinos, Hispanics Account for More Than Half the Nation's Growth in the Past Decade.

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