The Fellows Gazette

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What's at Stake?

Sustaining DEIJ in US Theatre

When *The Fellows Gazette* announced its theme of "What's at Stake" for the spring 2025 issue on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in US theatre, could we have imagined that the stakes would be *this* high? Could we have imagined that the individual words — diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice — would become so weaponized that organizations and educational institutions would scrub them from their websites as though they were obscenities scrawled by vandals, rather than words that have graced some of the nation's most historic speeches and treasured monuments?

In such a moment what does it mean to set aside the manufactured hysteria and return to the core values represented in each of those individual words? As the College of Fellows marks its 60th year, honoring a community of artists and scholars, so many of whom have dedicated their careers to telling the stories of marginalized communities, how does our organization understand what diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice mean to *us*? How do we envision a path forward that honors the contributions of so many of the founding members of the College of Fellows and all the generations that have followed in their footsteps? In this issue we share the reflections of theatre artists and scholars on the past, present, and future of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in US theatre.

Theatre people have always understood that survival requires collaboration. As our members have demonstrated in their work and their lives, it also demands building a "Welcome Table" that uplifts all voices and identities. Through its fellowships and through the work of its members, the College of Fellows supports

rising generations of artists -- who may themselves be future Fellows. In this moment, we can imagine the individual and collective actions that will ensure that the true impact of the College of Fellows manifests in the work we value and the lives we change.

Our five questions for the Roundtable Participants, Benny Sato Ambush, Henry Bial, Kristoffer Diaz, Kim Marra, and Harvey Young, included:

1. Can you describe the impact that you've seen DEIJ activism have on US theatre over the past 10-20 years (this might include major milestones or important trends you've seen, or it might include communities represented, voices uplifted, etc.)?
2. How have the DEIJ initiatives you just talked about seeing shaped your career as an artist or scholar, or both?
3. Have you encountered resistance to DEIJ work? How did you navigate it? What does this resistance to DEIJ cultivate for the field?
4. Can you name some individuals or institutions whose DEIJ work has served as a successful model for your career?
5. How do you envision the future of your DEIJ work in the US, and what can you do to help artists and scholars sustain equity and inclusion in the US cultural landscape? How do people in positions of power/influence sustain this work?

--Heather Nathans (Tufts University and CoF, 2023)

The Fellows Roundtable

1. Can you describe the impact that you've seen DEIJ activism have on US theatre over the past 10-20 years (this might include major milestones or important trends you've seen, or it might include communities represented, voices uplifted, etc.)?

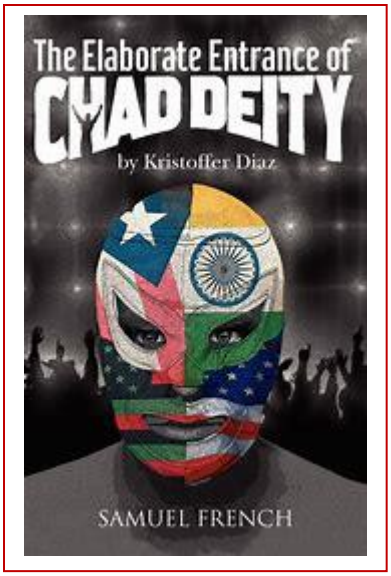
Henry Bial, Professor at the University of Kansas (Henry Bial | Department of Theatre & Dance) observes, "What we are seeing is a radical expansion of the kind of stories and identities that are getting produced." As Bial argues, Black theatre, Latinx, LGBTQ+ theatre, Women's Theatre, Asian American theatre, Indigenous theatre, didn't suddenly manifest in the 2000s, but "mainstream" theatres often seemed reluctant to produce art that, "expressed the whole range of human experience." Bial notes that this was once particularly true in university theatre, where institutions might allocate a "slot" for a so-called DEIJ show, without imagining that *every* show in a season could engage with the university's values around diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Bial marks the important shift from seeing the exploration of DEIJ topics as "optional" to them becoming part of the core mission of educational institutions.

Bial adds, "I think a really healthy thing that's happened in the last ten or twenty years has been moving the conversation past the kind of counting game of 'This is how many actors of a certain demographic we've put on the stage,' or 'This is how many playwrights of a certain demographic have been represented,' and we're moving towards a kind of *qualitative* understanding of the stories that we're telling." He points to the importance of student activism in this shift, as new generations of performers reject narratives and types of representation that don't do the kinds of cultural labor they want to see.

Picking up on Bial's theme of representation, **Benny Sato Ambush** (Artistic Director of the Venice Theatre, Benny Sato Ambush – Venice Theatre) reflected on his first trip to the annual gathering of LORT theatres in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. "It was the early 1980s and there was one person of color there, me, and one woman." Benny's comment raises the question of what it means to be "the only" in a space that might be majority white or majority male-identifying. Ambush describes, "I first started seeing a difference in representation especially racially and culturally during the 1980s when Equity was sponsoring regional, nontraditional casting symposiums," as a result of a prior four-year study about representation in the American theatre. He recalled one symposium in San Franciso which explored what he then called the "hot topic" of "multicultural and non-traditional casting in different categories of approaches," noting that this was "before the term 'antiracist' came into common use." As Benny commented, "The terms we used back then were multiculturalism and pluralism… and those were supposed to create a 'big table' to which everyone was invited." And while the terms have continued to develop, Ambush saw those regional symposiums and a flurry of articles in *American Theatre* and other publications (some that he wrote) begin, "to make a little difference." Ambush's acknowledgement that the difference seemed "little" offers a telling reminder of the immense gaps in representation that have persisted throughout the trajectory of US theatre.

> ***"I was there, and I was the only one."***

"We've been having this same conversation for twenty-five years," observes award-winning playwright, librettist, screenwriter, and educator, **Kristoffer Diaz** (https://www.kristofferdiaz.com/), as he reflected on the conversations among arts organizations and educators about creating more compositionally diverse teams and broader representation in US repertoires. For Diaz, it seems a simple idea that, "The more

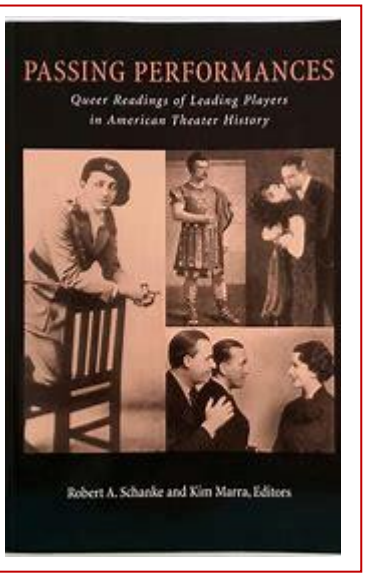


different kinds of voices you have, the better the work is going to be." However, he acknowledges that this is where the "simple" aspect of the work ends. He reminds his students that representation onstage, in the repertoire, and in the academy *has* shifted over the past three decades. Yet, he also notes, "I'm working primarily in the Broadway world these days [and] I'm consistently shocked by how few of specific groups are represented, how few Latino artists are working in on Broadway. When was the last time that a Latino playwright had a play produced, or more than *one* in a season?" Diaz calls out the current season as unusual for featuring *two* stories that center Latinx voices, and cautions those who see it as clear evidence of "progress." As he argues, "There is so much that is undone or unfinished...There's room, there's room, there's stories to be heard," beyond those one or two plays.

Diaz does see the results of the work that so many artists and scholars have put into the field over the trajectory of his career, "I think that things have gotten better…as a writer feeling comfortable and confident that I can write the things that I want to write, and that I [will] have actors regardless of the character that I want to put on stage. I'm going to be able to find the actors, to, to play those roles. I'm going to find directors who can understand, or at least have the vocabulary to do [the work]. So I feel great about that…[and] I feel really good about the opportunity that these shows will have…to find an audience." The paradox of when the work might be "finished" still lingers, as he says, "At the same time I still feel that very real sense of the work not being done."

Like Diaz, Professor Emeritus **Kim Marra** (https://theatre.uiowa.edu/people/kim-marra) looked back at generational change in the trajectory of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, sharing her perspective as a path-breaking scholar in LGBTQ+ performance history. From Marra's perspective, "The visibility of trans advocacy and trans rights has been a major force in the last ten or twenty years." She pointed to a number of rising scholars whose work explores "the queer unfinished" and what it means to "queer archives."

And Marra spotlighted not only the scholars who have been expanding on some of the conversations she helped to launch through her own work, but the earlier generations of scholars who helped to mold *her* early in her career. As she acknowledged, many of those community members might not have been able to openly express their identities forty or fifty years ago, but they made opportunities to encourage and support their students' and mentees' work. That encouragement helped to *legitimize* pursuing LGBTQ+ theatre as a research topic.



Marra also shared the tremendous impact of two major Black theatre scholars (both members of the College of Fellows) who taught her during her undergraduate and graduate education, Errol Hill (Dartmouth) and Esther Merle Jackson (University of Wisconsin-Madison). Beyond the skills and knowledge they shared with her, for Marra, both of these individuals became role models, "for the battles [they] fought." Their teachings came full circle in the year before her retirement, which witnessed the murder of George Floyd and the tremendous expansion of the Black Lives Matter movement. As she says, "I spent that summer trying to take my understanding of DEI and how my courses were honoring that mission to another level, because clearly whatever we had been doing was not sufficient. I'm grateful that I had that opportunity, that provocation to do that before I left."

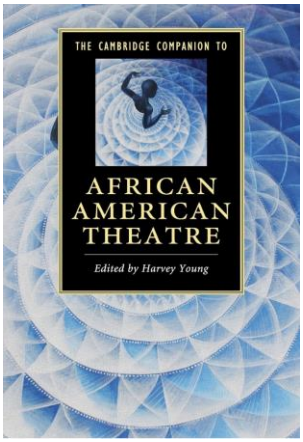
Looking to the future, Marra says she hopes to continue mentoring new scholars – particularly in the areas of disability studies, eco studies, and animal studies (where much of her recent research has focused). As she observes, "The interconnectedness of species has become more and more pressing to understand and performance can provide ways of doing that because of all of the unique potentials of performance and performance studies. My

intersectional frame has expanded to include, along with race ethnicity, class gender, sexuality, gender identity, also to include species. Historically, as we know, animals have been used to denigrate people. Certain people have been seen as less human, more animalistic. So I feel an urgency as a theater historian who has studied American theater in particular, to see how that works through those histories."

Harvey Young, Dean of the College of Fine Arts, Boston University (https://www.bu.edu/cfa/about/contact-directions/directory/harvey-young/) described the transformations he witnessed as a scholar and administrator over the past decade. Young pointed to #BLM, "We See You White American Theatre," "Stop Asian Hate," #MeToo, and the other activist movements that have challenged American artists and spectators to "stand up and say, 'Let's listen to these stories. Let's take a moment to hear a person share their experience.'" Young points to the work comissioned in the wake of so many tragedies as communities have grappled with the aftermath of multiple traumas or ongoing marginalization. He argues, "You can see the proliferation and growth of those previously unheard voices. These new plays, specifically post 2020, have helped Broadway evolve. The shifting demographics of voices featured in regional theaters are noticeable and related to the movements occuring over the past decade."

Young adds, "I often write about African American theater. My *Cambridge Companion to African American Theater* book, which came out in its first edition in 2012," a moment Young describes as "the before times of Black Lives Matter at a national level." He adds, "When the book was first published, there were not that many contemporary Black playwrights who had won the Pulitzer prize *and* whose works were frequently appearing on Broadway and regional stages."

Like Diaz, Young sees positive change in whose stories are being told now and whose work is being recognized. However, also like Diaz, he acknowledges the signficant distance yet to be traveled for the professional theatre to create equity in representation.



2. How have the DEIJ initiatives you just talked about seeing shaped your career as an artist or scholar, or both?

Bial describes the call to activist work that has shaped his career since the 1990s, watching people like Jill Dolan (Cof) and Dwight Conquergood. As Bial says, they argued that "The work that we do in the theater and in theater education has to be engaged and active. Theater can't be just an aesthetic artistic thing that happens in a vacuum, or about the kind of conservation of the great cultural achievements of the past, but it has to be that the work we do is about shaping the world for the better, going forward about doing kind of cultural labor."

Bial has been drawn to that kind of craft throughout his career, but says that the diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice movement of the last decade, "has helped sharpen and focus," his efforts. He adds, "It's helped me realize that this abstract call for theater to make people more empathetic or make people believe more in in the goodness of humanity… is not helping the people who need help." For Bial, theatre adorned with platitudes does nothing to "really move the needle" on "the social conditions that we want to try to influence both within our institutions and beyond."

"This abstract call for theatre to make people more empathetic is not helping the people who need help."

Marra's current research on animal performance has challenged her to think about the ways that classifications around animal labor have translated into the Social Darwinist mentality that continues to plague US culture. For her, studying animals also offers a window into the origins of some contemporary conversations about ableism and the ongoing question of, "What can a body do?"

Marra underscored that her research into ableism and its links to animal performance lies outside the standard subjects familiar to scholars of US theatre. For Marra, a commitment to inclusion and equity are key in identifying and pursuing overlooked subjects. And it returned her to the theme that several of our Roundtable participants echoed – the ways in which subjects acquire *legitimacy* through the work of artists and scholars documenting and validating their experiences.

Diaz described some of the opportunities that had shaped his trajectory as an artist and educator. He notes, that "None of this was DEI at the time… but I come into this business through a lot of culturally specific programs." For example, he pointed to the Hispanic Playwrights Project at the South Coast Repertory Theatre (1986-2004) as one of his first big professional moments (Hispanic Playwrights Project History | South Coast Repertory). He recalls, "At that time (2003) I had just gotten out of graduate school, and I was selected to develop my play, *Welcome to Arroyo's* at South Coast. They brought out four playwrights… It was me Karen Zacarias, Carlos Murillo and Quiara Alegria Huides, which was just craziness. Amazing [to work with] Quiara right before she exploded on the scene. So that was a great game-changing opportunity for me."

For Diaz, the moment meant more than a platform for his work. It meant a chance to work in a *community* of other artists developing new work in Latinx theatre. He praises Zacarias, who, "took me under her wing in a very conscious way…and grounded me and hipped me to the game." Through the SCR program Diaz connected with people who would become lifelong colleagues, including Michael John Garcés and Jaime Castañeda.

Diaz was open about his anxieties of entering spaces being framed in certain ways, "I was hesitant of Latino spaces, because I don't speak Spanish. I'm very, very, very Americanized. I consider my cultural heritage to be New York City as much as I consider it to be anything else. So I always have a little bit of that concern in those kinds of spaces. And what was really fantastic about the Hispanic Playwrights Project was, it made me understand that this community was supportive of *everyone*, from all different kinds of backgrounds." For Diaz, the community at SCR focused on telling stories, rather than judging artists, and "I got over that fear and self- loathing that I have for never having learned Spanish."

"If you're in the work, you have to name the work."

In looking back over the network of relationships that have supported his work, Diaz muses, "I don't know that it necessarily falls under the big picture sort of formalized DEI work, but it's been so fundamental to my success," and to understanding, "how this business and how this community works." Diaz added that his experiences have helped him to realize that it is in fact important to *name* the work as part of a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice: "If you're in the work, you have to name the work."

Looking back at the way DEIJ work has shaped his career, like Diaz, Ambush noted, "Back then, we didn't call it DEI, but that's essentially what it was." Ambush described his efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to create more inclusive theatre spaces, but pointed to the challenges he and other like-minded artists of color faced in the process, even among what he describes as "ethnically specific theatres." It was a constant fight for legitimacy and recognition. When-Eurocentric companies *did* do work related to Black experiences, he argues that they often resorted to the same small collection of "safe" well-known works, such as *A Raisin in the Sun*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and works by Athol Fugard. Reflecting back on the DEI productions of the 1980s, Ambush said, "I'm going to talk about Black folks for a moment, but I also mean by, extension, all people of color: There are palatable, comfortable explorations of plays that have Black people in them that are for white people, and there are plays with Black people in them that speak to Black people." And Ambush points to the crucial absences of productions from the repertoires of Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous voices.

Like Ambush, **Young** pays attention to representation in the mainstream media and recognizable stages for artists of the global majority. He described the brief, post-2020 surge in the presence of Black playwrights on Broadway, even though, as he notes, many of those shows closed early because of audiences' COVID-related reluctance to come back into performance spaces. Young also notes the ratio of Pulitzer Prizes for drama vs. Tony Awards over the past decade, arguing, "There's a notable difference. The community of scholars and critics have been more likely to recognize the works of BIPOC artists than the theatre industry itself." As a scholar of theatre, awards offer an important index for Young in tracking the kinds of voices and stories that institutions want to lift up (since 2016, the majority of the Pulitzer Prizes for Drama have been awarded to artists of color: https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/218; *Image: Eboni Booth, recipient of the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Primary Trust*).

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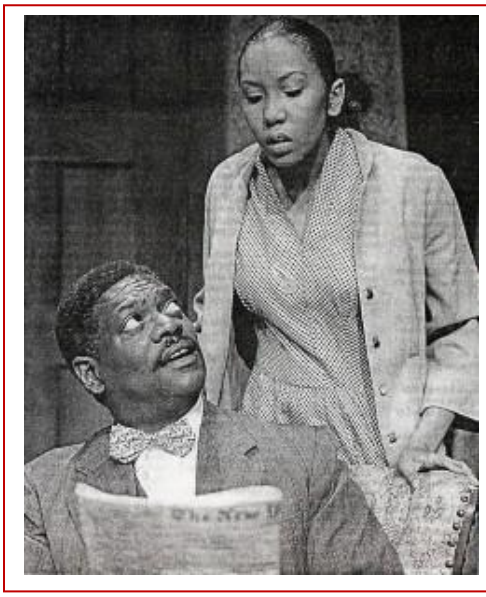
3. Have you encountered resistance to DEIJ work? How did you navigate it? What does this resistance to DEIJ cultivate for the field?

"Before I showed up in town…people started canceling their subscriptions and when I showed up at the theatre there was hate mail waiting for me."

Ambush reflected on his brief tenure with TheatreVirginia in Richmond, VA (LORT C). He says, "It was a short tenure only 18 months… I was teaching at California State University, Monterey Bay at the time, and living in California when I got the job. Richmond is the former capital of the Confederacy and that theater was about 47 years old then. I was still working my job in California when the newspapers announced that I was the new hire. They put my picture in the paper and before I showed up in town to begin my work, people started canceling their subscriptions, and when I physically arrived in

town, there was hate mail waiting for me." Ambush remembers, "I had a lot of people fearful that I would turn it into a 'Black theater' before I had even done anything." He describes how he navigated the challenge, "I held a number of Town Hall meetings where I was trying to get to know my new community and vice versa, and to allay their fears." He adds, "There was a lot of tension in the room during those meetings (two of them)… When I mentioned that among the few plays written by people of color that TheatreVirginia had ever done was *A Raisin in the Sun*, I had one white community member say, 'Well, so what difference does that make?'" After that comment Ambush says, "I finally had one brave young woman say, "I'll tell you how my grandmother, who's not here, feels about it. She said she's afraid that because [Ambush] is here, that she will no longer be welcome as a white person." Ambush responded, "So I told that woman, 'Thank you for saying that, now we can get to work. Now I see where you're stuck. It's out in the open. Now I can address it'."



Coming into that environment, Ambush also remembers that he "inherited a season," but that because of the controversy over his appointment, artists started to "bail" on the company. He made two changes to the season: canceling one play and substituting Lynn Nottage's *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* for Rebecca Gilman's *Spinning Into Butter*. The *Virginia Chronicle* described it as a "good choice" for Ambush's debut with the company, noting that the "stunned audience was abuzz in the lobby" after Act One. The paper also pointed to Ambush as, "The first African-American to hold the post [of Producing Artistic Director] in the theatre's 47-year history." (Richmond Free Press 28 February 2002 — Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive; image from the original production, featuring Johnny Lee Davenport and Nadiyah Dorsey).

> ***"They hired me to make a difference… I guess it wasn't the difference that they wanted."***

For Ambush, shifting representation onstage and among the audience at TheatreVirginia was a crucial part of his mission: "60% of the population of Richmond was Black, and they never felt invited at that theatre. So I said, I'm changing that perception. I had people accuse me of an agenda. Almost any person of color that has taken any of these artistic leadership positions in historically white theaters faces this white fear projected on the difference-maker." Despite his efforts, "The board shut the theater down 17 months after I took over and closed it. They hired me to make a difference. That was the whole point of me being there. I guess it wasn't the difference that they wanted."

Ambush also described another, more insidious resistance that he and other Black colleagues experience on a regular basis, "I'm a director, and I have freelanced off and on all my career. I often only hear from theatres for the Black History month show, and only for Black shows. The other eleven months of the year…crickets." Ambush calls this the "ghettoizing" of Black artists and hails Jack O'Brien (CoF) for bringing him to the Old Globe in San Diego multiple times to direct works that were *not* "Black shows." Similarly, he pointed to Gloucester Stage in Massachusetts, where he had the opportunity to direct Peter Shaffer's Lettice and Lovage and Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Yet, Ambush argues that his choices to direct shows outside the repertoire of Black authors sometimes drew criticism from both within and beyond the Black community. Some Black audiences, "questioned the degree of my Blackness," while "white people [said] that I was confused and didn't know my own mind." He recognizes that, "meanwhile my white artistic director counterparts down the road can do whatever they want and be celebrated for the breadth and depth of their vision." As Ambush contends, "There always seems to be a double standard for historically disenfranchised artists and that includes women, anybody who's not of the dominant male, Christian, heterosexual, cisgendered population. You're less than, lower than, the collateral damage to white supremacy. White men are entitled to be in

charge because they are seen to be divinely endowed with gifts superior to anybody else's." He adds, "That's what we're seeing right now. What's happening in our country now is driven by that same impulse, we're just using different terms."

Young's observations echo Ambush's as he described the challenge in perceptions around hiring artists from the global majority. He describes hearing friends, who are white artists, say that they "cannot" be hired for particular roles because there's "great pressure to hire a person of color." Young expressed concern with this phrasing, "Because the narrative of inclusion gets reframed as something being 'taken away' without acknowledging the biases that previously denied qualified artists of color opportunities." For Young, this represents a misperception of what it means to bring diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice to US society. It also points to a critical failure of imagination: the inability to recognize that absence of certain voices *harms* the greater community.

As an educator, Young recognizes that there are a lot of talented artists of all backgrounds and that theatre companies should be "proactive in their outreach." Theatre companies should not only wait until a member of a traditionally marginalized community "walks in the door." Those individuals who claim that there "just aren't any" artists of the global majority (for example), are "being willfully blind to the circumstances that created a condition of exclusion." It is equally important for companies to be vocal in their desire to hire the best artists regardless of their backgrounds.

"I feel like I've had the opportunity to advocate in these very small rooms."

Bial dissected the differences between big-picture resistance to DEIJ work (at the national or state level), vs. what individuals might experience in their home institutions, "I think that that big picture resistance is, in a sense much easier to deal with because the lines are clearly drawn and perhaps they're very nakedly partisan…The trickier ones, right are the resistance that presents itself as 'reasonable' or 'necessary'." For example, Bial cites pressure to develop theatrical repertoires with easy name recognition. In the process, "You are making assumptions about

who your audience is, or who your audience is *going* to be." He notes that kind of bias surfaces in season planning when people may contend that a certain play didn't draw a large audience in the past, using that as a rationale for not doing another play by an artist of color, a woman, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, etc. And he talks about the need to be the person in the room to remind decision-makers that those kinds of generalizations don't get applied to cis-gendered white male artists in the same way. "One flop of a play by a white man never scares a theatre company away from doing all plays by white men."

Bial also discussed the impact of prestige bias in hiring in for US theatre at both the professional and educational level, and the harm caused by the assumption that a candidate with a specific set of institutional credentials is automatically more qualified another with possibly less well-known credentials. Bial adds, "I feel like I've been able to advocate in these very small rooms," where he has had the opportunity to point out implicit or unconscious biases, "And to [people's] credit, the resistance usually evaporates once you can take it out and put it on the table and name it. These aren't people who are cynically using these objections to advance a racist or transphobic agenda. These are people who simply haven't had the tools or the experience to see those blind spots." Bial described pursuing training that has helped him navigate his own biases and develop the tools to call others into the work.

Marra described first-hand experiences of bias and resistance in her scholarship on LGBTQ+ artists, "Well, certainly, when Bob Schanke (CoF) and I started out with the idea for passing performances in the early 1990s we met a great deal of resistance." In Marra's case, colleagues with a vision for a more just and inclusive field helped to support her work, "The heroic LeAnn Fields was the editor we were working with at Michigan, and she not only supported our project, but she strategically navigated the system to help move it forward." As Marra describes, "She set up a series called Triangulations in order to bring on Jill Dolan and David Román as editors, and have that layer of advocacy for the project" (Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance (Series): Showing 1 to 25 of 27 results sorted by Newest to oldest). Dolan and Román helped with the pushback from

the Board about "outing" American artists of the distant past. As Marra emphasizes, "We weren't in people's bedrooms… so we were trying to track networks of affiliation. Who people worked with, what the lifestyles were of these folks in terms of where they lived, who they lived with for any length of time, what they did for each other." Marra points to what has now become a standard practice in contemporary theatre research, but which encountered resistance almost thirty years ago, "You begin to see patterns that allow you to argue that that certain desires were informing these connections and informing the aesthetics of the shows they sought to do." Marra sees the resistance to the project as a reluctance to acknowledge the full diversity and intersectionality of US theatre history, and credits the imagination and determination of senior colleagues who advocated for that more honest history. A blurb from Oscar Brockett (CoF) on the back jacket of *Passing Performances* when it was published in 1998 powerfully endorsed these pioneering efforts.

Diaz suggests that DEIJ activism in theatre often meets with resistance when people fear that they're "going to be told that their approach is wrong, or problematic, or hurtful." He has seen that defensive mode emerge and understands that it can create obstacles in doing the work. He described his own experience of realizing that he lacked awareness in critical areas and acknowledging that he would never be able to know, see, or understand the experience of every marginalized community member. However, for him, this offered a prompt to focus on the critical questions that shape conversations around identity and help to build a *shared* vocabulary about the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice as action items, rather than nouns.

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4. Can you name some individuals or institutions whose DEIJ work has served as a successful model for your career?

Interestingly, **Ambush** focused on the organizations, "not necessarily looking for attention, but just doing the work in their communities and embracing them." He hailed the theatre companies that imagined diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice as, "part of their mission, not as an attachment or an add-on when funding became available all of a sudden. This has been an issue in some of the theaters I've worked at." Ambush expressed appreciation for the groups that lean into hyper-localized work. He clarified that while they may be flying under a national radar, they're not "hiding" their mission. Instead of "boasting and bragging, they *do*… Those are my kind of people." Ambush pointed to the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center (*image*), which he says, "from its inception was always about *all* of Los Angeles." He also pointed to La MaMa and the work of Ellen Stewart for the pioneering work in welcoming so many voices into the community. (www.innercityculturalcenter.org/our-history.html and https://www.lamama.org/). He offered Mixed Blood and the San Francisco Mime Troupe as additional examples.

Ambush also spoke movingly about the struggles to find a role model for the kind of work he wanted to do early in his career, "I went to my mentor, George Bass, in despair saying, I'm dreaming about these things (artistically lead a LORT theatre), but I don't see anybody out there that looks like me as a role model. He said, 'You have to become a role model for other people and dare to be great,' which is what I've been trying to do ever since. I might have felt better and more encouraged if I had seen other examples. At least at the LORT level. There have always been artistic directors of color and of different races, cultures, genders and sexualities in other categories of theaters that were not LORT they've always been there. But at the LORT level, I didn't see them."

"It was a very active, vital, and violent time."

As part of his mission to be a model for others, Ambush has contributed articles on non-traditional casting, and has long been an activist in that arena. As he comments, "We didn't say DEI back then in the

seventies or eighties, or even in the sixties. We had a Black Arts movement, and other human rights movements. All those movements were happening in the sixties and early seventies when I came of age -- ERA, free speech, the American Indian movement, Black Power, anti-Viet Nam war protests, women's liberation. It was a very active, vital, and violent time."

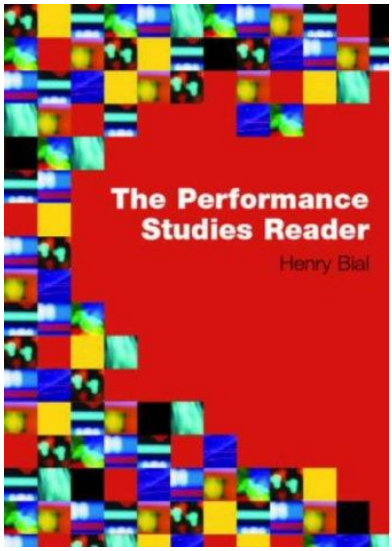
In describing his models for success, **Young** focused on individuals who have impressed him. For example, he pointed to Crystal Williams, the President of the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design (https://www.risd.edu/about/leadership/about-crystal-williams). As he commented, "She might be the most articulate person I've encountered who can talk persuasively about the work of equity and inclusion in manner that does not posit diversity as a bad word and thinks justice is part of a larger narrative of solutions to exclusion."

Young also saluted the Black theatre companies in Boston, Chicago, New York, DC, Philadelphia, and elsewhere that have labored to create and expand community of all backgrounds, even as he noted that many now face challenges to their survival due to funding cuts, lack of stable leadership, or post-COVID challenges. In looking at local arts organizations near his own institutional home of Boston University, he pointed to the award-winning Front Porch Arts Collective of Boston, which identifies as, "A black theatre company committed to advancing racial equity in Boston through theatre" (https://www.frontporcharts.org/)

In thinking about models for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice throughout his career, **Bial** cited his training at NYU's Performance Studies program in the 1990s because of the ways it encouraged scholars to explore performance cultures in Africa and Asia, cultivating what he described as a kind of "utopian interculturalism." He appreciated the ways that a curriculum that *didn't* focus on traditional works and knowledge created space for new kinds of knowing. And while Bial notes that the original work launched by Richard Schechner has

been nuanced by the scholarship of the past thirty years, as Bial says, the original vision was "inspirational." He also points to, "The important work on queer theater and performance art with Peggy Phelan and Fred Moten on the ways in which certain types of power structures are built into the university, and how we navigate those."

Bial adds, "I feel like really fortunate to have had different models, [although]…they were considered dangerously radical in 1995." As Bial contends, he found it liberating to see, "the way they made space in the curriculum for all of these other voices that had previously been excluded in the conversation through the simple expedient of saying, 'You know what? Who cares if we read Shaw? Who cares about the weight of the stones in the theater of Dionysus? We're going to [explore] all this other stuff. and if we neglect Arthur Miller well, it'll be OK."



Bial also sees his non-traditional path into Theatre Studies as part of his penchant for thinking outside the box in curriculum development, "I've often found it very liberating that I don't actually have any degrees in theater. I have one in folklore and mythology, and two in performance studies, and therefore I am not tied down to any particular idea of what has to be in a theatre curriculum."

Bial credits his students with teaching him about how to put the values of DEIJ work into practice. He says, "My tenure track job was at University of New Mexico, which is a Title V Hispanic Serving Institution." There he taught a compositionally-diverse community of Hispanic, Anglo, and Indigenous students. "Teaching in that environment made me much more aware of these issues of representation and made me much more up to speed on the kind of writers and performers who had that experience." As Bial acknowledges, he also struggled with the challenge of not representing the majority identity positions of his students (nor did anyone

else in his department at the time). But, he says, "I bonded with a lot of these students simply by virtue of being the one closest to them in age, and so that that was really very helpful." He describes similar experiences at his current institution, KU, where, as he suggests, it's easier to deal with DEIJ questions in some sense, "because as a public institution we explicitly have the *mandate* to serve everyone." At the end of the day, Bial also argues that schools should, "not be premised on exclusivity, on how many people we turn down…That's another way of freeing us up from some of those past biases, or removing obstacles to doing the work you want to do." And as theatre programs across the country labor to increase enrollments, creating inclusive environments will prove crucial to that process.

Marra focused on the need to create and support opportunities for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice at the local level – both on college campuses and in the communities that house them. She also spoke emotionally of the ways that senior colleagues can and should *protect* junior scholars whose careers might be more vulnerable based on their identities or their research. Marra's "pay it forward" model of mentorship invites people to commit to their DEIJ service at the individual and daily level. She spoke from the perspective of putting together the 100-year anniversary history of her department, since, as she observed wryly, "I was here for a third of that time."

She pointed to the importance of creating an inclusive environment in the most literal sense – ensuring that students and junior colleagues see representation in the classrooms and halls they navigate on a daily basis. She described transforming the department at Iowa, which had, prior to 2021, been replete with headshots of past faculty and alums, and which, "was like a sea of white male dominance," without any history of the department to give context. The department elected to create a digital gallery that will now have more space to support the stories of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ faculty and alums, as well as continuing to document the history of the program's past, such as its longstanding connections with HBCUs that brought students to the Iowa MFA program (https://theatre.uiowa.edu/alumni). Perhaps not

surprisingly, as a lifelong theatre historian, Marra understands the importance of drawing out the nuances of our histories.

Diaz emphasized the need to model multiple kinds of storytelling and to cultivate a diversity of *perspectives* – particularly in academic settings. He observed, "In academia we do not see people across the political spectrum. That's just a fact. We just don't see it. I don't see a lot of people from certain parts of the country. We need to do a better job. The world need to do a better job of understanding the diversity of the United States. The United States is so many things... So I do think there's value in the interrogation about what we mean when we ask for diversity." However, as Diaz argues, those questions need to be posed *in good faith*.

And like Ambush and Bial, he raised the question of who is allowed to write, direct, or tell certain stories. For example, he described wanting to "just write the story about the family that gets together on the holidays and rehashes old shit. Not [to] talk about our immigration status. That may or may not be the thing that we have to talk about. But the primary thing I want to talk about is what the relationships are if the relationships are colored by those other things. That's great. But I don't want to be pinned into that corner." With that in mind, he admits, that he does get "nervous sometimes around the DEI work," if it seems to be putting *limits* on the kinds of stories he can tell.

As a role model for work in diversity, equity, and inclusion, he pointed to an experience with Minnesota's Mixed Blood Theatre Company (https://mixedblood.com/). They invited him to be part of a 2016 project called *DJ Latinidad Big Latin Dance Party*. A number of writers came in to craft short plays and produce them over the course of a night. (*Image, DJ Latinidad*)

Diaz recalls, “I didn't know what to write. I had a 2 year old son at that point, and I said to him, ‘Let's make something together.’ So he gave me a bunch of random baby names for characters and it was just nonsense and baby language, like the chaos of being a little kid. And I took that, and I wrote a short play about it, and it was called *Lemon Jackson*, and it had no ‘cultural’ anything in it. And we put it in the show. Artist-in-Residence, Mark Valdez was the person [coordinating the show] and Jack Reuler (Artistic Director) was still there at the time, and both of them said, ‘This is great, this is this is what we want’.” (https://www.markevaldez.com/ and https://mixedblood.com/about/history/).

But as Diaz remembers, “Some of the audience members were the people who asked, ‘Why is this in this show? You're not talking about language. You're not talking about immigration. You're not talking about *Abuelita*. You're not talking about food. You're not hitting any of those markers’.” Diaz appreciated the way that the theatre’s directors and the actors stood up for him, declaring, “It's a Latino story, because it was written by a Latino man and his half Latino son. And we get to tell those stories, too.” Diaz’s experience reminded him of the need to make sure that definitions of what constitutes “diversity” don’t become so narrowly focused that they ultimately *exclude* voices and stories.

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5. How do you envision the future of your DEIJ work in the US, and what can you do to help artists and scholars sustain equity and inclusion in the US cultural landscape? How do people in positions of power/influence sustain this work?

Marra returned to her theme of genealogies, and the need to make the generational work of campaigning for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice *visible* to younger artists and scholars. That visibility and sense of legacy can counter a sense of despair and isolation. It can also create a sense of momentum and agency.

Speaking from her perspective as a historian focusing on LGBTQ+ narratives, Marra reminded scholars and artists to *always* query the archive for what it reveals and what it conceals. She described the ways in which narratives have often been "straightened," another process that generates a sense of isolation in queer communities. As artists and scholars, we have opportunities to resist that impulse. As Marra says, "There are stories I want to share that moved me and moved the field and if we don't share them, how will this be known?"

"As a straight white guy, I have a ton of unearned privilege. What am I going to do with it?"

Bial commented candidly, "As a straight white guy, I have a ton of unearned privilege. What am I going to do with it?" In answer to his own question, he makes himself vulnerable to critique by building inclusive programming in his curriculum and by representing a compositionally diverse array of voices and experiences. With his characteristic humor, he notes, "That doesn't make me Rosa Parks," adding, "I've definitely made some mistakes, and that's where you trust the students to tell you if you've created a culture where they feel comfortable." He also reminded educators that claiming a certain area was outside their comfort zone or expertise was a feeble excuse for not doing the work, "No one would ever come into a class and say, 'I haven't really bothered to read any of the literature about this Shakespeare guy, but I got hold of this play last week, and I wanted to mix up the syllabus'." And as unthinkable as that example sounds, he observes, "I have occasionally seen people do that with a 'diversity' play" as a way to sidestep their own insecurities about making "mistakes" in grappling with complicated material. Bial challenges himself with the reminder that, "Any of my discomfort is so trivial relative to living as a queer person or person of color under this sort of end-stage capitalism that we're in, that I should just shut up and do the thing."

"Any of my discomfort is so trivial relative to a living as a queer person or person of color under this sort of end-stage capitalism…"

Diaz questioned the concept of "merit" being substituted for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice – as though the terms were somehow incompatible or functioned in opposition to each other. "Meritocracy sounds great in the arts." But he pushes back against the concept that

there can be an "objective" standard for art because that supposed impartiality elides the very structures and systems that have kept some stories relegated to the margins. As Diaz argues, "One of the things that I value when I read a new play is, have I seen this play before? Have I heard this voice before? Because what I'm interested in in new plays especially is someone giving me a perspective on the world that changes the way that I think about it. So there is something fundamentally meritorious in *that*."

Diaz's goals for the future included prompts for theatre companies to imagine seasons with more than one voice or one perspective on an identity. He points to the danger of having *one* season slot for Latinx artists, *one* slot for Indigenous artists, *one* slot for Black artists, etc., saying, "It's putting us in a position where we feel like we are in competition with each other." Moving forward, Diaz hopes to see seasons that might feature *multiple* authors from a particular group in the global majority as a way to expand the range of stories told and voices represented. He imagined a space where artistic directors would have the confidence to program an entire season of (for example) Latinx artists. For Diaz, engaging with multiple voices from specific communities represents a kind of "intellectual and artistic honesty," rather than imagining that one artist speaks for an entire community.

He also challenges companies that *don't* want to represent artists from the global majority or traditionally marginalized communities to be honest about it. This circles back to his theme of merit. Rather than pretending that a certain play isn't as good as one by a canonical (white) author, "I think it is about being like honest about what it is that you do and what you believe. I wouldn't be shocked if over the next few years we see some theater companies start to remove that language [DEIJ] and feel like they're freeing themselves from that." He notes that "there is a very viable business plan that is not centered around diversity" in certain communities. Diaz adds, "If you want to do that, I encourage you to be brave and be upfront about what it is that you actually do. So that for the people for whom equity in representation *is* an issue, we know either, 'Okay, we're not welcome here. I'm not going to bother submitting my plays to you'." While that may offer an uncomfortable truth, for Diaz, honesty at least counters the fallacy of a meritocracy in the arts.

> ***"Double down. Don't buy into fear. Stake your claim in the work…"***

In imagining how to sustain diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in US theatre, **Ambush** declared, "Try not to be afraid. Try not to be cowed. Try not to self-censor. Try not to obey in advance. Try not to alter already." Ambush reminds us, "Resistance is needed. Double down. Don't buy into fear. Stake your claim in the work you do and on your terms. Take back the definitions that were there to begin with. I'm at the age now where I'm not going to stop. I fought my whole life for legitimacy. The same kind of legitimacy that my white counterparts have had their whole lives. To have people now say, 'Oh, we're bringing back the colorless society' -- Colorblindness never works. Don't tell me you don't see a black face. I've heard all my life, 'Oh, Benny, when I see you, I don't see a Black person.' Bullshit. Yes, you do."

Ambush demanded, "We have to go the other way, have to lean into it and proclaim proudly who we are in our difference, in our specificity, and insist upon an equal place at the table, a different paradigm that is horizontal, not vertical. It's a scary time right now. Personally, I'm not changing me. That may mean there'd be some projects I turn down. I've done that before. I can't live a lie, and I'm not hiding. I'm not going into anybody's closet. That's a decision that many organizations and individuals have to face now." Ambush understands what a terrifying and uncertain moment people may be in right now, "How are you going to respond to this? I say, get courage by looking at what people who came before us did. They stood up and they fought. It's a shame that we still have to fight. But it's the same issues. The idea of America is a work in progress, and we may lose it. We're in the process of losing it right now. Can we survive it? And can we come back from it? I don't know. But right now, what's happening is how democracies die... and the dream of true equality without sacrificing difference or apologizing for difference is threatened."

Young echoed Ambush's theme, "History should not be edited in such a way that the contributions of whole groups of people disappear. Structures and institutions should not be operated in a manner that denies the possibilities of a person's identity. How do you continue to advocate for a person being themselves especially in a climate in which just the fact of

their own being is contested and threatened?" Young pointed to the "long history" of moments when societies move towards inclusion, "and then the rock rolls back down the hill." And while he admits it can be heart-wrenching when you realize that "The pushing, the work, the labor needs to continue." But, he added with hope, "In those moments you acknowledge that the progress you made is because there were some people who were there before carrying some of the burden." Underscoring the generations of labor that have gone into the struggle for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, he said, "Those people are tired now. Some will continue to push on. Some are no longer with us. And some just need a break." And when the people who have been in the fight need to take a breath, others need to be ready to step forward. Young admits, "that's the hard part."

As an educator, Young can't let go of the fight for access to education and of the right for people to express their identities freely and without fear. And while he has seen academic discourse shift over time as terms such as "gender" and "diversity" continue to evolve, he warns against the wholesale *erasure* of words from our teaching vocabularies. "Words that are meant to be inclusive get redefined to be exclusive." Or words that the society has valued suddenly acquire pejorative meanings or become weaponized like "woke" or "diversity" or "justice." As Young observes, "That's something that raises an eyebrow… But this is why the work we do matters." And at the end of the day, for Young, artists and educators can use whatever words they need, "to carry on the work, because ultimately that work is *not* divisive. That work is just meant to bring more people to the table."

"In those moments, you acknowledge that the progress you made is because there were some people who were there before carrying some of the burden."

Conclusion

Our Roundtable participants spoke with passion, candor, and commitment. They see the struggle that lies ahead. As veterans of many earlier struggles, they shared their faith that artists and scholars *can* continue to do the transformative work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice if we remember that we never have to be alone in the work, and that we can call on each other for support and courage along the way.

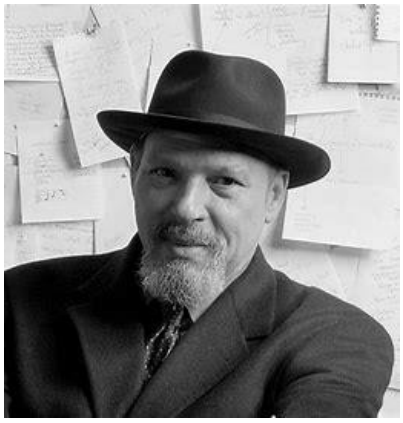
For more resource on the current state of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice work in US theatre and higher education, we offer the resources below. We also invite colleagues to share their own experiences, stories, resources, and inspiration. Email fellowsgazette@gmail.com.

- ***The Chronicle of Higher Education* has been tracking DEI-related issues across US institutions:** https://www.chronicle.com/tag/diversity-equity-inclusion**.**

- **Theatre Communications Group (TCG):** https://www.tcg.org/Web/Web/Our-Work/Advocacy/Advocacy.aspx?hkey=55281f32-03fb-4be9-9ef7-ef017b393aef

- **The list below was created and shared via a joint effort from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and the American Society for Theatre Research:**
    - Receive TCG's Action Alerts and Advocacy Updates to take immediate action on issues that affect the theatre field and stay up-to-date on the latest news. https://tcg.org/Web/ContactManagement/Advocacy-Sign-Up.aspx
    - To receive advocacy alerts from the American Historical Association with specific actions for your geographic locations: https://www.historians.org/why-history-matters/aha-advocacy/
    - For more information on how the administration's Executive Orders affect higher education: https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Trump-EOs-Shift-Higher-Education-Landscape.aspx
    - For links on research funding and the shifting policies: https://www.cogr.edu/2025-administration-transition-information-resources
    - For the effects on nonprofits: https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/impacts-recent-executive-orders-nonprofits
    - What DEI and Accessibility policies are under attack: https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/dei-and-accessibility-explained
    - ACLU's action petition on right to education: https://action.aclu.org/petition/defend-every-students-right-learn
    - Opinion piece on academic freedom to understand some of the ongoing arguments: https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2025/01/29/we-need-new-ways-protect-academic-freedom-opinion

SPECIAL Announcement



The College of Fellows is pleased to announce that **August Wilson** will be posthumously inducted into the Class of 2025 on what would have been his 80th birthday. August Wilson is an American playwright best known for his extraordinary cycle of 10 plays that chronicle the 20th century African-American experience. All but one of Wilson's masterful plays are set in the Hill District, the working-class neighborhood of his birth in 1945. Each play is set in a different decade and collectively became known as the American Century Cycle. "Put them all together," Wilson once said, "and you have a history." August Wilson never formally studied theater. He often explained that he instead got his education from the four B's: the blues, the art of painter Romare Bearden, the writing of poet Amiri Baraka and writer/poet Jorge Luis Borges. "The foundation of my playwriting is poetry," Wilson once said.

All of Wilson's 10 play cycle have been produced on Broadway, two of them have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (*Fences*, 1987 and *The Piano Lesson*, 1990). Actors and directors including Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, Laurence Fishburne, Mary Alice, Delroy Lindo, Leslie Uggams, Ruben Santiago Hudson and Lloyd Richards, were either nominated or won Tony Awards for their work in Wilson's sagas. Three of Wilson's plays, *Fences*, *Ma' Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson*, have been developed into movies, each garnering numerous awards and honors.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