

Staging Race in a “Post-Racial” Age:
Contemporary Collaborations Between Mainstream and Culturally Specific Theatres
in the United States

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to every artist, activist, and educator that carries on the fight for social and racial justice.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the ways in which artists and administrators from mainstream and culturally specific theater companies in the United States negotiate vexed racial histories, complex racial representations, and material inequalities in contemporary partnerships. Though these collaborations mark a progressive step towards increasing racial inclusion on prominent American stages and subsequently within the national imaginary, they simultaneously constrain the transformative, social justice oriented goals that culturally specific theaters aim to achieve. Thus, I contend that these partnerships do not herald the definitive achievement of racial equality in the field of theater. Instead, they involve constant negotiation between companies' competing aesthetic, philosophical, and political missions, and their differing economic realities. In these sites, companies enter into delicate and contested territory, navigating between inclusion and imperialism, neighborliness and benevolent patriarchy: race is both celebrated and ignored, hyper-visible and repressed, the underpinning motivator for the collaboration and the not-to-be-discussed specter haunting every decision. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that these sites of cross-cultural engagement are not simply victories in the long march of civil rights progress, as they are often framed for the public, but rather are dynamic and contentious "contact zones" - sites of conflict, tension, collision, and compromise - that reveal the persistence of racism in limiting equality in the field. When the celebratory multicultural and post-racial rhetorics of "good stories" and "visibility" frame these partnerships, the consequence is that culturally specific artists must conform to liberal humanist standards (as commonly human or distinctly other) and aesthetic

norms (through Western, Aristotelian dramatic structures) in order to be recognized. As
such, culturally specific theater companies are looking to other venues, relationships, and
interracial coalitions to ensure their long-term sustainability.

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Introduction: Theater's "Post-Racial" Contact Zones

Penumbra's Story – Staking Out Autonomy

February 2008. Towering calmly above the assemblage of actors, artists, and administrators seated around a Guthrie Theater rehearsal room table, Penumbra Theatre Company's Founding Artistic Director Lou Bellamy inaugurates a new era of partnership between the two organizations with the performative pronouncement, "This [model of collaboration] is good for our cities, our state, the art, the Midwest – very, very good" (Bellamy, *Gem*). Like the sparkling and spacious room in the Guthrie's new multi-million dollar building overlooking Minnesota's lifeblood Mississippi River, Bellamy's hopeful statement stakes out a future markedly different and yet still connected to each company's storied past. At the Guthrie's founding in 1963, a partnership with a local African American theater company would have been unthinkable – Penumbra did not yet exist. In the late 1990s and early 2000, when Bellamy directed or performed in three major productions at the Guthrie, his artistic vision would be challenged in contentious battles behind the scenes. But in this new building, operating under a new Guthrie mission, and a clearer set of artistic boundaries protecting their autonomy,¹ Penumbra's production of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* would signal a new relational dynamic: Guthrie as host and marketer, Penumbra as artistic interpreter. Not only would Bellamy helm this staging, but Penumbra's seasoned ensemble of actors and artists would bring it to life, and their education team would contextualize it through program materials, a study guide, and a series of pre- and post-show discussions. Though presented at the Guthrie, this would, in Bellamy's estimation, be a definitive Penumbra production,

steeped in the history and specific cultural nuance of the African American experience. Yet, six years and five productions later, questions remain as to the “good” nature of the partnership as struggles over cultural ownership and the future sustainability of autonomous African American theaters persist.

Mu Performing Arts’ Story – Reaching the Limits of Accommodation

February 2010. It is opening night of Mu Performing Arts’ production of David Henry Hwang’s play *Yellow Face*, and the Guthrie’s Dowling Studio Theater is abuzz with anticipation. Breaking the Guthrie’s usual protocol for visiting companies using this space, Mu has organized a pre-show panel entitled “Asians in the Media,” aimed at questioning Asian representations and challenging dominant narratives of Asian America on the page, stage, and screen. The discussion will be headlined by the playwright himself, moderated by Minnesota Public Radio’s Marianne Combs, and will include lead actor Randy Reyes, performance scholar and University of Minnesota professor Josephine Lee, Star Tribune theater critic Graydon Royce, and Tom Lee from the Asian American Journal Association. This event, though seemingly commonplace in the professional theater landscape, reflects a recent pivotal shift in Mu’s mission towards a more overt engagement with issues of social justice related to Asian American and Pacific Islander peoples and communities. When the companies’ partnership began in 2007 in the Guthrie’s inaugural season in their new building, it was with a less controversial piece celebrating hula-inspired movement and a young man’s coming of age on the Hawaiian island of Moloka’i. Three years later, through Hwang’s new hit,

Guthrie audiences would be presented with issues of yellow face casting, performance protests, and ongoing government surveillance of Asian Americans. In line with their new mission, Mu's panel is intended to extend these topics beyond the confines of the play itself, into direct dialogue with attendees. But this breach in standard operating procedure and the potentially sensitive panel content has raised the ire of some key Guthrie personnel. Nonetheless, Mu artists and administrators forged ahead, finding allies within the Guthrie administration, and the panel is set to begin. This will be the first of many stands the company will take within the next few years in their relationships with mainstream companies, making clear the limits of accommodation, and a decisive refusal to remain silent on the matters that impact Asian American artists' lives.

The Native Theater Initiative's Story - Fighting to Establish Presence

November 2008. Under the auspices of an unprecedented initiative, nearly one hundred indigenous theater artists from across the continental United States, Hawai'i, Alaska, and Canada gather at the Public Theater in New York City for the company's second annual Native Theater Festival. Whether seated in concentric semi-circles of folding chairs during a series of field discussions for Native artists, administrators, and allies, or on the stage of one of the Public's many performance spaces following a staged reading, their conversations continuously return to the fundamental issue of making the broader public aware of the contemporary existence of indigenous peoples. Yvette Nolan (Algonquin), Artistic Director of Toronto's Native Earth Performing Arts, succinctly encapsulates the refrain that resounds throughout the Festival when Native artists are

asked about engaging the mainstream: “I feel like *Horton Hears a Who*... ‘we are here, we are here, we are here,’ and I just keep yelling it, trying to get people into the house to see the work. Which is why this [the Public’s Native Theater Festival and Initiative] is so important. Which is why this, being allowed in once in a while, being invited in, being allowed to speak is so important.” Though the Public intermittently presented the work of indigenous artists under the leadership of its founder Joseph Papp as early as the 1970s, Native American plays and playwrights have reached a new level of recognition through the festivals that current Artistic Director Oskar Eustis initiated in 2007 in partnership with Ford Foundation program officer and Cherokee theater artist Betsy Theobald Richards. One of the primary goals of the festivals addresses the crucial need “to raise visibility and awareness of Native theater artists” (“Native Theater Initiative”), affirming Saulteaux/Israeli/Canadian theater-maker Jennifer Podemski’s insistence that: “we’re here and we’re relevant and we’re real and we have something to offer. In this territory, on Turtle Island...everybody has something to learn from indigenous perspectives.” For peoples who have been systematically erased from both national histories and contemporary national imaginaries, this is a herculean task. As Native theater makers face this challenge at and with the Public, their efforts are complicated by difficulties in construing a cohesive field, engaging audiences with the work on their terms, and navigating the historically layered and problematic relationships between indigenous nations and the white, power-holding elite.

Overview

In an era that is increasingly defined as “post-racial,” contemporary cross-cultural collaborations like these raise significant questions for the field of theater and racial discourses at large.² Have we, as a field and a nation, moved beyond race and racism as primary factors in shaping access to opportunity? Do these partnerships portend major shifts in theatrical practice and racial formations? What are their implications for aesthetic and political representation and the re-distribution of resources? How are professional American theaters grappling with race in a purportedly post-racial age? And what does this mean for the future of culturally specific theater companies and the work they develop and champion?

My dissertation takes up these questions, investigating how artists and administrators from both mainstream and culturally specific companies negotiate vexed racial histories, complex racial representations, and material inequalities in contemporary partnerships.³ Specifically, I examine the relationships between Minnesota’s flagship regional theater company, the Guthrie Theater, and two of its local culturally specific partners: Penumbra Theatre Company (Minnesota’s professional African American theatre) and Mu Performing Arts (Minnesota’s professional Asian American performance company); and between New York City’s Public Theater and the Native American artists and companies brought together under the auspices of its nascent Native Theater Initiative. Fledgling collaborations like these are just a few of the many that comprise an increasing trend in the United States in the early 21st century. These two kinds of institutions have often co-existed at a tense and uneasy distance for the past three

decades, thus their coming together in long-term relationships in recent years seems to signal tectonic changes.

Because these relationships have been so long in coming, participating companies and artists most often rhetorically frame them as Bellamy did, as “very, very good” and as a straightforward means to showcase “good art,” tell “good stories,” and enable minorities to become more visible in the public eye. Indeed, the partnerships do mark a certain kind of progress in terms of racial representation – under their auspices, plays by Asian American playwrights have appeared on the Guthrie’s stages for the first time in the company’s 50 year history, and the work of August Wilson and Lorraine Hansberry are becoming increasingly frequent fixtures inside the building that features their larger-than-life size images on its exterior.⁴ Likewise, complex articulations of indigenous identities, histories, and socio-political concerns are reaching audiences in New York City, attesting to their continuing presence in the state and across North America.

Most importantly, these plays are appearing under the authority and direction of culturally specific companies or culturally specific fields as a whole. These engagements mark significant departures from mainstream theaters’ dominant models of addressing race. Whereas the Guthrie has typically undertaken colorblind casting of European and Euro-American classics, staged plays featuring non-white characters by white playwrights, or engaged single playwrights of color,⁵ in these new partnerships they hand over artistic control to cohesive cultural collectives. And whereas the Public has primarily worked with individual playwrights of color or staged festivals of African American or Latino/a plays, they are now engaging an entire heterogeneous field in their

Native Theater Initiative. Thus, professional theater practice and the national imaginary are being changed by what appears on stage through these partnerships, and by the culturally specific companies and fields that are gaining power to shape these imaginings.

Yet despite these positive, progressive outcomes, I contend that these collaborations do not herald the definitive achievement of racial equality in the field. Instead, they involve constant negotiation between companies' competing aesthetic, philosophical, and political missions, and their differing economic realities. In these sites, companies enter into delicate and contested territory, navigating between inclusion and imperialism, neighborliness and benevolent patriarchy: race is both celebrated and ignored, hyper-visible and repressed, the underpinning motivator for the collaboration and the not-to-be-discussed specter haunting every decision. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that these sites of cross-cultural engagement are not simply victories in the long march of civil rights progress, as they are often framed for the public, but rather are dynamic and contentious "contact zones" - sites of conflict, tension, collision, and compromise - that reveal the persistence of racism in limiting equality in the field.

Theatrical Contact Zones

Theatre offers a rich site in which to explore the micro- and macro-level workings of race because it operates through multiple grammars (textual, corporeal, economic, and ideological) and necessitates intimate, real-time interactions between artists, audiences, and administrators. As a site of artistic production and as a set of institutional negotiations, theatre allows us to compare what we say/hope/dream about ourselves as a

multiracial nation with the material realities and racial logics that shape and limit those imaginings. As a field, theater is actively engaged with the politics of representation, and it acts as a vital arena for narrating and enacting cultural identities.

The particular theatrical partnerships that I explore in this project offer two complex and distinct models for cross-cultural engagement, and reveal competing racial ideologies in action. The Guthrie Theater, like most mainstream regional companies, is historically Euro-centric in terms of the plays they stage and the artists and administrators they employ. Situated in a predominantly white, but increasingly racially diverse Midwestern city, the Guthrie's conservative racial politics have recently come under pressure from critics, artists, and the theater-going public. Thus, they hope that new relationships with culturally specific companies might enact their goal of "broaden[ing] the cultural and aesthetic reach of the theater" (McGovern, "Welcome"), and reflect a conscious shift towards a more overt celebratory multiculturalism. Still, within this model there are institutional differences in the ways that their relationships play out. While Penumbra Theatre Company has been featured on their two larger main stages amongst the ranks of prestigious international companies, and has at times been included in their season subscription, Mu Performing Arts has only been offered opportunities to present work in the smaller Dowling Studio space along with the majority of the Guthrie's local theatrical partners.

In contrast, The Public Theater is located within a multiracial cosmopolitan metropolis at the widely-perceived center of U.S. theatrical and cultural production. Emerging out of the summer festival and off Broadway movements, the Public has

demonstrated a decades-long commitment to cultural and racial diversity in their programming. As such, their work with the field of Native theater signifies a new means of embodying their vision of themselves as “an American theater in which all of the country’s voices, rhythms, and cultures converge” (“The Public Theater”). With the Native Theater Initiative, the Public recognizes that indigenous peoples have been the most under-represented and under-funded of culturally specific groups and artists in the United States. The Public’s politics move between celebratory and anti-racist strands of multiculturalism as they showcase Native work, and as they aim to rectify a gap in the broader field of American theater.

Both mainstream companies are driven by imperatives to diversify whose stories are told and who comes through their doors in ways that they could arguably not do alone. Partnering with culturally specific theaters garners them access to these companies’ cultural and aesthetic expertise. Furthermore, these co-presentations are often driven by financial necessity: the Guthrie’s and Public’s multiple stages demand more work than either company can afford to produce in-house, and by shifting granting priorities: government and corporate funders perceive cross-cultural and cross-company collaborations as doubly valuable and increasingly efficient allocations in the face of shrinking budgets.

For *Penumbra*, *Mu*, and the artists involved in the Native Theater Initiative, partnerships with mainstream organizations are less a function of shifting racial logics than they are a tactical means of survival.⁶ When these artists established their own theatres such as the American Indian Theatre Ensemble in 1972 (in New York City),

Penumbra in 1976 (in St. Paul, MN), and Mu in 1992 (in Minneapolis, MN), they did so with simultaneous calls for equal rights and separatism, demanding to be included in the representative power of the American theater and to stand in opposition and resistance to the markedly white and economically privileged space of the mainstream. In this heterogeneous set of movements, artists of color claimed the right to represent their own communities, tell their own stories, and combat the racial marginalization they experienced as part of mainstream theatrical practice. Now, despite past tensions with the mainstream, culturally specific companies are coming together with companies like the Guthrie and the Public in the hopes that the name recognition and economic resources of the larger institutions will help propel them into national spotlights. As companies like Mu and Penumbra present their work at venues of this scale they not only reach a much larger patron base with each performance, they broaden their potential audience through the power of the Guthrie and Public's marketing machines. That these new audience members may eventually become subscribers and donors, providing the necessary funding to sustain the culturally specific companies in the long term is especially enticing.

Thinking through these partnerships as "contact zones," helps illuminate the debates, collisions, negotiations and compromises that erupt as culturally specific and mainstream companies come together. Most importantly, it highlights the asymmetrical power dynamics that are often hidden in public framings, and allows us to investigate the multilayered relationships that comprise these partnerships: those between artists, administrators, audiences, critics, and the public; between imaginings and realities;

market driven spheres of public culture and community activism; and competing racial logics. “Contact zones” have joined performance scholars’ and cultural theorists’ lexicon for describing sites of cultural contestation in recent years, because the term focuses attention on power hierarchies and networks. According to Mary Louise Pratt, a contact zone is “any social space...subject to highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths” (7). Alongside corollary terms like “borderlands,” “crossroads,” and “in-between spaces,” contact zones reveal the conflict inherent in sites of cultural encounter. Rustom Bharucha, Una Chaudhuri, Roberta Uno, and Homi Bhabha each take up and nuance this concept of cross-cultural agonism, and my theorization follows their scholarly lead.

Now let me be clear - contact zones in the American professional theater are not the same as contact zones that emerge under slavery, amidst the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict, or in the aftermath of the most recent fatal shooting of a black man on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. The stakes here are quite distinct from those kinds of cultural contestations, and not as radically polarized. For the most part, theatrical practitioners from each of these mainstream and culturally specific companies share a great deal: they are highly educated, belong primarily to the middle or upper class, and many of them move fluidly between both kinds of institutions. In these highly mediated spaces which circumscribe the boundaries of visible conflict, witnesses will observe a wealth of friendliness, camaraderie, professionalism and good intentions. Yet given this level of similarity, in fact precisely because of it, the persistence of race and racism in perpetuating inequalities becomes starkly clear. Race continues to matter in the theater.

Competing Racial Logics

As my title suggests, this project foregrounds the concept of a “post-racial” era while simultaneously questioning its primary assumptions. With the election of the country’s first African American president in 2008, our national dialogue about race has become paradoxically more open and more veiled. On the one hand, this significant event has caused many to hail the arrival of a post-racial moment in which race and racism are no longer critical factors in shaping individual destinies. On the other hand, it has precipitated a fierce backlash, re-igniting the kinds of blatantly racist actions of decades gone by, and spurring insidious forms of racist speech intended to divide and marginalize.

Contemporary critical race theorists describe this new form of racism in various ways. For Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Tim Wise, and others, it is “colorblind racism” or “post-racial liberalism”, for Catherine Squires it is the “post-racial mystique,” for Omi and Winant it is a “neoliberal racial project” that re-articulates the neo-conservative racial ideology of the right wing, for Jhally and Lewis it is “enlightened racism”, and for Kenji Yoshino it is “covering.”⁷ Variations exist between each of these framings, yet they share a few key tenets. For all of these scholars post-racialism downplays the impact of race, racism, and racialized social structures past and present, appealing instead to notions of the “universal” for righting inequities. Under post-racialism people may espouse non-racist personal attitudes while clinging to dominant race-based prejudices. Post-racialism allows society to include and celebrate successful individual “exceptions” from minority groups (such as Obama), while disallowing structural shifts and improvements for the

vast majority of minority populations. Finally, post-racialism demands a new kind of assimilation from racial minorities – while it may now be acceptable to *be* African American or Asian American or Native American, it is not acceptable to engage in language or behaviors that illuminate those groups’ current or past resistance to oppression, white privilege, racism, and hegemony. White audiences are able to identify with and love TV’s Cosby family, Jhally and Lewis posit, because they never remind us about the ongoing injustices faced by black Americans on both epic and quotidian scales.

In the mainstream non-profit professional theater, post-racialism plays out in subtle ways, most often through what I call a “happy” or “celebratory” multicultural framing. Contemporarily, the de rigueur practice of including and celebrating racial and cultural difference on stage is lauded, while its exclusionary opposite is more and more frequently challenged by artists, critics, and the public. Yet this inclusivity remains circumscribed by post-racial logics. Under these circumstances, harmony and peaceful co-existence are emphasized while current and past racial injustices are downplayed or ignored. Mainstream theaters appeal to notions of “common humanity,” “good stories,” and “universal” sentiments and aesthetic standards in an attempt to avoid the tensions that can emerge when dealing directly with issues of race. In highlighting selected minority artists’ work in this celebratory way, mainstream companies recognize their artistic excellence and cultural experience (albeit in limited ways), but they avoid addressing systemic inequalities and the politics of redistribution. In sum, post-racial logics in the theater obfuscate persistent racial hierarchies and white privilege at the same time as they

celebrate racial difference and bring culturally specific companies and artists into the mainstream.

The artists of the Native Theater Initiative, Mu, and Penumbra operate under a markedly different racial framework which I would call a “radical,” “progressive,” or “anti-racist” multiculturalism.⁸ They are keenly aware that the U.S. has not reached a utopic moment of racial equality as post-racialism would lead us to believe, and their missions and programming present a clear counterpoint to post-racial logics. Through their art and educational contextualization, these companies ask audiences and partnering companies to grapple honestly with the joys and shames of our national history. In ways that are often uncomfortable, their work demands that we take seriously the weight of racism – its historical legacy and its ongoing impact, its structural underpinnings and its individual implications. For them, speaking explicitly about racism is a necessary step in dismantling it. Yet, post-racialism’s hegemonic desire to quell dissent makes this task increasingly difficult.

Despite the deep differences between post-racial and anti-racist logics, there is not always a neat bifurcation between culturally specific and mainstream companies. Both kinds of institutions aim to celebrate the work of artists of color, and both adhere to certain tenets of liberal humanist multiculturalism – the value of artistic merit, common human experiences and emotions, and the ability of individuals to pursue freedom of choice and expression.⁹ But whereas post-racialism stops at this level of commonality, anti-racism requires an engagement with inequity and the reality that people of color have not had access to or been deemed worthy of these tenets. Furthermore, while the Guthrie

seems to operate institutionally under post-racial and celebratory multicultural logics, individuals within the behemoth organization certainly challenge and resist this trend. And the Public Theater, given their unique commitment to racially diverse programming often falls more in alignment with culturally specific companies, moving between the celebratory and anti-racist points of the multicultural spectrum. Still, within the contact zones of these partnerships, competing racial logics tend to underpin and propel conflicts between companies. My project attempts to articulate and illuminate them.

Methodologies

In order to assess both the micro- and macro-level functioning of race in these sites, I deploy three interdisciplinary methodologies. First, I conduct textual analyses of play scripts, company histories, marketing materials, critical reviews, public speeches, and scholarly articles in order to illuminate the discursive and visual strategies at work in these texts as they pertain to race. Secondly, I utilize institutional ethnography to analyze how the production process (i.e. play selection, rehearsal, and performance), audience responses, and behind-the-scenes managerial choices (that impact budgeting, profit sharing, marketing materials, etc.) actualize racial relations. Here I conduct formal and informal interviews with companies' artistic and administrative leaders, record audience feedback, and observe rehearsals and performances, looking for moments of dissensus and negotiation - the "gaps or frictions that reflect conflicting social values or aesthetic standards" (Pao 20).¹⁰ Finally, I conduct material analyses of these collaborations, investigating the broader economic, social, and political structures that give them shape.

Here I examine everything from the companies' financial reports, to partnership contracts, to demographic data in order to understand the conditions that simultaneously limit these partnerships and make them possible.

This project builds on eight years of ethnographic research and institutional analysis conducted within my three primary partnership sites. I enter these spaces from multiple subject positions and perspectives: as an insider and an outsider, a subjective participant and an analytic observer, a researcher and an advocate for social change. In terms of racial and ethnic identity, I am primarily Euro-American (with lines of genealogy to German, Norwegian, French, and Danish heritage), as well as a small part Ojibwe (my maternal grandfather was enrolled with the Mississippi Band of the White Earth Ojibwe in northwestern Minnesota¹¹). In terms of professional experience, I have spent over a decade immersed in culturally specific theater, first through my work with Mu Performing Arts (as a stage manager, director, actor, and a three-year term as the company's Managing Director), then with Native Voices at the Atrium (where I participated as an Assistant Director for their New Play Retreat), and finally with Penumbra Theatre Company (where I served as the August Wilson Fellow, Summer Institute Coordinator and Instructor, and Education Programs Manager). Though I myself am predominantly white and cannot claim these particular cultural contexts as my own, I have become steeped in the history, politics, and aesthetics of Asian American, Native American, and African American theater through this work, and I aim for critical self-reflexivity and conscious self-positioning in my research.

As this history indicates, I am not impartial in my analysis. My perspective is inevitably shaped by my work and relationships with these companies. Though staff members at both the Guthrie and the Public were gracious enough to grant me interviews, these conversations only reflect a fraction of the time I have spent with their culturally specific counterparts. So, while I do my best to understand and convey mainstream perspectives, my project ultimately attempts to illuminate and advocate for culturally specific companies' missions. My time at Penumbra, Mu, and Native Voices has allowed me to hear the stories of complex, intersectional, and heterogeneous American experiences, and these stories have informed and reshaped my worldview and my understanding of history. As such, in this project I argue for the critical relevance of culturally specific theater as a site for attention, study, participation, examination, critique, and support. I contend that these companies provide crucial tools for enacting social justice and catalyzing social change. By examining what accomplishments they make and what limits and conflicts they encounter when partnering with mainstream companies, I hope my project will help to illuminate the work that is yet to be done in advancing the cause of racial justice in the field.

Current Literature and Project Interventions

I arrived at my research question in the trenches of professional theater practice. Rather than surveying a body of literature and finding a point with which to disagree, I stumbled upon my investigation through a persistent problem. Time and again in my work with culturally specific theater companies, I would witness the setbacks,

disappointments, and frustrations they (and I) would encounter when they produced work in conjunction with mainstream theater companies. This is not to say that there were not also triumphs, moments of awe, celebrations of goals accomplished, and new alliances forged. There certainly were and continue to be. But after many years of strong relationships with supposedly well-meaning partners, it was unnerving and heartbreaking to see major missteps in places where I thought lasting transformations had occurred. How could the Guthrie defend an all-white season lineup when they had seemed so dedicated to including racial and cultural diversity in their programming? How could the Public produce a musical (*Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*) that dehumanized indigenous peoples when they had been working to support and promote Native artists? How and why could these kinds of things keep happening, especially in the face of ongoing cross-cultural partnerships?

One of the key reasons, I contend, is that there tends to be a disconnect between existing critical race theory scholarship and the dialogues that happen in professional theater practice, especially in the mainstream. While scholars and artists of color have been writing, speaking, and theorizing about their experiences in the field of theater and the broader public sphere for quite some time, mainstream theaters often fails to engage this critical work in deep and ongoing ways, a reality which is bolstered by celebratory multicultural logics. Thus, with this project, I attempt to make space for these voices, and to balance specific local and national examples with grounded theorization. There has not yet been a comprehensive comparative analysis of racial relationships between mainstream and minority theatre companies of the kind I conduct here, and because the

trend of cross-cultural partnerships seems to be on the rise within the past decade, I hope that this investigation will catalyze critical conversations within the field.

Furthermore, though there has been much literature published on U.S. regional theaters like the Guthrie, none of it offers a sustained analysis of race. Thus cultural and aesthetic whiteness remains at the uncontested center of these histories and institutional practices.¹² My project intervenes by critically analyzing mainstream theaters' institutional histories in relation to race, laying bare the ways in which these current partnerships are shaping and reflecting implicit racial logics.

I also bring together and build upon multiple strands of literature on culturally specific theater and multiculturalism in the U.S. One of these strands has largely served a championing function, marking these sites as worthy of scholarly dialogue. This writing elucidates the goals, values, tactics, cultural histories, and racial ideologies of each field (African American, Asian American, Native American, etc.).¹³ These projects also investigate the dominant narratives and pervasive stereotypes that each field works to contest, and propose how theater can “imagine and construct liberatory identities, community, and/or nation” (Geiogamah and Darby, *Critical Directions* xv). This literature is vital in illuminating culturally specific theater's possibilities – my project compares these imaginings with the obstacles that artists, productions, and companies face in the midst of current cross-cultural partnerships.

Another thread through this literature investigates cross-cultural theatrical experiences through the personal narratives of individual artists of color. These documentary accounts detail how artists have navigated between mainstream and

culturally specific companies with rich, vivid, and embodied specificity, critically contributing to the goal of mapping racial logics and national imaginings on a micro-scale.¹⁴ Yet often absent in this literature is the broader institutional contextualization that I aim for in my project, the macro-level analysis of institutional hierarchies, economic drivers, and cultural tastes that make possible these artists' work at particular moments within particular companies.

A third subset of this material takes up a macro-level analysis in its theorization of theatrical practices such as colorblind casting. Here, scholars unpack the shifting racial logics inherent in this practice which cuts across pan-racial groups and is a predominant trend in mainstream theater companies wishing to incorporate artists of color onto their stages. Angela Pao's *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* is one example of this thread through U.S. multicultural theater policy, as is Brandi Wilkins Catanese's *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*. My project finds both methodological and theoretical alignment with this significant body of scholarship in its attempts to locate shifting racial formations in the discourses surrounding productions and the slippery terminology of race, culture, and ethnicity; in its understanding of both the semiotic and sociocultural functions of theater in shaping racial and national identities; and its premise of finding the most revealing materials at the sites of greatest resistance. My research complements this literature vis-à-vis a shift towards the relationships between mainstream and culturally specific companies, and the distinct ways that race gets

articulated and staged when two differently positioned companies encounter and engage one other.

Chapter Structure

In the first chapter, *Racial Legacies: Contexts and Contestations*, I begin to tease out the historical contours of three specific partnerships: between the Guthrie and Penumbra, between the Guthrie and Mu Performing Arts, and between the Public Theater and the Native American artists working under the auspices of their Native Theater Initiative. Through this historical analysis I examine the ways that specific racial legacies – within the theater and in the broader public sphere – shape the experience and outcomes of these collaborations. Looking at the longitudinal development of these relationships helps us understand the character of racial power in mainstream institutions and the limits of multiculturalism as a mechanism of social justice.

This chapter is broken into sections for each of my three sites. In the first, I examine one of Penumbra's primary objectives in bringing their work to the Guthrie: articulating and defending their artistic autonomy. While the racial narrative of African American slavery, emancipation, segregation, and civil rights activism has successfully permeated mainstream histories of the country, making African Americans the most visible of U.S. racial minorities, black artists have largely been denied ownership of their cultural materials and cultural production in conveying these histories. Against a deep-seated American history of cultural appropriation, these African American artists decisively claim their right to self-determination in telling their own histories and

performing their unique aesthetics in mainstream spaces. The cadre of aesthetic, educational, and audience-empowering tactics that Penumbra deploys in their partnership puts them on the vanguard of cross-cultural collaborative models. At the same time, there are limits to what they can achieve when having to act in complicity with a dominant organization whose racial logic centers on the celebration of common humanity. Yet their nascent efforts to build inter-racial coalitions with other culturally specific companies reveal new forms of autonomy and interdependence outside of majority/minority and black/white binaries.

In the second section of the chapter, I investigate Mu Performing Arts' significant philosophical shift from covert to overt tactics in addressing social justice issues within their mainstream partnerships. The contradictory legacies of Orientalism, exclusion from citizenship, and supposedly successful assimilation have shaped Asian Americans' participation and formation in the national imaginary, and thus Asian American artists have most often taken up Equal Rights' tactics in order to achieve belonging within dominant spheres. But in the wake of a significant mission change, and after years of partnering with the Guthrie and other prominent companies, Mu Performing Arts is recognizing the limits of accommodating the mainstream and is boldly moving towards anti-assimilationist tactics. Though they continue to perform in mainstream spaces when such opportunities coincide with their current politics and mission, they have also re-focused on partnerships with smaller mission-aligned organizations whose flexible structures allow for holistic support of the company's goals. And as they join forces with

Penumbra, Pangea World Theater, New Native Theater, and Teatro del Pueblo, Mu is helping to foment the revitalization of culturally specific theater.

In the third and final section of the chapter, I explore how the Native American theater artists working with the Public undertake the monumental challenge of establishing their contemporary presence, lives, and stories in the mainstream. Set against the legacies of colonialism, genocide, and the ongoing erasure of indigenous North American peoples, this task is further complicated as they engage contemporary liberal multicultural logics in the mainstream. Whereas Penumbra and Mu enter into relationships with the Guthrie as singular cohesive organizations, the Native Theater Initiative involves and shapes an entire heterogeneous field throughout the continental U.S., Hawai'i, Alaska, and Canada. The Public's historical and continued commitment to producing work by and about artists of color makes them a unique and progressive mainstream partner in Native artists' quest to establish presence, and yet does not exempt them from the dangers of celebratory multiculturalism. Still, within the Public's Native Theater Initiative, select artists and plays are gaining unprecedented recognition and presence on mainstream stages, re-shaping the stories we tell about indigenous peoples on this land called Turtle Island.

The second chapter, *The Politics of Recognition and the Trap of Visibility*, explores the analytical framework of visibility in greater depth. Here I illuminate connections between the theatre as "seeing place" and minority artists' desire for recognition under liberal humanist multiculturalism. While achieving greater visibility for culturally specific companies and artists is a persistent and powerful rationalization for

partnering with mainstream theaters, I propose that thinking primarily in terms of visibility can foreclose the more radical goals of anti-racist multiculturalism. Though crucial for peoples who have been systematically erased and misrepresented since the inception of the United States, visibility alone cannot make legible the potential transformations that culturally specific theater hopes to enact in the field.

In the third chapter, *Unpacking “Good Stories:” Negotiating Aesthetic Standards*, I conduct a closer comparative analysis of these collaborations in motion through the persistent rationalizing refrain of “good stories.” Taking up Bourdieu’s notion of distinction and Rancière’s concept of dissensus, I examine the contours of aesthetic/theatrical/political decision-making in a “post-racial” world. While the rhetoric of “good stories” appears to equalize racial difference and draw artists of all colors together under the umbrella of universal narrative values, in practice it can function to enfranchise white privilege. In this chapter I examine the ways in which the language of “good stories” reifies the canon of European and Euro-American dramatic literature, obfuscates the problematic post-racial politics of popular contemporary plays, conflates all plays that include racial issues into the same political philosophies and goals, and elides deeply conflicting dramaturgical principles and expectations between mainstream and culturally specific companies.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, *Redistributive Politics and the Problems of Capital*, I turn my attention to the material and immaterial forms of capital – cultural, symbolic, social, and economic – that circulate in these partnerships. Each of these forms feed the others, and together this nexus motivates strategies on the part of all partnering

companies. Because mainstream organizations have been endowed with a greater share of many of these forms, companies like Mu and Penumbra, as well as the Native theater artists working with the Public, enter into these relationships in order to gain access to them and to strengthen their long-term sustainability. As such, they implicitly intervene in patterns of capital distribution, and aim to catalyze a redistribution of these resources. However, the degree to which mainstream theaters acknowledge their privilege can have an impact on these flows of capital. Here, the Public's anti-racist recognition of capital inequality marks a distinct counterpoint to the Guthrie's post-racial denial of their position, and offers the possibility of catalyzing productive transformations.

I argue that these theatrical sites have something to tell us about the shifting racial landscape in the United States in the 21st century. Taken together, these collaborations serve as what Clifford Geertz terms "ethnographic miniatures," specific microcosms that allow us to understand the ways in which racial representations, logics, and material conditions are playing out on and offstage. In this project my voice joins those of other critical race theorists in critiquing white privilege, exposing the lacunae of post-racialism, and claiming that race and racism continue to play pivotally significant roles in influencing institutional relationships and policies, as well as aesthetic and cultural ideologies.

Chapter One: Racial Legacies: Contexts and Contestations

Part One: Penumbra Theatre Company Stakes Out Their Autonomy

As the dramaturg for Penumbra's production of *Gem of the Ocean*, I was witness to the guarded sense of optimism that permeated the Guthrie's rehearsal room during that first gathering in February 2008. The positive affective charge that rippled through the bodies of the artists – a predominantly African American ensemble, many of whom were longtime Penumbra company members – radiated outward in the days and weeks to follow, as representatives from both institutions spoke publicly of this joint endeavor in newspaper articles, interviews, speeches, and post-play discussions.¹⁵ The Guthrie's Artistic Director Joe Dowling echoed Bellamy's pronouncement of the partnership's "goodness" in his playbill notes for the production, raving that he was "thrilled" to be working with the "considerable talents of the Penumbra Theatre Company" (6). Throughout the partnership Dowling would repeat his enthusiasm, characterizing the companies' relationship as one of "mutual respect," and saying that "together, we can achieve a coming together in our community that would be impossible alone" (*Playbill for Amen* 3). The pair's hopes for the partnership extended to the broader theater ecosystem, as Bellamy claimed "We have the ability to create a national model for collaborative work" (*Playbill for Gem* 6). In framing this new era of partnership against a backdrop of tumultuous tensions and conflict, Bellamy explained the theatrical détente by saying:

If we don't begin to take honest steps towards each other, I don't think we're ever going to do anything but be separate. And we *are* very

separate. These are separate worlds. They are worlds that we don't want to talk about. So I thought I'd try taking that step - to take the best of our cultural specificity and share it on these large scales while maintaining our individuality. If partnering with the Guthrie means being able to share these plays from inside of the African American experience on that larger scale, then I'm willing to do it. I think that could be a good lesson for our country and our communities: art might be able to lead the way in these collaborative efforts. (Bellamy 28 Apr. 2008)

For Penumbra and Bellamy, partnering with a major regional theater company despite myriad dangers, presents an opportunity to ameliorate past inequities and diversify the American theater landscape from a culturally specific position. Through their relationship, the Guthrie gains access to a more richly nuanced cultural and artistic product, while Penumbra secures access to one of the largest theater audiences in the region, and perhaps more importantly, a share in the cultural capital and significant resources that the Guthrie maintains as one of the country's most prominent regional theater companies. This exchange propels the collaboration, and it is the historical difference between the companies' shares of capital that necessitates the partnership. If culturally specific companies like Penumbra possessed theatrical facilities, funding, and international reputation at the level of regional theatres like the Guthrie, such cross-cultural partnerships may not be a reality.

Yet, even considering the potential benefits inherent in such a partnership, Penumbra has not foregone its wariness of collaborating with the mainstream. Rather,

under Lou Bellamy and his daughter and current Co-Artistic Director Sarah Bellamy, they have sharpened their self-articulations within and apart from their partnership with the Guthrie. As they enter into the big blue building on the river, Penumbra tactically deploys a cadre of indispensable elements to legitimate and protect their autonomy and culturally specific authority: deliberate grounding in historical context, mastery of an African American aesthetic, the engagement of a cultural community, the naming of racial injustices, rigorous educational contextualization, and a broad invitation to participate in the company's anti-racist mission. It is these factors which make the collaboration possible from Penumbra's perspective, which distinguish their work and their relationship with the Guthrie from other models of cross-cultural theatrical engagement, and which underpin their proclamations of the partnership as a potential national exemplar. In what follows, I mark out the separate worlds to which Bellamy refers, tracing differences in cultural and economic capital, aesthetic ideologies and practice, and each company's position within theatrical movements and racial formations. Each of these analytics will be treated in greater detail in subsequent chapters - here they serve to illuminate the trajectories of each company individually and as partners. Finally, I examine each of the key ingredients in Penumbra's arsenal, and the ways in which they are influenced by past conditions of collaboration and anti-racist logics.

The Guthrie's Beginnings

Long before opening of the star-filled inaugural season of the Guthrie Theater (then known as the Minnesota Theatre Company) in Minneapolis in 1963, Tyrone

Guthrie and his co-founders, Oliver Rea and Peter Zeisler, aimed to create a world-class theater in the provinces of the upper Midwest with a canon of classic European and Euro-American drama (Morison and Fliehr). Like other theater leaders involved in the regional theater movement of the 40s, 50s, and 60s, Guthrie was seeking an escape from the commercialism, hegemony, and hierarchy of the Broadway theater scene, as well as an opportunity to impart theater of the highest artistic quality to people whom he presumed had not previously had access to such art within their own geographical region. Spurred by an agenda of de-centralization and opposition to Broadway's dominance, the movement was less concerned with a participatory, democratic brand of theatrical involvement and representation than it was with establishing an institution at the apex of national artistic abilities. As Jacqueline Levy explains in her laudatory book about (and published by) the company, "The Guthrie Theater began as the dream of Sir Tyrone Guthrie to found a new kind of American theater where serious artists could work together providing the community with quality entertainment and the nation with a standard of excellence for theatrical production and performance" (5).

While seven different communities across the U.S. competed to have this new theatrical center located in their cities, Guthrie and his team eventually selected Minneapolis as its home. Myriad factors contributed to their decision, including the prominence of the University of Minnesota, with whom they could partner to train professional actors, a population with a relatively high level of educational attainment, and engaged and supportive civic leadership. Also key to the company's success in cultivating cultural capital was the expansive land mass that seemed open for the

claiming, a region in which the company's founders might plant the colonizing flag of 'culture' – as both high art and a new way of life. As the Guthrie's original Publicity and Audience Development team, Bradley Morison and Kay Fliehr explained, it was because of the Twin Cities' geographic location as the “only major metropolitan center within a vast, yet cohesive, area which stretches an awesome fifteen hundred miles from the Rocky Mountains east to Eau Claire, Wisconsin” the Guthrie was able to draw audiences from as far afield as Montana, across an area of four hundred thousand square miles, and to convince them that this was 'their' theatre (12). Affluence and broad-based community financial support were also critical in the choice of Minneapolis as the theater's home. Morison and Fliehr explicated the reciprocal relationship of exchange between the theater company and local patrons, detailing how Tyrone Guthrie and his team were initially able to ingratiate themselves into what they found to be one of the most open-minded and intellectually curious populaces in 'the provinces' (5):

The call for cash support [to build the Guthrie Theater] raises questions: “What do I get out of helping you? Why should I buy your product?” The answers were two-fold: (1) Culture (always with a capital C) for the community and (2) prestige for the state. Give us a theatre and your support, said Guthrie and [original Manager/Producer Oliver] Rea, and we will give you great classical drama, excitingly performed, and make your state the home of the greatest repertory theatre in the United States. [...]

The fund goal was met. The public bought the idea, digging into its pockets out of either civic or intellectual pride—both good reasons. (9)

From the elite classes and business people to intellectuals to Sunday schools classes, it seems, according to Morison and Fliehr that Minnesotans of the early 1960s were willing to invest their financial capital in exchange for the cultural capital that the Guthrie would impart. These disparate sources, in addition to foundation, corporate, and state and national government funding, led to the Guthrie's founding in the Twin Cities, and its emergence as what Minnesota theater historian Frank Whiting described as "an object of pride like the symphony, the university, the museums, the Twins, the Vikings, maybe even the Mississippi River itself" for the upper Midwestern populace (181).

Its impact was not confined to the state or the region, but it became a national icon and model, a source of both pride and jealousy for other regional theater leaders. As Joseph Zeigler notes, "while we scorned its lack of indigenous beginnings, we still yearned to bask in its majesty... 'Granddaddy' was the new lodestone and measure for regional theatre. It drew us like a magnet... Throughout the country, theatres adopted a new definition of themselves: 'regional professional theatre, like the Guthrie in Minneapolis'" (74-75). Newspapers around the globe, including outlets in Europe, Australia, Africa, and North America covered the company's opening in 1963, and the majority of US and Canadian daily periodicals featured articles throughout the year, propelling the company to international stardom (Guilfoyle 34). From its inception, then, the Guthrie has wielded an incredible amount of cultural and financial capital, and has secured a place for itself at the height of Minnesota's and the nation's theatrical hierarchy. This status has positioned the Guthrie as a desirable partner for smaller companies and as a signifier of the utmost achievement for artists of all racial

backgrounds. To “make it” on/to the stages of the Guthrie is, in the eyes of many American practitioners and theater-goers, to be definitely successful in the American theater.

Amidst the existing histories of the Guthrie,¹⁶ the broader regional theater movement,¹⁷ and other Minnesota theater companies that arose around the same time, racial representation and involvement remains an unexamined question. In the early 1960s, at the time of the Guthrie’s founding, Minnesota’s population was overwhelmingly white: 98.8% according to census data (“Persons of Color”). This demographic reality, combined with the Guthrie’s mission of presenting European and Euro-American drama, and the predominantly white framework of the entire movement were no doubt contributing factors to the silence on matters of race. Yet, the Twin Cities of the 1960s was not immune to racial unrest and civil rights strivings. The race riots that swept across the country in the late 1960s erupted in North Minneapolis, where poverty and restrictive housing covenants had ghettoized African American and Jewish peoples, and the construction of interstate I-94 cut through the heart of St. Paul’s historic Rondo neighborhood, bifurcating a community and dispersing African Americans into a racially segregated city (“Rondo”). Simultaneously, Minneapolis became one of the largest sites for the urban migration and relocation of indigenous peoples in the country, and their collective presence and spirit of activism led to the founding of the American Indian Movement in 1968. Under the leadership of Clyde Bellecourt, Dennis Banks, Eddie Benton Banai, George Mitchell, and later Russell Means, AIM established schools, a health board, legal rights centers, and other measures to protect and support American

Indian individuals and communities, as well as fighting for Native sovereignty and the transformation of federal relations with Native nations (Waterman Wittstock and Salinas).

Despite these highly visible local examples of racial division and resistance, the Guthrie remained distanced from issues of race, and their repertoire was comprised primarily of white cultural material for its first twenty eight years (Mahala 13-14). In a rare exception from their usual programming, the company hired a number of black actors and staged a select few African American plays between 1969 and 1970. These decisions were driven not by an Artistic Director, but by Managing Director Donald Schoenbaum during an interim period between artistic leadership. In a unique institutional moment of naming race, Schoenbaum proclaimed his pride in selecting a “fully racially-integrated company” for three plays to be done in repertory in 1970, one of which was by an African American playwright – *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* by Lonne Elder III and directed by Israel Hicks (Guilfoyle 62). This piece and a 1969 production of Leroi Jones’ *The Dutchman* in the Guthrie’s “The Other Place” (a secondary, experimental space the company utilized for a few seasons) marked their few forays into black theater. In most cases, if and when artists of color gained roles, visibility, and recognition on the Guthrie’s stages, it was primarily through practices like colorblind casting. Though the incorporation of non-white actors marked an improvement over their previous exclusion, and allowed them professional access to the body of work for which they had most likely been trained, this practice further legitimized the European and

Euro-American canon as the ultimate and finite set of artistic expressions for major U.S. stages.

Penumbra Theatre Emerges

It wasn't until the emergence of culturally specific companies in the mid-1970s that race and ethnicity were propelled to the forefront of theatrical agendas in Minnesota. Not seeing the lives and stories of minorities reflected on the state's stages, Penumbra Theatre Company - along with companies like Mixed Blood Theatre (1976) and later Theater Mu (1992), Teatro Del Pueblo (1992), Pangea World Theater (1995), New Native Theatre (2009) and others - were founded to carve out spaces for these expressions. These organizations identified and developed both local and national talent, nurtured artists within culturally specific milieus, acted as sites for the exploration and staging of complex racial identities, and served as what bell hooks describes as "homeplaces" (45-53), crafting a sense of family, solidarity, and resistance amongst artists. Whereas Tyrone Guthrie searched the country to find a viable venue for his 'world-class' company, these culturally specific theaters arose in heterogeneous ways out of local communities.

Rather than arriving on the scene as an amply funded cultural icon, Lou Bellamy forged the company out of a federal jobs training program grant that was intended to be a new WPA. While the predominantly white Minnesota populace of the 1960s could foresee the value of a company dedicated to European and Euro-American classics, they did not attribute the same cultural capital to an African American theater company in the

1970s. As Mance Williams details in his book *Black Theatres in the 1960s and 1970s*, “Black theatres had to prove their worth to the community” (40), and, according to August Wilson and others who weighed in on the Wilson-Brustein debates of the 1990s, black communities had not yet developed a habit of financially supporting theater companies. Whereas the Guthrie boasted a line-up of nationally renowned artists and their own brand new building for their first season, Penumbra arose in a corner of St. Paul’s Hallie Q. Brown Community Center alongside critical community offerings such as childcare and programs for elders, juvenile delinquency prevention and medical services (Mahala 4). HQB’s Executive Director Henry Thomas hired Bellamy (whom he knew from his involvement at the Center as a young man) to administer the \$150,000 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act grant for dramatic arts, with which Bellamy hired a core group of twenty artists and began producing plays. The CETA money was the company’s sole support, and because they emerged from a social service agency, Penumbra was initially ineligible for funding from the Minnesota State Arts Board, as they were seen to be offering a social rather than artistic contribution to the community (Bellamy 28 Mar. 2008).

In tandem with these financial beginnings, the company was born out of a confluence of local and national factors, including Bellamy’s own life experiences in the historically black Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, his artistic and scholarly training at the University of Minnesota and Mankato State University, the Settlement House movement of which Hallie Q. Brown was a part, and the principles of the Black Arts and Black Power movements. Philosophically, Penumbra understood their art as a catalyst for

socio-political discussion, critique, and change, rather than solely for art's or entertainment's sake; and they held fast to W.E.B. DuBois' clarion call for art about, by, for, and near the people – a mantra he coined in 1926 in *The Crisis* magazine, drawing upon the liberal ideology and wording of the Gettysburg Address, and later taken up by the Black Arts movement in the 1960s and 70s by proponents who insisted that theatre and the arts could not be separated from the African American community.

The latter principle presented unique challenges for an African American theater company in Minnesota. Paul Carter Harrison illuminates Penumbra's unexpected beginnings, musing that "It would seem unlikely that Minneapolis-St. Paul, an ethnically Nordic Midwestern metropolis...could be the nurturing ground for the Africentric cultural enterprise of Penumbra Theatre" (10). And yet, it was precisely this unexpectedness that may have ensured its long-term success. As Hill and Hatch relay, Penumbra used the state's demographics to its advantage:

Penumbra's racial "isolation" in the Midwest gave it distinction – Minnesota had only sixty thousand Blacks in the entire state¹⁸...[and it] became Minnesota's only African American professional theatre. Perhaps its uniqueness helped its initial survival, but its longevity lay in a vision, as well as careful planning by Bellamy, who framed Penumbra's mission to increase public awareness of the significant social contributions that African Americans had made. (471-472)

Founded to give voice and visibility to the black experience, to combat the pervasive colorblindness that marked mainstream sentiment in the state, and to "repair the spiritual

and psychic damage done to a host of artists who have been told their culture, their contribution to the canon, is tertiary” (Bellamy, A Tribute), Penumbra made race central to the local imaginary in and through their art.

At the same time, they walked a fine line – because some of their artists, key potential future funders, and a large share of their audience was white – they had to speak across racial boundaries and appeal to liberal humanist notions of “common humanity,” emphasizing the shared “universal” character of their stories as well as their cultural specificity. In *Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama*, Macelle Mahala details the competing racial ideologies that were held in tension during Penumbra’s early years, noting how the Equal Rights’ tenets of the Civil Rights movement, the revolutionary principles of the Black Arts and Black Power movements, pluralism, and multiculturalism were all taken up in various strategic capacities from play selection to staffing (8-19). The name Penumbra – meaning partial shadow, and the company’s original logo – a spectrum of faces ranging from black to white, would, Bellamy hoped, “demonstrate the joining of actors of all races in a common effort, namely, the achievement of artistic excellence” (qtd. in Mahala 12). For both Bellamy and Guthrie then, art of the highest standard was the goal and vision, and yet Bellamy muses that if he had had the courage of his convictions he would have called his company the St. Paul Black Repertory (17 Feb. 2011). This name, he believes, would have more overtly reflected the principles of the Black Arts movement which Penumbra embraced, and which distinguished the company from regional theaters like the Guthrie. And yet, for a culturally specific arts organization to survive in the U.S. and especially in

Minnesota at this moment, they had to be willing to frame themselves in ways that were conducive to funding opportunities. While the revolutionary hopes of the Black Arts Movement were potent for radically challenging the white hegemony of the field, they did not necessarily serve to goal of sustaining a professional arts organization over the long term. Thus, Penumbra chose their name, programming, and public statements carefully, tactically appealing to both black and non-black audiences, artists, and funders.

Differing missions and politics, as well as levels of cultural and financial capital, meant that Penumbra and the Guthrie initially existed in separate spheres. Until the 1990s the Guthrie had no mechanism in place to facilitate partnerships with other local companies. Penumbra was focused on getting their feet under them as a professional producing company, and though local and national partnerships would eventually become a key aspect of their programming and survival, they had not yet emerged.

The Companies Come Together – 1995-2000

In 1995, nearly two decades after Penumbra's founding in St. Paul, and more than three decades since the Guthrie's opening in Minneapolis, the companies embarked upon their first three engagements with one another. While the Guthrie's new era of official partnerships with local companies would begin in earnest with the opening of their new riverfront complex in 2006, their theatrical relationships in the previous decade offered (in retrospect) a kind of beta testing of different relational structures and configurations for both parties. These early collaborations also helped Penumbra identify and clarify

their critiques of the mainstream, and begin to legitimate their authority and articulate their autonomy.

The first of these engagements occurred in the 1995-96 season when Bellamy was hired to direct the Guthrie's production of Theodore Ward's play *Big White Fog*. Dr. John Wright, a professor of African American and African Studies and English at the University of Minnesota and a mentor of Bellamy's, had been hired by the Guthrie as a dramaturgical consultant to survey African American dramatic literature and make suggestions about pieces worth pursuing. He recommended Ward's play, an epic family drama which explored the competing philosophies of Black nationalism, capitalism, and communism in the post WWI-era. When Bellamy heard that the play was under consideration, he wrote to then Artistic Director Garland Wright requesting to direct the production. Wright agreed, and Bellamy set to work, casting a number of Penumbra company members to bring cultural experience, expertise, and authenticity to Ward's script. Though it featured numerous artists from Penumbra's ensemble, and was led by Penumbra's aesthetic under Bellamy, *Big White Fog* was considered a Guthrie production. Aside from the funding that the artists involved received, Penumbra as an institution had no financial stake in the production, nor was their name attached to the accompanying marketing materials. Bellamy recalls Garland Wright's attitude towards him and the production as rather laissez-faire, and he remained distant throughout the rehearsal process, only really addressing Bellamy while passing him in the lobby on the night before opening (2 Jan. 2014).

In the next season, the Guthrie marked a major transition as they welcomed new Artistic Director Joe Dowling, who would go on to serve as the company's leader for the following two decades. When Bellamy and his team returned to their stage with August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winning *Fences*, the performance was understood and billed as a Penumbra production at the Guthrie. With this arrangement, Penumbra was able to negotiate for greater artistic authority in the casting and rehearsal process, while the Guthrie handled marketing and managed the performance space (Bellamy 2 Jan. 2014). With Claude Purdy's direction, Bellamy's portrayal of Troy Maxson, and the rest of the Penumbra ensemble's influence, even reviewers would comment on the unique aesthetic, intimate sensibility, and gritty, realistic style that distinguished this production from the Guthrie's usual fare (Mahala 74-75). Indeed, Wilson's work was new to the Guthrie stage, as Garland Wright had not staged any of his plays during his tenure as Artistic Director (Gleason). Sources disagree on whether Wright's decision was based on an active dismissal of Wilson's talents, benign neglect of the rising star, or an acknowledgment that Penumbra had more expertise in Wilson's oeuvre than the Guthrie. Whatever the case, Penumbra stepped into this void with vocal claims to Wilson and cultural authority in regards to his body of work.

Finally, in the 1999-2000 season, the companies co-produced poet laureate Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth*, and the parameters of involvement fell somewhere between the companies' previous two joint ventures, with each company contributing funding and receiving box office returns. Bellamy muses that the co-production status did not necessarily translate to an equal share in all aspects of the relationship, and

remembers needing to clear expenses – to take the playwright to lunch to discuss the script, for instance – with the Guthrie’s Associate Artistic Director beforehand (2 Jan. 2014). Furthermore, despite the benefits of producing work at the Guthrie (including access to audiences and the Guthrie’s “marketing machine”), tensions in artistic direction erupted in the casting process and rehearsal room. Penumbra’s Managing Director Chris Widdess characterizes the conditions of these early partnerships as

combative and contentious and...centered around the perspective of culturally specific theater versus a theater that does not embody that kind of authenticity....There were two...very strong directors, very strong positions in how they view the world, in how they interpret the world and it became very conflicted....It’s like having two masters chefs in the kitchen making the same pot of soup, you’re going to have some fights over how you do it...and that’s where it became hard... and uncomfortable and untenable for Lou to work in that environment. And I think it became hard for Joe not to want to offer his opinion and to see a rehearsal, and it just was not a good idea. It was born from a good place, but in implementation it was really hard. (11 Apr. 2008)

Given these tensions in aesthetic vision and artistic practice, Penumbra sought ways to implement more autonomy within their partnership with the Guthrie. In order to do so, they drew upon philosophies articulated by August Wilson, a Penumbra Theatre Company member whose success in and simultaneous critique of the mainstream served as a timely and fitting guide to help Penumbra distinguish their goals from the Guthrie’s.

In 1996, shortly after Bellamy directed *Big White Fog*, Wilson gave a groundbreaking speech at the national Theatre Communications Group conference, entitled “The Ground on Which I Stand.” At once a passionate ode to American theater and scathing indictment of the racism inherent in regional theater practice and funding, his comments laid the groundwork for a national debate and provided an eloquent platform for challenging the status quo. Contesting colorblind and multicultural logics, Wilson mapped out African Americans’ desire for inclusion in the American theater alongside the limits of “common humanity” under liberal multiculturalism. To those in the dominant mainstream he proposed that “we can meet on the common ground of theatre as a field of work and endeavor,” while simultaneously holding in tension cultural specificity and difference - “but we cannot meet on the common ground of experience [...] we will not be denied our history” (26). He proudly proclaimed that the contents of his mother’s cabinet –the quotidian and particular objects, histories, and stories of his family’s and his peoples’ lives – were worthy of the highest art, and that it was African American artists, those who had lived these experiences, who should be the stewards of their expression. To that end, he insisted on black directors for his work, whether at regional theater companies like the Eugene O’Neill Center or Yale Rep, on Broadway, or in film. In this, Bellamy agreed, and both artists were unafraid to name themselves as “race men,” foregrounding the history of slavery and segregation in the African American genealogy, and linking themselves indelibly to the American landscape with phrases like “Our blood is soaked into the soil...” (38). In no uncertain terms, Wilson made clear who had rights to present and produce African American cultural materials.

Following in the wake of “Ground” and Penumbra’s production of *Fences* at the Guthrie, Bellamy explicated his own thoughts on mainstream involvement in African American cultural production in an article in the *African American Review* in 1997. Based in part on Bellamy’s experience with the Guthrie, “The Colonization of Black Theatre,” vocally contested mainstream practices like colorblind casting, the skewing of aesthetic standards for black artists, disproportionate funding, and more, all of which, Bellamy contended, contribute to the dissolution of black theaters as the mainstream appropriated African American work and artists. Bellamy posited in “Colonization” that “perhaps, now that August has provided a national forum, we will begin to hear black artists saying things like: “No, thank you! I don’t want your help. Your help has been the undoing of most things I hold dear”” (590). Bellamy echoed Wilson’s call for a regional black theater as a site for staging culturally specific work in a culturally specific context. However, given that his call has yet to be answered, a complete separation from the dominant seemed an unlikely option. As black theatres have not yet been endowed with either the financial or cultural capital necessary to support this reality, Penumbra continues to fiercely protect their art from *within* the partnership. Since “Colonization” the company has continued a delicate dance of partnership and opposition, collaboration and distance within the contact zone, and in doing so has sharpened their self-understanding.

A New Era of Partnership – 2007 to present

A few years after their co-production of *Darker Face*, Dowling contacted Bellamy to once again work with the Guthrie, precipitating a new era in the companies' ongoing relationship. A few key conditions prompted Dowling's request: the major regional theater was finishing up the construction of a new \$125 million dollar building on the Mississippi River, complete with three performance spaces which required more programming than the Guthrie could provide on their own. On the face of the building, two-story images of playwrights included African American greats Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson, the former of whom had never been presented on the Guthrie stage, and the latter of whom had only appeared once – in Penumbra's production of *Fences* in 1997. Their likenesses were, according to Guthrie insiders, a promise for future programming and one that Dowling felt could be best achieved through Penumbra's partnership.¹⁹ Finally, and most critically, senior staff at Penumbra saw Dowling under intense pressure from his board after the media raised concerns about the Guthrie's lack of racial and cultural diversity in recent seasons (Widdess 11 Apr. 2008). Given that the Guthrie had been able to raise funding for the new building in large part because they framed it as open to and supportive of the local theater community, a new collaboration with Penumbra was a savvy strategic choice.

Bellamy recalls that Dowling presented him with three options for their next endeavor: he could direct for the Guthrie as he had done on *Big White Fog*, the companies could co-produce as they had on *Darker Face*, or they could bring in a Penumbra production, as they had with *Fences* (2 Jan. 2014). Because of their past

difficulties with trying to share the art – which Bellamy found problematic on many levels as articulated in “Colonization” – and because of Penumbra’s commitment to their ensemble structure and aesthetic, Bellamy was adamant that their next production at the Guthrie be Penumbra’s. He suggested August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*, the penultimate piece penned in the 20th Century Cycle, and as Penumbra had not yet staged it, this production could be the regional premiere (28 Apr. 2008). The recognition attached to this kind of symbolic capital was appealing to Dowling, and so the agreement was made, and the production went into rehearsals in early 2008. It would be followed closely by *A Raisin in the Sun* in 2009, finally bringing Hansberry’s classic inside the building that featured her likeness on its exterior. Penumbra returned with Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in 2011, James Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner* in 2012, and Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop* in 2014, marking their fifth production in the new building. With each of these productions, Penumbra maintained artistic control over their process and product, while the Guthrie was responsible for marketing, publicity, box office, and the performance spaces. These key structural features of the new partnership model built on the guidelines first set forth on *Fences*, and have led both partners to hail this as a national model for theatrical collaboration. While these features are written into contracts and candidly discussed between company administrators as now-routine matters of partnership logistics, Penumbra has crafted and implemented a set of critical elements to help them stake out their autonomy and their cultural expertise within their relationship with the Guthrie. It is these elements, which appear in the quotidian interaction of Penumbra company members in the rehearsal room, in bodily memory of actors seasoned

in an African American aesthetic, in the intense table talk that precedes blocking, and in the program notes and dialogues that buttress the artistic process and product to which my attention now turns.

Deliberate Grounding in Historical Context

Gracing the walls of Penumbra's space in the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, amidst the company's repertoire, production photos, and murals, is the carefully painted image of a larger-than-life sized Sankofa bird. Its body facing forward, and its head looking back, this West African Adinkra symbol conveys a simple and profound meaning: we must look back before moving forward. As individuals and as a collective we must know where we come from in order to know where we are going. When Penumbra's artists moved to the Guthrie's rehearsal rooms and stages with *Gem of the Ocean*, the Sankofa's meaning was firmly embedded in the ethos of their work, and manifested itself from the outset of the partnership process. With each production that Bellamy directs he begins by grounding those gathered around the rehearsal table in the company's history, and for *Gem* this practice was especially crucial. At the outset of the first rehearsal Bellamy described Penumbra's mission and vision and announced in his quietly assured, yet fiercely passionate manner that "Penumbra is a company, and we have been here for 31 years." For those new to working with the company, this was perhaps the first time they were learning about its guiding framework, while for veterans, it was a refrain they had heard countless times and had often articulated themselves. For me, the production dramaturg, a relatively new member of Penumbra's team, and a PhD

student at the University of Minnesota working with the company under the auspices of the August Wilson Fellowship, it was one of the first times I would bear witness to a vital ritual practice of historical grounding that made clear not only the current stakes of the production, but the rich genealogy upon which it would draw. In his comments, Bellamy's focus made its way around the room, landing on and calling attention to those that had helped to create and shape the company in its more than three decades of experience, noting artists like Jim Craven, Abdul Salaam El Razzac, Faye Price, Matt LeFebvre, and Marvette Knight. To this list of company members and longtime collaborators, he added August Wilson himself, acknowledging the playwright's start at Penumbra, and the company's intimate knowledge of and experience with his body of writing. "We've been a part of definitive Wilson productions," noted Bellamy. "We're laying down a line that future generations can draw from as the arbiter and archiver of this work. We do this differently than anyone else, it's special, worthy of attention, and a vital part of the state of black theater" (Rehearsal Notes 28 Mar. 2008).

Mastery of an African American Aesthetic

Underlying Bellamy's comments was the fact that Penumbra had given Wilson his professional debut with *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* in the 1982-83 season, and would go on to produce more of his work than any other theater in the world. During Wilson's tenure with the company from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, company members symbiotically shaped his characters and stories in rehearsals on Penumbra's stage, as in conversations with the playwright who looked on from the house. Wilson's

widow Constanza Romero Wilson later characterized these veteran performers as “Wilsonian Warriors,” describing the way they expertly delivered his jazz-inspired rhythms and phrasings, a result of a decades-long process which laced the work into their bodies and bones (Romero Wilson and Bellamy).

In a conversation over coffee during the *Gem* rehearsal period, company member Jim Craven seconded Bellamy’s assertion of Penumbra’s authority in the arena of African American theater, extending their expertise from Wilson to Hansberry to Baldwin. He proudly claimed, “We are showing them the way to do American work. The Guthrie can’t do this without us – they don’t have the actors. This can and should be a model, a truly American thing, and America is changing” (Craven 19 May 2008). Like the Sankofa, Bellamy and Craven’s statements interweave past and present, honoring those who have come before and crafting a genealogy in which they are an integral member. In so doing, they firmly lay claim to their artistic authority and embodied cultural capital, tactically protecting against artistic interference, appropriation by non-African Americans, and potential attempts to dislodge black writers from their communities and heritage. Penumbra’s intimate knowledge of Wilson and other African American playwrights, buttressed by Wilson’s call for African American artistic specificity in “Ground,” has allowed them to leverage artistic autonomy within the bounds of their collaboration.

The Engagement of a Cultural Community

Bellamy’s decision to build this new era of partnership on Penumbra productions, rather than solely his directing, reveal another critical element of the company’s

autonomy. From the organization's beginnings when all of the artists answered phones, swept floors, and sold tickets in addition to playing roles, to the company bows that refuse to single out any one performer, Penumbra's work is the result of a cultural community rather than the achievement of a single individual. The company's ensemble approach, for example, is grown out of working relationships built and strengthened over the course of thirty five years, intrinsically shaped by a deep understanding of African American cultural texture, and flavored with the improvisational quality of jazz that Bellamy says "happens long before one gets to the stage" (22 Sept. 2009). Careful observers can witness the ties that bind ensemble members in both the rehearsal room and during performance. As a production dramaturg on *Gem of the Ocean*, I watched the interplay of levity and gravity as the cast interspersed blocking logistics with reminiscences, good natured teasing, and singing. Longtime company members Jim Craven and Abdul Salaam El Razzac began rehearsal one day by carefully conveying to a younger cast member, Cedric Mays, the history and philosophy of Wilson's characters, their explanations and personal stories illustrating the importance of passing on the torch of culture, artistry, and historical memory within the play and within that very room. Though Bellamy, as the director, would eventually make the final artistic decisions, during the rehearsal process the power dynamics were dispersed, and veteran Penumbra artists shared the responsibility of training the newer artists and the next generation in this particular dramatic oeuvre.

Company members within the Penumbra community explain that their work there becomes more than a job. Fellow Penumbra artists have sustained them through some of

the most difficult times in their lives, and because of these bonds and the work's humanizing and self-actualizing mechanisms they have described the company as a family, a home, even a church (Jackson).²⁰ This kind of supportive cultural network, combined with aesthetic expertise and a critical mass of artists working together, serves to shift the dominant backdrop of theatrical experience. This is not to say that the Penumbra community is utopic or homogeneous, however, and whenever lines of inclusion are drawn around a collection of people, so too are lines of exclusion. The company has been critiqued both internally and externally for failing to adequately incorporate and address the experiences of African American women, gays, members of the X and millennial generations, and the influx of new African immigrants to the Twin Cities, among others. While these concerns are worthy of deeper exploration, my point here is to distinguish the kind of strength that Penumbra wields in bringing an ensemble to their partnerships, and the ways in which this protects against the tokenism that can result from both post-racial logics and the theatrical star system. In bringing a full company to the Guthrie, individual Penumbra artists are less likely to be situated as sole representatives and cultural defenders of their art and their racial experience, or to be perceived as singular exceptional artists in ways that would erase the breadth and depth of the African American talent pool in Minnesota and across the country. Working against the individualizing tendencies of liberal humanist multiculturalism, Penumbra's ensemble forces reckoning with and recognition of black artists *as a group*, with claims to specific histories, while simultaneously throwing into relief the situatedness and power of the white mainstream. By both dispersing and buttressing power throughout the group,

Penumbra's ensemble aims to prevent the appropriation of African American cultural materials.

Naming Racial Injustices

Whereas Lou Bellamy could not elucidate the company's goal of eliminating racism in the early days of the organization's life given the cultural milieu, his daughter Sarah Bellamy, upon the announcement of her succession in January 2014, made it crystal clear that this was and had always been at the heart of Penumbra's mission and vision. Her remarks built upon the company's decades of producing African American theater, articles like "Colonization," and rhetoric Penumbra has crafted since embarking on their new era of partnership with the Guthrie. In the playbill for their production of *The Amen Corner* at the Guthrie, Lou Bellamy writes of James Baldwin's confrontation of the "stinging reality of racism" in the mid-1950s (3), and Sarah Bellamy ties his work to Penumbra's mission of naming racial injustice:

The American terrorist regime that operated largely unchecked from the advent of Africans in America through the Civil Rights Movement is the true story of the birth of our nation, though it has been omitted, erased or written over by countless politicians, historians and writers. Baldwin's body of work – extensive as it is – meets these lies where they are, in nearly every genre where they sought refuge to propagate white supremacy and justify violence against American citizens, and with his

keen, sharp criticism and heart-wrenching prose, Baldwin commenced to truth-telling. (“James Baldwin” 8)

Both Bellamys engage in their own truth-telling about the American experience in all of their writing surrounding each co-presentation, deploying terms like “terrorist regime” to illuminate racism’s systemic structure and to reframe the national dialogue about racism in a way that resonates with sharper impact for those who have lived through numerous “wars on terror” around the globe. Against post-racial logics that disconnect current injustices from their historical precedents, Sarah Bellamy illuminates the threads that weave past and present together. In her program essay for *A Raisin in the Sun*, for instance, she paints careful parallels between Lorraine Hansberry and First Lady Michelle Obama, teasing out their shared beginnings on the south side of Chicago and their rise to international stardom amidst ongoing racial tensions. Whereas mainstream framings of productions like *Raisin* often highlight the distinctions between 1950s U.S. racial policies and contemporary attitudes, she asks us to rethink our definitions of racial progress, and to reexamine current racial inequities (S. Bellamy, “A Family Portrait”). While this kind of contextualization is a vital part of all of Penumbra’s programming, within partnerships with the Guthrie and other mainstream companies it is crucial for distinguishing their culturally specific approach to the material, and for defining their autonomy. Given their lived experience of racial injustice, their artistic expertise, and their scholarly framing, Penumbra is uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogues on race in ways that the mainstream is unable to do on their own.

Rigorous Educational Contextualization

Whereas Lou Bellamy's comments mark out the company's history within the rehearsal room, his daughter Sarah Bellamy –until recently the Associate Artistic Director of Education –historically contextualizes the work through rigorous program notes, extensive study guides and essays, and pre- and post-show classes and dialogues that she and her education team lead. The younger Bellamy received her graduate degree in Post-Colonial Studies at the University of Chicago, and as the recognized scholar on staff she has worked to gather and record the company's history through a series of interviews with company members (called the Wilson Lab), and to ensure that audience members' experience of the work is shaped by the critical and theoretical lens of the African American experience. A host of scholars and educators join Sarah Bellamy in these efforts, including the current August Wilson Fellow (a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota), community experts, faculty at colleges and universities throughout the Twin Cities, the community advocacy coalition of partner organizations specializing in various aspects of social justice, and a curriculum development team with extensive experience in the public school system. In taking on the pedagogical labor of contextualization through original research, and the lens of African American history and theory, Bellamy and the education team provide a way for audiences to enter into and understand the stakes of the artistic work.

A Broad Invitation to Participate in the Company's Anti-Racist Mission

In all of their programming, but especially in their partnerships with mainstream companies like the Guthrie, Penumbra recognizes many Americans' desire for cross-cultural interaction and their equally powerful anxiety about talking honestly about race and racism. Through their art and their educational programming, they offer a means to engage for those who might otherwise not have the tools to begin. The invitation extends to all those willing to be steeped in the company's history, mission, aesthetics, and politics, and creates the opportunity to form interracial alliances against injustice. In his playbill notes for Penumbra's production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at the Guthrie, Lou Bellamy draws blacks and non-blacks into the same circle, affirming and extending the role of stewardship to a broader populace. He argues that

Black history is American history. In this play you will witness an unflinching look at our nation's history told from a perspective that has been ignored, manipulated, and is presently besieged by those who seek to rewrite history. Many are afraid to recognize that our shared past is as painful as it is glorious. Yet it belongs to *all* of us, and you and I are responsible for its custody. (3)

Firmly situated in a specific cultural context and a complex and racially fraught past, Bellamy calls audiences, artists, and partner institutions to stand alongside the company in addressing racial trauma and inequity. In counterpoint to and in commonality with the Guthrie's original selling of the company to the Minnesotan and Midwest population by convincing them that this was "their" theater, Bellamy creates a sense of belonging in

framing this history, black history as “ours”. This historiographic maneuver contests the we/they binary in a way that is neither assimilationist nor separatist, neither an erasure of difference nor a reversal of the oppressor/oppressed dynamic. Rather, it shifts power by asking those in the dominant culture (and those in cultures other than African American) to see, think, and act through an awareness of an African American lens. While they make it clear that the production of African American cultural material belongs to blacks, they make it equally clear that the history of racial relations in the country belongs to everyone, and it is only in and through this sense of ownership that racial injustice can be addressed and rectified moving forward. Their proposal signifies a distinct alternative to post-racial ideologies which promise the false hope of an already-achieved equality, and demonstrates the vital necessity of culturally specific companies. Though unafraid to call out white privilege, supremacy, and oppression, Penumbra’s invitation opens up a means for whites and others to engage in an anti-racist process of confrontation and even reconciliation by offering them a productive alternative to the role of oppressor. Sarah Bellamy, at the company’s succession event on January 13, 2014, made this invitation overt, stating her goal of catalyzing “dynamic theater participation” and a promising to “build a community of engaged citizens” through Penumbra’s art. This broad invitation to participation is a call to action that asks artists, audiences, and companies of all races to live up to their best selves in the service of shaping a more racially just future. In the next chapters I will detail the ways in which Penumbra’s tactics, so clearly articulated and actualized in the public sphere, are and are not successful within the bounds of their partnership with the Guthrie.

As an outgrowth of Penumbra's efforts, and in response to Mu Performing Arts' facilitation of dialogue around the most recent *Miss Saigon* controversy in the Twin Cities (that erupted around the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts' production of the piece in the fall of 2013), theaters of color in the Twin Cities have recently come together to form a coalition. Demonstrating a new politics of solidarity, Penumbra, Mu, New Native Theater, Teatro del Pueblo, and Pangea World Theater joined forces in the spring of 2014 as a means to support one another, contest problematic misrepresentations in the mainstream, advocate for culturally specific plays, educate funders about the importance of culturally specific theaters, and to open up honest conversations about racism in the broader field of American theater (Combs, "New Theater Coalition;" Kellen). As Sarah Bellamy notes, "I think people are scared to be collaborative, scared to let other people in and I think we need to do whatever we can to change that for the future... We have to talk to each other" (Combs, "New Theater Coalition"). In an exciting turn that moves within and outside of the mainstream/culturally specific theater dynamic, this coalition builds upon Penumbra's tactics of engaging the entire community.

Part Two: Mu Performing Arts and the Limits of Accommodation

For the Asian American artists of Mu Performing Arts, the challenges of entering the theatrical mainstream differ significantly from those faced by Penumbra Theatre Company, due to the unique ways that each group has been historically racialized through prevailing narratives, images, and logics, and their attendant political policies. While Penumbra's struggle is framed by defining their autonomy in opposition to the threat of

appropriation, Mu's challenge has been first making their stories heard, and later resisting assimilation and accommodation by developing a more overt politics of social justice.

The dominant American racial narrative of African American slavery, segregation, and civil rights activism has illuminated the oppressions faced by the largest minority segment of the American populace – 12.8% or 39 million according to 2010 census data – for the broader mainstream (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez). Black theater companies benefit from this high level of public awareness, and yet as my last section revealed, they have had to fight for the rights to own and produce the cultural material about this history. Mainstream reliance on this singular narrative, however, has overshadowed other racial histories, erasing Asian American struggles for inclusion and equality and contemporary Native American existence as peoples and sovereign nations. Thus Asian American (and Native American) artists must take on an even greater pedagogical labor in addressing invisibility and building a baseline of historical knowledge in order to create a platform for dissent. In addition to representing a much smaller segment of the U.S. population – 4.8% or 14.6 million in 2010 – there has also been far less cohesion in terms of the Asian American experience and its attendant narratives, goals, and political aspirations.

The term Asian American only emerged in the 1960s out of a politics of pan-ethnic solidarity, and thus is relatively young as an organizing concept. Multiple and distinct waves of immigrants fall under the umbrella of this broad moniker, including a handful of seafarers between the 1500s-1700s, migrant laborers in the mid-late 1800s, and a paradoxical mix of refugees of war and highly skilled professionals who have

arrived since the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act lifted previous restrictions and led to the most exponential influx of Asian immigration in the country's history. Each of these waves is complicated by multiple nations of origin, ethnic identities, class and educational levels, and political and economic reasons – some forced, some chosen – for coming to the U.S. This heterogeneity results in a multiplicity of narratives about Asian American experiences, a reality which differs sharply from the deep consensus about the defining trajectory of the African American experience.

Penumbra has been able to successfully frame this oppositional and cohesive narrative in their institutional identity, in tandem with a clearly defined aesthetic, links to specific playwrights, connections to the Black Arts Movements, and an increasing national reputation. All of these factors, along with their larger institutional size (a 1-2 million dollar budget) and their own performance space, have created a basis for their demonstrative claims for autonomy. Mu's broad mission and deployment of a variety of political tactics, on the other hand, speaks to the breadth of the Asian American experience. Taken together with Mu's smaller size (a half million dollar budget), younger institutional tenure, and a set of racial histories less well known to the public, the company's relationship to the theatrical mainstream has been less overtly resistant.

While African Americans have been set in fierce and dire opposition to the country's white power structure, Asian Americans have been historically excluded from immigration and citizenship through political and juridical decree, and erased from national dialogues on race. Depicted as the "perpetual foreigner" since the mid-19th century, Asian Americans have been interpellated as "strangers from a different shore"

according to historian Ronald Takaki, ultimately unassimilable due to their points of origin in Asian countries, their entrance into the U.S. through Angel Island in California rather than Ellis Island in New York, and their physiological markers of racial difference. In their discussions of Orientalism, Edward Said and other postcolonial scholars detail the ways in which the very foundations of U.S. national identity rely on the East/West dichotomy, and how the construction of this national “self” depends for its existence on the Asian “Other”. And so, as Asian immigrants entered the country, they were hailed as either threatening outsiders or exotic spectacles, by turns either mysterious, desirable, and subservient, or requiring surveillance, disenfranchisement, and even internment. These Orientalist tropes were played out on the stage and screen, embedding an ideology of Asian Otherness into the fabric of the national imaginary, and justifying discriminatory public policies. Characters such as Ah Sin, Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, the Dragon Lady, and the Doll Bride –created by white writers and most often performed by whites in yellow face – helped to popularize and solidify the myriad facets of Orientalism.²¹

With the rise of Asian American activism in the 1960s and 70s, as well as the emergence of Asian American studies programs in colleges and universities across the country, scholars, artists, and activists challenged these problematic stereotypes. Yet, in the wake of this influential activism, and in alignment with the colorblind rhetoric espoused in the late 1980s and 1990s, Asian Americans were given the new moniker of the Model Minority. Now completely assimilable, they were held up as the quintessential example of bootstrapping success and the inherent equity of the American dream. Though this new trope celebrated Asian American achievements in educational

attainment, workplace expertise, and economic prosperity, it masked the limits of Asian American advancement under white hegemony, as well as the disparities between Asian groups based on ethnicity, class, immigrant status, and gender. It also served as a wedge to divide racial minority groups, rewarding Asian Americans for their seeming agreeability and complicity with dominant structures, while demonizing African Americans and Latino/as for failing to adhere to this standard and continuing to raise vocal opposition to racial oppression. Thus contemporary Asian Americans find themselves in an interlocking set of double binds - between hypervisibility and invisibility, desirable exoticism and menacing threat, terminally unassimilable and triumphantly assimilable.

For Asian American artists, these realities are complicated by the aesthetic and cultural hierarchies of mainstream theater, which often prize the European and Euro-American canon above all others, and tend to confine minority representation to colorblind roles in that canon or depictions that fit dominant tropes. Yet, because they inhabit the same field of professional theater, many Asian American artists aspire to the recognition and cultural capital that accompany mainstream success. At the same time, they hope to transform the expectations of white audiences and the practices of regional theaters to better reflect the complex realities of their lives. Given this context, Mu Performing Arts entered into their relationship with the Guthrie in 2007 by deploying tactics similar to those they used to found their company in the overwhelmingly white upper Midwest in the early 1990s. Due to the history of Asian American *exclusion*, they have fought to be *included* in the theatrical landscape and the national imaginary,

grounding their efforts in a liberal Equal Rights framework. Likewise, they have combated the pernicious image of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (either desirable or threatening) with appeals to their common humanity. Chela Sandoval explicates the linkages between these tactics in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, arguing that

Within the first equal-rights enactment of consciousness-in-opposition, the members of the subordinated group argue that the differences for which they have been assigned inferior status lay in appearance only, not in “reality.” Behind what they maintain are only exterior physical differences from the most legitimated form of the human-in-society is a content, an essence that is the same as the essence of the human-in-power. These oppositional actors argue for civil rights based on the philosophy that all humans are created equally. Practitioners of this particular ideological tactic demand that their humanity be legitimated, recognized as the same under the law, and assimilated into the most favored form of the human-in-power. (56)

Sandoval differentiates this Equal-Rights Form from the Revolutionary Form which calls for the fundamental restructuring of the dominant order, the Supremacist Form which claims oppressed groups’ superiority over the dominant, the Separatist Form which is organized by subordinated groups to protect and nurture difference, and the Differential Form of Consciousness which weaves “between and among” oppositional ideologies (56-58). While Penumbra works to balance their Equal Rights claims with Separatist tactics,

due to their genealogical links to both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Mu's primary method for achieving recognition in the mainstream has emphasized Equal Rights, aligning with concepts of liberal humanist multiculturalism. And under the leadership of Artistic Director Rick Shiomi, their claims to human equality have historically taken a more covert form. Recently, however, Mu has become more outspoken in their contestation of troubling racial practices in the theater in response to a few key factors: resistance to the Model Minority moniker, a mission change that more explicitly incorporates social justice content and activism, and a series of conflicts around issues of Asian American representation in the Twin Cities. Over the course of their relationship with the Guthrie, they have been confronted with the limits of these Equal Rights tactics, and are beginning to look to other partners and avenues for achieving long-term visibility, validation, solidarity, and sustainability.

Mu's Covert Beginnings

In the early 1990s, when Theater Mu was founded, the company's primary concern was establishing the presence, voice, and visibility of Asian American artists in Minnesota. This act, though it was not concerned with direct *opposition* to the established theatrical mainstream, was in itself an anti-assimilative gesture. In making Asian Americans visible in Minnesota, Mu contested the assumption of their disappearance into the celebrated American melting pot. This particular Midwestern state initially seemed like the least likely place for the company's emergence, however, and Shiomi termed it "a hinterland of ice and snow—a distinctly non-Asian place" (Lemanczyk 68). The

whiteness of the state's infamous winters was matched by the predominance of the Euro-American population, which led Shiomi to serious doubts about the viability of a Minneapolis-based Asian American theater company. Yet, when Dong-Il Lee, a Korean graduate student at the University of Minnesota proposed the idea to Shiomi during one of his visits to the Twin Cities, he agreed to help. Together with co-founders Martha Johnson, a Euro-American theater professor at Augsburg College specializing in Asian and Asian American theater, Andrew Kim, a Korean American living in the Twin Cities, and Diane Espaldon, a Filipina professional and the company's original Managing Director, Theater Mu was born.²²

In the beginning, the company aimed to "give voice to Asian Americans" (Zia 64), and as such one of their fundamental tasks was the slow, steady, and significant process of building an Asian American talent pool. Whereas the Guthrie was immediately able to draw established stars to their stages, and whereas Penumbra had a cohesive ensemble of locally-based artists to begin their company, Mu drew together their performers from disparate sources throughout the Twin Cities. Some, like Lia Rivamonte, were well established professional actors that had performed at venues like Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, while others like Paul Juhn were not initially trained in theater, but later went on to earn advanced degrees from the likes of UC San Diego and successful careers in New York. Still others had training in undergraduate theater and dance programs, including Marcus Quiniones, Jennifer Weir, Sun Mee Chomet, Nancy Parsons, Kurt Kwan, and Sherwin Resurreccion (Johnson and Shiomi).

Mu's founding coincided with and was strengthened by the establishment of the artist collective Asian American Renaissance. Formed by writers like David Mura and artists like Marlina Gonzalez, AAR helped give rise to myriad Asian American organizations in the Twin Cities. Gonzalez notes how "In Minnesota we were starving for a way to see ourselves, to express ourselves in the midst of this Nordic presence" (Zia 264). Mu addressed this need by creating a 'homeplace' for the self-shaping of cultural identities and the contestation of dominant narratives, beginning with staged readings and small-scale productions at Intermedia Arts and the nationally recognized Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis.

Like their corollaries at Asian American Renaissance, Mu worked to create a pan-ethnic community of artists from the various Asian American constituencies in the Twin Cities. Shiomi's experience as a playwright and director in the heat of the Asian American theater movement in the early 1980s, as well as his multi-year role as the organizer of Vancouver's Powell Street Festival, had taught him that this kind of coalition-building was necessary for long-term sustainability. Thus, from the outset the company has been comprised of artists from a range of ethnic and cultural affiliations, those who are bi- or multi-racial, adoptees, first generation immigrants, and those whose families have been in the U.S. for two, three, or four generations. Though there were established enclaves of Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and Chinese Americans in the Twin Cities in the early 1990s, they were much smaller than their corollaries on the East and West coasts of the U.S. and Canada. Rather, two thirds of the Asian Americans in Minnesota at that time were former refugees from southeast Asia, many of them Hmong

(Zia 264). In fact, the influx of Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian immigrants to the Twin Cities quadrupled the metropolitan area's Asian population between the early 1980s-1990s, and while the state's minority population was still one of the lowest in the country, the metro region was gaining increasing racial complexity (E. Lee 212). These new immigrants would later become key participants in the company, but Mu began by focusing their spotlight on another unique group of Minnesotan Asian Americans: Korean adoptees. Numbering over 10,000, they represented the largest density of Korean adoptees anywhere in the country (Glover). As they were predominantly raised in white families, Korean adoptees had largely been acculturated into mainstream Euro-America, contributing to the differentiation of Minnesota's Asian American population as compared to other regions in the U.S. and Canada.

Mask Dance, Mu's inaugural work showcased adoptee stories, reflecting the kinds of double consciousness they faced. Though culturally white, their bodies read as Asian, inciting insensitivities, prejudices, and overt racism from the broader population and leading to feelings of isolation. Stories like *Mask Dance* revealed adoptees' sense of deep loss, not only about being given up for adoption, but an ongoing lack of knowledge about their biological and cultural origins. Most often there were no paper trails connecting them to their birth parents. And yet, if and when they returned to Korea in search of answers and belonging, they often felt ostracized in a country where they didn't speak the language and where social and national shame prevented an open dialogue.²³

This sense of in-between-ness was reflected in the hybrid aesthetic that Mu initially became known for – a blending of traditional Asian performance forms, in this case Korean mask dance, with contemporary personal narratives about the Asian American experience.²⁴ It was in and through Mu productions like these that many Korean adoptee artists reported developing a new sense of Asian American affiliation, one that created belonging in and through the art itself rather than a strong identification with either the country of their birth or their life.²⁵ In joining forces with other artists of Asian American heritage for the first time through their work at Mu, many of these adoptees began to gain a new understanding of themselves as Asian. Later, in being able to tell their stories in a contemporary Western dramaturgical format, new refugee immigrant artists like the Hmong would begin to understand themselves as American. Thus, Mu's role in bringing together artists from myriad ethnic backgrounds and racialized experiences was not only pivotal to the formation of an Asian American community in the Twin Cities, it shaped artists' identities and their sense of belonging to a broader Asian America. In the beginning, creating, nurturing, celebrating, and sharing this sense of belonging in the face of isolation and discrimination was more critical than direct opposition to the discrimination itself.

Because Minnesota's general population, as well as the families and friends of many of the Korean adoptee artists were white, Mu's circle of audiences and stakeholders was largely Euro-American from the outset. At 15% Asian and 85% non-Asian, Mu's audience made it unique among Asian American theater companies in the country (E. Lee 214-215). Just as the fledgling company had to build an artist pool to make their

work viable, they needed to assemble an audience base, and since white Midwesterners remained largely unaware of Asian American stories and artistic abilities, their first goal was to make these visible and visceral. Like *Penumbra*, this prompted the company to speak across lines of racial and cultural difference, and to adopt an Equal Rights approach to racial dialogue. Early on, notes Managing Director Don Eitel, “Rick [Shiomi] was trying to change people’s minds without them knowing that was his intention...in other words, more covertly. He would provide plays, readings, and art without this [explicit social justice] context in the hopes that change would happen more organically” (6 Feb. 2014). Shiomi’s approach to introducing Minnesotan audiences to the stories and artistic talents of Asian Americans was a savvy tactical maneuver given the company’s geo-political context and their spatial and temporal distance from some of the more radical politics happening at companies like San Francisco’s Asian American Theatre Workshop in the early 1970s. There, vocal artistic leaders like Frank Chin were steeped in an atmosphere of “successful political activism, cultural maturity, and sheer numbers [of Asian Americans, which] made the city an ideal setting” for an Asian American theater company (E. Lee 57). Chin’s confrontational political style was likened to the Black Revolutionary Theater and its proponents Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, and his brash persona spurred other Asian American companies to follow his ideological lead (E. Lee 54).

Back in Minnesota, Shiomi explains, it has taken conversations about race and representation around ten to twenty years to reach the general populace, and the discussions and activism that were happening in New York and California in the 1970s

did not occur here until much more recently (18 Apr. 2010). Rather, in the heart of the upper Midwest, Mu faced a particularly Minnesotan brand of passive-aggressive and conflict avoidant interpersonal interaction known as ‘Minnesota nice,’ and an ideology that I term ‘colorblind progressiveness.’²⁶ For decades (until very recently when it has become more of a swing state), Minnesota was known as a stronghold of the coalitional Democratic-Farmer-Labor party, and progressive leaders like then Minneapolis Mayor Hubert Humphrey were spearheading anti-racist activism as early as the 1940s. These political leanings combined with high levels of educational attainment, top-ranked health care facilities, regional government through the Metropolitan Council, and some of the highest national contribution rates to social welfare programs have led many Minnesotans to view themselves as progressive, even if racial equality has lagged behind other areas of justice in the state.²⁷ At the same time, knowledge and transparency about Minnesota’s own history of racial conflict and injustice is lacking in information disseminating systems like K-12 education.

Further, because Minnesota has one of the lowest non-white populations in the country (11.8% in 2010 according to Humes, Jones, and Ramirez), and because much of the state’s racial diversity is restricted to specific neighborhoods in Minneapolis and St. Paul, many whites in the state have not had to engage racial difference in close quarters. Thus, the prevailing logic of racism is framed in terms of personal prejudice rather than institutional structures and systems, and many white Minnesotans tend to equate a lack of overt racist attacks on individuals with a lack of racist ideology. Here the dominant black/white binary narrative of racial relations is combined with a geographical and

historical binary in which the north imagines racism as relegated to the American south and/or the era of Jim Crow segregation. The seeming absence of separate drinking fountains and semiotic markers like the Confederate flag offer some Minnesotans a moral high ground from which to believe that racism cannot and does not happen here. Thus race and racism need not be named or discussed, and if they are, they are likely to be quickly denied or eschewed. Rather, many white Minnesotans maintain a belief in colorblindness as a positive means of valuing individuals without attention to race.

It is not surprising, then, that notions of liberal humanist multiculturalism rather than anti-racist logics were beginning to gain currency in Minnesota in the early 1990s. During this time there was, Shiomi notes, “a growing cultural diversity consciousness in the Twin Cities” (18 Apr. 2007). With conceptions of diversity in vogue, and with the emerging multicultural imperative to address and include cultural difference, the company filled a particularly well-timed artistic niche and had little trouble securing funding from the prominent McKnight Foundation.²⁸ And yet, like *Penumbra*, the fledgling organization had to demonstrate their stability and staying power before support would be granted from other foundations, corporate, and government sources.

After a decade of continuous and incremental growth, Mu’s aesthetic began to shift away from their initial hybrid style. Spurred by a new generation of formally trained young Asian American artists eager to hone their talents, the success of Mu’s efforts in raising the visibility of Asian American stories, and a more savvy audience base (that the company helped to create), Mu began producing pieces that were more explicit in their engagement of contemporary political and social issues. This is not to say that these kinds

of issues had never previously been addressed in Mu's repertoire. In fact, the company produced Shiomi's provocative *Yellow Fever* in their first full season. Rather, the balance of genres shifted in the early 2000s, and each season from 2003-2005 began with a more politically overt production. In *Interior Designs* by Kiseung Rhee, for instance, a young Vietnamese man reveals his homosexuality to his disapproving family. *From Shadows to Light* by Ka Vang illuminated Hmong women's silent suffering under the vagaries of domestic abuse, and in Aurorae Khoo's *Happy Valley*, anxieties of class, nation, ethnicity, gender, and emigration bubble to the surface as Hong Kong is returned to Chinese control after more than a century and a half of British rule. By the time Mu partnered with the Guthrie in the mid-2000s, then, their seasons comprised a blend of their older (politically-covert) and newer (politically-overt) tactics.

The Guthrie Partnership Begins

Mu's relationship with the Guthrie officially began in the 2006-2007 season, when Mu's production of Marcus Quiniones' *Circle Around the Island* was presented in the 200-seat Dowling Studio Theater in the Guthrie's brand new riverfront complex. *Circle* marked the first time in the Guthrie's forty four year history that a play conceived, performed, and directed entirely by Asian American artists performed on one of its stages. As the Managing Director for Mu Performing Arts at the time, I helped to negotiate the collaboration, and can attest to the company's enthusiasm for securing such a prominent spotlight in the Twin Cities, for being included in the Guthrie's inaugural season in their new location, and for their role in bringing the first Asian American

production into Minnesota's flagship theater. Given the history of Asian American exclusion from mainstream narratives and theater spaces, combined with the Asian American theater movement's aspirations to regional theater standards (E. Lee 6), Mu perceived this presentation to be a major coup. Over the course of their ongoing partnership with the Guthrie, Mu has tested several different tactics for both achieving Equal Rights and resisting assimilation. In the beginning, Mu returned to their signature hybrid style with *Circle*, covertly attempting to draw in Guthrie audiences who may have never seen an Asian American play in enticing and comfortable ways, while simultaneously introducing them to the highest level of Asian American artistic talent in the Twin Cities.

Written and choreographed by Marcus Quiniones, a theater artist of Filipino heritage who was born and raised in Hawai'i, *Circle* is set on the island of Moloka'i and tells the story of 10-year old Maliko (a thinly veiled younger version of Quiniones himself), who experiences the unexpected death of his father, and must struggle through grief, fear, and uncertainty to a new understanding of himself and his existential purpose. The *MuView* newsletter illuminated *Circle*'s unique combination of cultural difference and common humanity, calling it an "extraordinary tale of mystical companions, family guardians and Hawaiian legends...[a] journey of self-discovery, told with the grace and movement of hula...the search for human compassion, our place in the world, and the things that help us grow into who we become" (2). The performance showcased Quiniones' multiple skills and talents ranging from hula-inspired dancing to Hawaiian chanting, from bawdy Lecoq style comedic movement to storytelling, all in a hybrid form

that was representative of Mu's original aesthetic. Quiniones' artistic virtuosity, combined with the Julliard-trained clout of emerging Director Randy Reyes, the strength of the cast - including veterans like Sandy Agustin and Sun Mee Chomet and the talents of newer recruits like Sherwin Resurreccion, Mayano Ochi, and Elizabeth Truong - helped to establish Mu's artistic rigor, a fact that was not a given for the mainstream theater-going public. The high artistic value of *Circle* also led to both public approval and financial success, a fact that both Dowling and Shiomi were banking on, given that this was a revival of Mu's successful 1999 production. Attendance came in at over 80% capacity (Eitel 1 May 2014), and the production garnered a bevy of glowing reviews, signifying and exemplifying the hopes and visions of both companies as they embarked upon their collaboration.

Mu's Equal Rights model simultaneously played into the Guthrie's logic of liberal humanist multiculturalism. Returning to a more covert set of politics and the less contentious folktale form with a play like *Circle Around the Island* made sense for Mu given the circumstances, even if this was not a complete representation of the company's current identity. The play also made sense for the Guthrie, as it clearly aligned with their mission of presenting "new works from diverse cultures" ("About the Guthrie"), and their goal of filling the Dowling Studio with productions "which seek out our common humanity in uncommon ways" (*Dowling Studio 2006-2007*). Given the history of Asian American racialization, the particular racial landscape in Minnesota, and Mu's desire to make Asian American stories and artistic talents visible in these contexts, they played into notions of "common humanity" within their work. With this framing, they hoped to

engender meaningful empathy across lines of race and color by contesting dehumanizing stereotypes of Asian Americans and expectations of non-white inferiority on and off the stage. The potent and ongoing impact of the perpetual foreigner and exotic Other images in the mainstream, and Mu's equally powerful desire to overturn them cannot be underestimated. Under these circumstances, taking up the language of "common humanity" and its attendant Equal Rights politics was a calculated tactical maneuver within the broader racial and aesthetic ecosystem of the Twin Cities theater community. To this end, their promotional materials balanced instances of focused cultural specificity, like Reyes' characterization of the piece as a "story about a Filipino family in Moloka'i, Hawaii," with broader appeals to "what we all share, our humanity" ("Circle Around the Island" 2).

While the language of "common humanity" helped to smooth Mu's welcome onto the Guthrie's stage, it also unearthed the fraught and contingent politics of recognition. As one *Circle* performer commented in an email conversation with me, "When a place like the Guthrie gives Mu an opportunity to present a piece in their space, I felt there was a validation and recognition of our work. But there's that frustration creeping up again. That feeling of "About f--king time!" (Resurreccion). This sense of validation is bound up with the problematic obfuscations of the "common humanity" logic. Within the rubric of liberal humanist multiculturalism, the recognition that this artist refers to tends to "reproduce hegemonic social relations between the "we" who recognize and "they" who require recognition. It is a gift rather than an entitlement...[and] invites "them" to join

“us” in dominant society” (Levine-Rasky). The language of common humanity conceals this hegemonic operation.

Mu’s Tactics Become More Overt

In the fall of 2009, Mu announced a new mission statement which made social justice one of the company’s explicit goals, laying the groundwork for their vocal opposition to mainstream theatrical practices and for recognizing the limits of accommodation. The shift in institutional purpose was spurred in large part by a 2008 grant from the philanthropic and advocacy organization Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, which called for overt engagement in issues of racial and gender injustice. While Mu’s mission statement of the early 2000s reflected their aesthetic desire “To be a premier artistic company that creates theater and taiko from the heart of the Asian American experience,” their social purpose was more specifically elucidated in this new language: “Mu produces great performances born of arts, equality, and justice from the heart of the Asian American experience” (“Mission”). Furthermore, one of company’s foremost values now articulated their intention “To promote awareness of and progressive action on issues of social justice and gender equity in society” (“Primary Artistic Values”). For Mu, whose initial aim had been to contest the invisibility and exclusion of Asian American stories in Minnesota, this was both a logical next step and a paradigmatic shift in the way the company presented itself to the public.

Almost immediately, Mu’s mission revision provided a launching pad to test their new identity. From 2010 to 2013, the company faced a rapid succession of critical

incidents in the Twin Cities theater scene that acted as a tipping point, calling their new mission into action. The first: the controversy surrounding the “Asians in the Media” panel attached to Mu’s production of *Yellow Face* in the Guthrie’s Dowling Studio Theater in February 2010. Two short months later in April, Minneapolis’ Children’s Theatre Company provoked the Asian American community’s indignation when they cast primary Asian characters in their production of Disney’s *Mulan Jr.* with white actors. Though CTC claimed to have done everything in their power to fill the roles with Asian American performers, and though their efforts were complicated by the reality of five local productions requiring Asian American actors running almost simultaneously, their casting decisions touched the precise nerve exposed through the *Yellow Face* panel. In response, Mu’s Artistic Director Rick Shiomi and then Artistic Associate Randy Reyes spearheaded a gathering of local theater leaders to address issues of race and casting in a public forum at CTC. Because the Guthrie was staging David Henry Hwang’s Tony-Award winning play *M. Butterfly* at the same time as *Mulan Jr.*, and was one of the five productions utilizing Asian American actors, their institutional absence at the forum was conspicuous.²⁹ Finally, in the fall of 2013, St. Paul’s largest performing arts venue, the Ordway Center, after years of partnering with and presenting Mu’s work, slated the highly controversial musical production *Miss Saigon* to return to its stages for a third time in twenty years, catalyzing a third wave of vehement protests from the Asian American community, including Mu Performing Arts. In the face of the controversy, Mu organized and facilitated a series of conversations: one for Asian American artists, a second for the Twin Cities’ theater community, and a third for the general public including funders,

elected officials, the press, participants in the newly formed “Don’t Buy Miss Saigon” coalition, and those on all sides of the issue. Though the show went on in each of these critical incidents, Mu’s voice grew in strength, clarity, and challenge as a result, reaching wider audiences and more prominent media sources than ever before.

Yellow Face

In line with the company’s new mission, and in a significant departure from *Circle Around the Island*’s politics and aesthetics, Mu’s next production at the Guthrie marked a conscious decision to foreground culturally specific social issues and racial injustice. David Henry Hwang’s *Yellow Face* examines myriad political issues in a mockumentary style filled with both self-deprecating humor and biting critique,³⁰ among them the vagaries of colorblind casting, multiple modes of racial mimicry, and the insidious threat Asian Americans face of being hailed by the U.S. government as perpetual foreigners. When DHH (a fictionalized version of the playwright) mistakenly casts a white actor, Marcus, in a leading role he wrote for an Asian American actor, he initiates the actor’s journey towards claiming an Asian American identity and becoming a spokesperson and activist for Asian American causes. Just as Marcus begins to inhabit a racial identity that is not his by birth or culture, DHH’s father, HYH, an immigrant who has been in the country for five decades and is prospering in the banking industry, is summoned for questioning in a McCarthy style interrogation of Chinese Americans. In this process, in a conversation between DHH and the investigative journalist NWOAOC (Name Withheld on Advice of Counsel), HYH’s loyalty to the country, his very

Americanness, is challenged. In the midst of both of these controversies, Marcus, HYH, and DHH must continuously renegotiate their subject positions in relation to race, nation, cultural community, and their respective industries. Though the play contained elements of “common humanity” - HYH clearly and passionately identifies with white American movie stars like Humphrey Bogart and Clark Gable despite their racial difference, and DHH is as capable of misreading racial identity as his white counterparts in the entertainment industry – it also emphasizes the disparities in racial experiences in the U.S. and shines a spotlight on ongoing oppressions. As an audience member at Mu’s production on two separate occasions, I watched white attendees vacillate between appreciative snickers, awkward silence, uncomfortable squirms, and hearty applause at this depiction of Asian American lives that neither celebrated commonality nor highlighted exotic cultural difference.

In conjunction with the production, Mu’s Randy Reyes initiated a pre-show panel on opening night to bring the play’s issues into direct dialogue with the audience. Specifically focused on “Asians in the Media,” the panel addressed Asian Americans’ efforts to contest damaging stereotypes on the stage and screen, and to raise awareness of Asian Americans’ often limited access to employment opportunities in the field. Despite what seemed to be a common educational practice in the theater, the panel proposal evoked tension between the two organizations as some members of the Guthrie staff supported it and some did not. While I explore these tensions in further detail in Chapter Two, I mention them here to point to the limits of comfort within the celebratory

multicultural framework, and the obstacles Mu met when attempting to implement a more overt social justice agenda.

Cowboy Versus Samurai

Following hot on the heels of *Yellow Face*, Mu re-mounted another previous success of theirs in the Dowling Studio in the fall of 2010: Michael Golamco's contemporary romantic comedy *Cowboy Versus Samurai*. The piece revealed a mixed bag of political tactics and represented a middle ground between Mu's first two productions at the Guthrie. Unlike *Circle*, Golamco's play dealt directly with issues of racism, but unlike *Yellow Face* it illuminated individual struggles over structural injustice, and was aimed more at garnering empathy than indicting hegemonic systems like the U.S. government and commercial theaters.

Set in the miniscule fictional town of Breakneck, Wyoming, *Cowboy Versus Samurai* follows four characters in their quests for love, companionship, cultural identity, and deep recognition. When Veronica, a gorgeous Korean American teacher moves to Breakneck, the only two Asian Americans in town, Travis and Chester, along with their white friend Del, pounce at the first opportunity to court her. When Veronica reveals that she only dates white men, however, Travis puts a Cyrano de Bergerac conceit into action, penning poetic missives to Veronica for the sweet but less-than-brilliant Del. Chester, an adoptee of unknown national origin, also attempts to win Veronica's love amidst his comically intense search to discover his Asian identity, and adhere to the teachings of Bruce Lee. In *Cowboy*, each character embodies a different racial logic or perspective,

and ultimately race is only allegorically addressed on a personal level. Humor and a familiar romantic plot line (albeit with an Asian American twist), are the delivery mechanisms in this Asian American comedy. In a post-racial era, these tactics become a more acceptable way of addressing race.

Mu may have decided that a less overtly political piece would keep newer audiences engaged at this point in their tenure at the Guthrie, while also smoothing over any remaining tensions from the *Yellow Face* panel. There were also parallels here with their decision to present *Circle* for their first production at the Guthrie. *Cowboy* represented a proven critical and economic success, as Mu had staged it previously at Mixed Blood Theatre. Shiomi felt this piece would be more palatable for a Guthrie audience than another of Golamco's shows they had been planning to stage that season, *Year Zero* (3 Mar. 2014). *Cowboy* was the safer choice for both partnering companies, as neither could afford to risk a money-losing production. This delicate advance and retreat dance that Mu felt they had to perform reveals the kind of tactical rather than strategic position they have assumed in the partnership, with motives that are both economic and political.

Yellow Fever

Ironically, in their latest production at the Guthrie, Mu returned to Shiomi's and the Asian American theater movement's roots with his first play, *Yellow Fever*. First staged in 1982 at San Francisco's Asian American Theater Company and then off-Broadway with Pan Asian Repertory, *Yellow Fever* tackles racism against Japanese and

Chinese Canadians head-on, albeit through the comically dark lens of a hard-boiled film-noir mystery. Set along Powell Street, Vancouver in the 1970s, the plot follows detective Sam Shikaze, a Japanese Canadian incarnation of Sam Spade, as he solves the case of the kidnapped Cherry Blossom Queen. Through his crime-stopping exploits, Shikaze uncovers white supremacist infiltration of the police force, encounters blatant, old-fashioned racism, and reveals how white power brokers have systematically limited the upward mobility of Asian Canadians in the public sector even when they operate by the rules of those mainstream systems. Josephine Lee theorizes that Shikaze's remembering of the Japanese Canadian internment is key to his solving the case, which could not be achieved without "keeping alive the consciousness of the wound made by the systematic racism of a corrupt authority. It is this historical trauma that connects Sam to the older community and affords him insider access to informants" (86). Lee comments that "such a victory comes only from vigilance and collective action. Those who have forgotten the racism of the past are at greatest risk of becoming victims of its resurgence" (87). Taking up this interpretation, Mu's staging of *Yellow Fever* at the Guthrie functions as a reminder, for them, their mainstream partner, and their audiences, that the wounds of racism have not been resolved despite national rhetoric declaring a post-racial age nor mainstream theater's sense of multicultural achievement. Remembering and re-presenting this reality confirms the need for culturally specific theater, and the ongoing project of anti-racist performance.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

Throughout their relationship with the Guthrie, through both covert and overt tactics, Mu has struggled against the history of Asian American exclusion. Their multiple performances in the Dowling Studio do indeed include them in the regional theatrical landscape and broaden the imagined community of the United States.

When Mu Performing Arts embarked on their relationship with the Guthrie in 2006-2007, Shiomi was cautiously optimistic, hedging any definitive claims to the meaning and impact of the partnership until future productions had painted a larger picture (18 Apr. 2007). Now, after eight years and four productions in the Dowling Studio space, Mu's hopes of achieving recognition, validation, and organizational sustainability through their partnership with the Guthrie are reaching their limits. On the one hand, Shiomi is certain of the positive role the collaboration has played in raising the visibility and cultural capital of his company. He asserts that performing at the Guthrie, along with other high profile venues in the Twin Cities like the Ordway Center for Performing Arts and Park Square Theatre, has raised Mu's profile in the eyes of the community and even for company members themselves. Artists, audiences, critics, and funders now view Mu as an established company, according to Shiomi, one whose aesthetic rigor and talent pool is no longer questioned. This recognition has translated into economic capital, and as board members' and funders' pride in the organization has grown, so too has their giving (Shiomi 3 Mar. 2014).³¹ On the other hand, while this validation benefits Mu, it also reifies the Guthrie's and the mainstream's role as cultural arbiters.

In retrospect, the Guthrie has become less of a destination for Mu, and more of a steppingstone in the company's trajectory. While the Guthrie has not necessarily transformed their racial politics, the partnership has helped Mu to clarify their own purpose as they produce work, engage the mainstream, and continue to shape their identity. Mu now presents a more unified and vocal resistance to problematic mainstream practices. Their purpose is strengthened as they realize the limits of the mainstream for nurturing artists of color, and the ongoing necessity of culturally specific companies like theirs. By 2014, other theater companies of color were taking note, using Mu's vocal organizing as a model to emulate, and as a foundation for building a strong coalition.

Part Three: The Native Theater Initiative and the Fight to Establish Presence

"We are here." This persistent performative pronouncement has been echoed in every site of Native performance I have encountered, and it makes clear the foundational objective that underpins the work and the field. As a participant-observer diving into Native American theater in the summer of 2008, I first heard this deceptively simple yet deeply profound phrase spoken by indigenous artists from across the country in the rehearsal rooms of San Diego State University, in the midst of the Native Voices at the Autry Playwrights' Retreat. Later, wandering through the company's lobby at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles, I found it calling out from the historical and promotional materials that lined the walls, an insistent beacon. As I journeyed to the Native Theater Festival at the Public Theater in New York that fall, I heard it once again. "We are here." The artists I have met, witnessed, and engaged with work in each of these sites work

tirelessly to establish this a priori truth so that they might pursue other, deeper, more varied facets of their lives on stage. “*We are here*” marks a corporeal contemporary presence, contesting centuries of violent and systematic acts, political policies, and dominant narratives erasing Native American existence. It also signals a commitment to a complex inter-cultural community comprised of over 500 nations in the United States and over 600 in Canada: “*We are here.*” The field of Native theater in North America is indelibly shaped by these twin concerns: gaining recognition and incorporating community.

These goals, as my investigation has shown, are also paramount for African American and Asian American artists and communities. Yet they pose unique challenges for the field of Native theater, challenges which have been shaped by the relationships between sovereign indigenous nations and federal governments. Because Native peoples have arguably been the most systematically eradicated, the least visible and recognized of cultural and racial minority groups in North America, the stakes and consequences of their working in the mainstream are significant. When Native Americans claim their existence through theater, they not only contest the myth of their vanishing, they simultaneously raise questions of redress for stolen lands, broken treaties, and hegemonic regimes like forced boarding school practices. Inevitably, they presence claims of injustice endured over the past 500 years. These claims challenge many of the core narratives of U.S. identity, as well as systems of increasingly globalized capitalism upon whose stolen lands the wealth and population of the country rests. The U.S. government has yet to publicly and broadly acknowledge these realities, and thus unlike the history of

African American slavery or the Japanese American internment during WWII, these indigenous histories are virtually unknown to the general public. Thus, as they bring their work into the mainstream, Native American theater-makers have the potential to radically transform the stories that we tell about ourselves as a nation.

The Public Theater, as the mainstream partner in this endeavor, presents a markedly different model of cross-cultural collaboration than the Guthrie's. Their historical and ongoing commitment to producing plays by, for, and about artists of color is unique for a mainstream company of their size and national prestige. So too, is their role as curator of the Native Theater Initiative, which began with two festivals in 2007 and 2008, and which continues as Native plays and playwrights are integrated into all aspects of the Public's programming. Unlike the partnerships between the Guthrie and their firmly established culturally specific partners, the Native Theater Initiative marshals and brokers a heterogeneous field. As such, the Public becomes a formative agent, not just in engaging the field but in shaping it, and this reality places them at the center of conflicts that circulate within Native theater. In this sphere, multiple missions and agendas emerge, and vexed and unresolved questions circulate through all of the decision-making and programming. Who is an "Indian" and who comprises the "community"? Which artists are the best representatives of the field, and which should be funded and produced on the Public's stages? What are the best stories to represent Native theater, given the limited opportunities available? And who is responsible for the pedagogical labor involved in educating non-Native audiences about plays that confound their expectations? Within the contact zone of the Initiative, artists' concerns are both

alleviated and exacerbated. While the Public has the potential to elevate Native theater to new levels of recognition in the broader field of American theater, they also risk repeating the damaging processes of white governance within the partnership and the dangers of keeping the work compartmentalized. Still, because Native artists currently have very few opportunities to establish their presence in the mainstream outside of the Public, they have continued to work together in what can be a both a productive and uncomfortable alliance.

Why “We Are Here” is Necessary

Though Asian Americans and African Americans each face different degrees of recognition under white hegemony, the erasure of Native peoples in this country has easily been the most systemic and successful, presenting a monumental challenge to establishing presence. Despite the number of indigenous tribal groups in North America, census data indicates that their current numbers represent the smallest cultural/racial minority in both Canada and the U.S. Approximately 3 million people or only 0.9% of the U.S. population reported sole Native American ancestry in 2010, a number which increases to just over 5 million, or 1.6% of the population when including those who claim indigenous heritage along with other racial identifiers (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez). Compared to the majority white population, and even the 12.8% African American and 4.8% Asian American demographics, Native American representation is only a tiny fraction of the broader populace.

Likewise, despite the fact that there are scores of working Native playwrights and at least five published multi-author anthologies of American Indian plays, there are less than a dozen actively producing Native theater companies in the U.S., and only one, Native Voices at the Autry in Los Angeles, operates on an Equity-level contract with a year-round schedule. Adding in indigenous Canadian theater companies and training programs raises the number, but together they still total under thirty, reaching less than half the numbers of Asian American companies (approximately 80 in the U.S.), and only a third of African American theaters (which run upwards of 90).³² Amongst the nearly 500 current members of the Theatre Communications Group, only two – Native Voices at the Autry and Amerinda (a New York based Native arts service organization that promotes myriad contemporary artistic disciplines) – are dedicated to indigenous work (“Theatre Profiles”).³³ This lack of access to the means of theatrical production means that Native artists face fierce competition for the few available slots in Native companies’ seasons and even slimmer chances in the vast sea of the mainstream. For these reasons, Native theater-makers have been compelled to partner with mainstream companies whose cultural and economic capital might afford them the opportunity for increased presence and visibility. Amerinda, for instance, has partnered informally with the Public prior to and outside of the Native Theater Festivals, using Public spaces to present works such as Assiniboine writer William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.’s *Thieves* (2011). And Native Voices at the Autry has performed mainstream venues like the La Jolla Playhouse and the Kennedy Center, and they are housed in and fiscally supported by a historically white museum that

has shifted and broadened its mission to include indigenous and other cultural perspectives in the recent years (Reinholz and Bruce Scott).

“We are here” not only proclaims contemporary indigenous existence, it also conjures up and contests the myriad political policies and violent campaigns meant to annihilate indigenous peoples. Understanding these policies is critical for understanding the stakes and challenges that contemporary Native artists face in making both their work and their existence known. Though *terra nullius* tropes declared the land empty, and justified Western expansion through the ideological regime of manifest destiny, Native peoples were here. By 1500, approximately 7-15 million indigenous people lived within the current boundaries of the United States, and approximately 1 million in present day Canada (Champagne 10-11). But contact with Europeans resulted in the contraction of new diseases like smallpox and influenza, which caused widespread decimation, reducing some groups’ populations by as much as 90% (Champagne 11-12). Still, many Native peoples remained, a corporeal fact which posed problems for European settlement and its underpinning protestant, capitalist, and enlightenment philosophies. In order for Europeans, and later the Euro-American elite, to seize and sanction ownership of North American land, they needed to dispossess Native peoples from their connections and claims to it. Thus they created a series of political policies to meet these ends: allotment, removal, assimilation, termination, and relocation. These policies and direct wars of extermination against Native peoples resulted in an effective and brutal genocide. From European contact through the turn of the 20th century, indigenous peoples numbers were

reduced from millions to mere thousands, leading non-Indian policy-makers to predict their eventual disappearance (Champagne 12). And yet they remained.

If Native peoples could not be completely annihilated, then perhaps they could be made invisible through forcible assimilation into the dominant Euro-American culture. With this strategy, the U.S and Canadian federal governments attempted to transform hunter-gatherer cultures into settled individual farmers on tiny parcels of often unfertile land, and later to train future national citizens through the boarding school system. These schools, which operated from the 1860s through the 1940s and later, removed Indian children from their homes and communities and stripped them of their clothing, hair, languages, and cultural and spiritual practices in the service of creating English-speaking, god-fearing, domestic and industrial workers. Their aim to “kill the Indian and save the man”³⁴ through these “civilizing” and Christianizing processes created devastating ruptures in generational cultural ties and outward markers of Native identity.

In tandem with these individualizing efforts, the U.S. government pursued assimilationist policies against indigenous nations as a whole. These policies not only erased Native visibility, they dismantled their representative power and their recognition as sovereign nations. In the early 1900s, the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs agents “assumed dictatorial control over Native reservation communities, and traditional governments often were ignored in favor of ‘business councils’ which functioned to sign contracts enabling non-Natives to exploit reservation resources” (Champagne 38-39). After World War II, policies shifted to end nation to nation relations between the government and tribes, as the BIA terminated more than 100 Native communities

(Champagne 40), destroying legal communal ties and rights to Native sovereignty.

Shortly thereafter, in the 1950s, the BIA facilitated a massive relocation program, helping move thousands of indigenous peoples off of their reservation lands into major cities like Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, and Minneapolis, and by 1990 more than two thirds of Native Americans lived in urban areas (Champagne 40). Ironically, this critical mass of Native peoples in major metropolises helped foment the activism of the Red Power Movement in the 1960s and 70s, with the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Minneapolis leading the charge for recognition of indigenous rights and sovereignty. These historical realities mean that gaining visibility within and recognition by the larger public sphere remains a crucial goal for this heterogeneous, fragmented, and disparate group of artists.

Their task is also necessitated by the deep-rooted persistence of the vanishing Native American narrative. Perpetuated in every imaginable medium from early American drama to contemporary films, Romantic-era literature to spaghetti Westerns, and tobacco shop carvings to the mega spectacle Wild West Shows, the myth of the dying and disappeared Indian has been one of the most enduring tropes since European contact. It justified and underwrote the ideological strategies outlined above, and continues to persist today, influencing mainstream aesthetic and dramaturgical expectations as well as political policies related to land, water, language, and cultural rights. Its power continues the work of erasing the visibility of contemporary Native Americans' existence, even as their numbers in the U.S. near the two million mark ("2013 American Indian

Population”). Thus, as contemporary indigenous artists claim their presence, they challenge centuries of policies and narratives designed to deny this possibility.

The Public as Partner

The Public Theater’s status as one of the premier non-profit companies in the United States, alongside their culturally and racially diverse repertoire, makes them a likely collaborator to help Native artists achieve their goals. It also makes them a rarity amongst corollaries of their institutional size.³⁵ Unlike the Guthrie, whose body of work has drawn almost entirely on Euro-American and European dramatic canons, and whose artistic leadership has been exclusively white and male,³⁶ the Public Theater has a decades-long track record of involving various communities, artists, and administrators of color. They have long been on the vanguard of racial and cultural boundary breaking, becoming a veritable beacon of radical multiculturalism within the American theater landscape. Throughout their institutional history, they have undertaken various strategies for engaging racial difference.

When Joseph Papp founded the Shakespeare Workshop in 1954, his primary aim was to make the bard’s works more financially and geographically accessible to the people of New York City. According to his biographers, Papp’s beginnings in poverty and his belief that art should be tied to civic responsibility meant that he was determined to make the highest quality professional theater free for all audiences (King and Coven, Epstein, Horn, and Turan and Papp). In the mid-1950s, the city’s populace was still predominantly white,³⁷ and so racial diversity and inclusion may not have been foremost

on the company's agenda. Yet, the removal of the economic barrier to theater participation was a radical idea that enabled access across lines of class and race. The geographic barriers that Papp meant to overcome were lessened with the founding of the company's Mobile Theater unit in 1957. Under this program, artists traveled and performed throughout the boroughs, garnering a more economically and racially diverse audience than most non-profit theater companies of their generation. Though the Workshop shared the Guthrie's impetus of bringing Shakespeare to the masses, the New York company differed in meeting audiences within their neighborhoods and communities rather than drawing them into the institution's building. When the Workshop began a Spanish speaking mobile unit with two Lorca plays in 1964, their attempts at racial and ethnic inclusion became more overt.

In the 1960s, the Public began casting actors of color in mainstage productions and staging works by and about African Americans and Latino/as. Along with a 1967 name change (from the Shakespeare Theater to The Public Theater), a new permanent space (in the former Astor Place Library) and alongside mass-driven, community based movements for racial justice, minority artists made their way onto the Public's stages in ways that increasingly reflected the growing racial diversity and density of the country's most populous city. African Americans represented 14% of the city in 1960 and 21% in 1970, while Latino/as percentages grew to 16.2% in 1970 – making them the largest racial minority groups in the metropolis (“Table 33”). Native Americans, in the meantime, comprised less than 0.1% of the city until 1970. These numbers, in concert with the fact that Native theater had not yet been established, meant that Native artists

were not regularly featured at the Public. Exceptions did occur when performers like Muriel Miguel (Kuna/Rappahanock) appeared in *The Serpent* at the same time as the company's groundbreaking production of *Hair* was taking off, but that piece was not identity-specific. Yet much of the Public's work reflected and propelled the social upheaval and protest of the era.

Whereas the Guthrie remained relatively insulated during the racial activism of the late 1960s and 1970s, Joe Papp and the Public were situated in the thick of it. Papp's memories of that time reveal the contours of a complex contact zone, and a complicated history of work with African American and Latino/a artists. By turns, the relationships were amicable and tense, celebratory and combative, spurred by protest and propelled on to Broadway. Referring to his producing of Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody* in 1969, and Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls* in 1976, Papp noted "I felt good having black actors in my theater in numbers. I always feel good when the theater is well represented in terms of any kind of minority group. I feel that I'm doing my work, that I'm part of the city and doing something that's important for the community" (Turan and Papp 212-213). While Papp's sense of pluralistic pride is evident in his comments, he also recognized that these acts of inclusion were not without conflict:

At the beginning of black revolutionary consciousness, we were right in the middle of it. Since I was involved in producing black and Hispanic plays, I ran up against some inflamed passions. I've had more knives pointed at me than you can imagine. Since I was the leading theater producing plays for black writers, there was competitiveness and jealousy,

plus I was expected to solve everyone's problems. One guy in particular, he'd started a theater in Brooklyn, he claimed I had stolen James Earl Jones from him, which was ridiculous. And this guy said he was going to get me. (219)

Revealed here are the visceral and symbolic stakes of cultural production, ownership, and self-determination that underlie multicultural programming in mainstream theater companies, and with which the Public would continue to grapple throughout their institutional life and into the Native Theater Initiative.

In the meantime, the field of contemporary Native theater began to ignite in New York in the early to mid-1970s, with scholar/artists like Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa/Delaware) founding the American Indian Theatre Ensemble (1972, later renamed the Native American Theater Ensemble) and artists like Spiderwoman Theater (1975) breaking racial and gender barriers as well as mainstream aesthetic constraints and methodologies. Though both of these ensembles were supported by Ellen Stewart and the La MaMa Experimental Theater Club, Oskar Eustis notes that the Public did host Geiogamah's company at some point in the 1970s (25 July 2014). They would later go on to host Spiderwoman, employ actor/director Sheila Tousey (Menominee), and create space for staged readings of plays like William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.'s *Sneaky*. However, Eustis remarks "prior to the 2007 Festival there was never a major initiative to feature Native work at the Public" (25 July 2014).

Decades later, in 1993, the company hired their first African American Artistic Director George C. Wolfe, a move that further differentiated The Public from other

theaters of their size and signaled a continued attention to racial inclusion and equity. During Wolfe's tenure from 1993-2004, he further deepened the company's cultural mission and programming, expanding the vision to become "a theatre where all the country's voices, rhythms and cultures converge," a place that would "look and feel like a subway stop in New York City," and could "be a place of inclusion and a forum for ideas" (Walker-Kuhne 3-4). Under this definition, inflected with the broader, less oppositional and group-specific rhetoric of mid-1990s multiculturalism, the Public Theater continued to reflect their surrounding and ever-changing population. By 1990, whites made up only slightly more than half of New York City's population (52.3%), while African Americans and Latinos comprised sizable figures (28.7% and 24.4% respectively), and Asian American and Native American percentages continued to grow (at 7% and .4%) ("Table 33"). Performance scholar David Román argues that Wolfe's work at the Public helped to change the color of theater in New York and throughout the country, and that other institutions such as the Manhattan Theater Club, Lincoln Center, American Repertory Theater, and Berkeley Rep, have been "stunningly conservative" by comparison on issues of racial diversity, despite the demographics of their own cities (240).

The Beginnings of the Native Theater Initiative

Given this rich history, The Native Theater Initiative broadens the Public's self-expressed commitment to multicultural performance in directions uncharted by other non-profit or regional theater companies. Though the Public had opened up their space

for Native artists in informal ways since the 1970s their focus on indigenous work began in earnest during their Native Theater Festivals in 2007 and 2008. According to Literary Manager Liz Frankel, there was zero demand from their audiences or the broader field of non-profit and regional theater for Native plays (27 Mar. 2014). Rather, a confluence of micro and macro factors served as catalysts for the festivals: the growth and “professionalization” of the field of Native theater, a funding opportunity through the Ford Foundation, the collegial relationship and personal interest of Oskar Eustis and Betsy Theobald Richards, and the Public’s recognition of a critical gap in the field. Eustis explains this lacuna, noting:

The Public’s mission is pretty simple: To be a theatrical participant in helping define an American cultural identity. To do that, we have to be speaking for/from the breadth of the American experience. Given that, I see the critical absence of Native work. It’s not just that it would be a nice thing to do, it’s a matter of then we are talking about American theater. Without Native voices, the American theater itself is less relevant, and it is an impoverishment to the discussion of the great issues facing our nation. The issues of the Native community are one of these key sets of issues. We have done a shameful job of addressing them, and we should do something about that fact. It is truly a democratic ideal. (25 July 2014)

While Eustis realized and acknowledged a gap in the representational field, it also took the right intersection of artists, institutions, and interest to make the festivals a reality. The first of these was the fact that by the early 2000s, Native theater was finally

gaining ground in the professional theater scene through the sustained efforts of companies like Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto (founded in 1982) and Native Voices at the Autry in Los Angeles (founded in 1993). In Canada, Native Earth helped to launch the career of Tomson Highway, a Cree writer and perhaps the most well-known indigenous North American playwright, with a production of *The Rez Sisters* in 1986. Similarly, Native Voices has been called “a virtual *Who’s Who* of American Indian theatre artists,” and “a hotbed for contemporary Native theatre” (“About Native Voices”), helping to propel playwrights such as Diane Glancy (Cherokee), Darrell Dennis (Shuswap), Joy Harjo (Mvskoke), Terry Gomez (Comanche), Marie Clements (Metís), Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibwe), and many others into the limelight. The ongoing efforts of these companies to produce at the Equity level (a critical marker of mainstream aesthetic achievement), along with a handful of other critical players across the U.S. and Canada, developed Native theater into a viable partner for companies like the Public.

Not only did it take 25 years of continuous production of Native work for it to be recognized on mainstream stages in the U.S., Eustis’ personal investment in indigenous theater (spurred by family ties – his two nieces are enrolled members of the Red Lake Ojibwe tribe in Minnesota), combined with his professional relationship with Betsy Theobald Richards helped launch the Native Theater Festivals. Eustis and Richards, a Cherokee theater director and dramaturg, and a Ford Foundation program officer (the first and only indigenous program officer at Ford) initially began producing Native plays when Eustis headed Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island, and when Richards was the Director of Public Programs at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in

neighboring Connecticut. “Theatre from the Four Directions: New Plays from First Nations Playwrights” began in 2001 with staged readings of works by William S. Yellow Robe, Jr., Drew Hayden Taylor, and Ian Ross (Ojibwe). When Eustis moved to New York to head the Public, and as Richards went on to the Ford Foundation, they maintained a strategic alignment, hoping to continue to support and promote Native plays. Richards’ post in the Media, Arts and Culture Unit at Ford meant that she oversaw a broad portfolio on Indigenous Knowledge and Expressive Culture in the United States. Under this umbrella, she saw an opportunity to connect Native theater with this wider dialogue, believing that it might catalyze paradigmatic shifts in the writing not only of dramatic literature, but history and national rhetoric about indigenous peoples (Richards 11 Aug. 2011). Together, the specific funding opportunity, organizational missions, and personal interest coincided, and with a \$500,000 Ford Foundation grant, the Native Theater Festivals were born. Together, Eustis and Richards hoped they could “try in a very small way to start tackling some of these issues, to see if it was possible to create space for a more powerful Native theater community to express itself” (Eustis 25 July 2014).

As such, the Public facilitated two Native Theater Festivals, convening a complex field comprised of multiple generations of indigenous artists across the continental U.S., Hawai’i, Alaska, and Canada. Amongst the 90 artists and administrators that attended the 2008 Native Theater Festival, there were representatives from well established companies like Spiderwoman Theater, Native Voices at the Autry, and Native Earth Performing Arts; smaller organizations like Amerinda and the Thunderbird Theatre program at

Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas; and independent artists from the X and millennial generations who have moved fluidly between Native and non-Native artistic contexts, community-based work, mainstream stages, and film and television: Tamara and Jennifer Podemski, Doug Bedard (Ojibwa), and Larissa FastHorse (Lakota) just to name a few.

These gatherings, which were largely unprecedented in the mainstream professional theater scene,³⁸ were structured by field discussions for Native artists, administrators, and allies; staged readings of Native plays; and public pre- and post-play dialogues, all of which moved indigenous artists towards their goal of increased presence and helped the Public to better fulfill their mission of reflecting the cultural diversity of the nation. The festival goals, which have carried over into the company's broader Native Theater Initiative after the two original convenings, are "to support the work of Native theater artists across North America; to create a forum for field discussion among Native theater artists and professionals; and to further raise visibility and awareness of Native theater artists for New York audiences and the greater field of American Theater" ("The Native Theater Initiative").

While the Public's festival goals reflected a celebratory multiculturalism, a number of ways that they structured the convenings demonstrated some of their anti-racist strategies in action. They began by organizing an Advisory Committee of Native theater leaders to help assemble, connect with, and invite in artists from across Canada and the U.S. Hanay Geiogamah (now at UCLA), Native Voices' Artistic Director Randy Reinholz (Choctaw), Native Earth's Yvette Nolan, Actor/Director/Festival Consultant

Sheila Tousey, and five other playwrights, performers, educators, and Artistic Directors comprised the panel, representing indigenous nations on both sides of the Canadian/U.S. border. Though the committee may have had some input on the play selection, final decisions for the artistic programming remained largely with Eustis. Rather, the committee worked closely with the Public to plan the field discussion topics and agendas (“The Native Theater Initiative”). Public dialogues such as “Writing About Early Cultural Contact” and “Politics and Performance” helped to provide context for audiences who may have been encountering Native work for the first time. As committee members and Public staff co-facilitated these discussions, they helped alleviate the educational burden of “Indian 101.” Furthermore, by acknowledging inequities in the field from the get-go, and the fact that they were stepping into a complex field with Native performance, Public leaders demonstrated a degree of self-reflexivity not evidenced by other mainstream companies producing culturally specific plays. This was poignantly reflected in a moment during one of the field discussions when Eustis admitted that the Public did not possess the answers for the best way to produce this work, and asked the Native community how, *if at all* they should be involved in helping to develop and promote Native plays and playwrights moving forward (Eustis, Conference Discussion).

The Public and the Challenges of the Field

By bringing Native artists together to strategize ways forward, and by giving Native companies space to produce their own work in ways that no other theatre of their status is doing, the Public’s efforts make a significant intervention in the field. At the

same time, their attempts to convene and promote the field have been complicated by the unresolved historical tensions that indigenous artists continue to grapple with in the present. As the Public selected plays, playwrights, Advisory Committee members, and Institutional partners, they stirred up fierce competition for scarce resources and inadvertently reiterated some of the troubling historical relationships between Native peoples and white mainstream institutions.

In terms of competition, the festivals' time span (3-4 days), and number of staged readings slots (3-4 each year), meant that an entire field of playwrights had to vie for very limited opportunities to be recognized. Though this is not an uncommon theatrical practice, and though playwrights are used to such competition, historical and ongoing divisions were fueled in this site. Prime among them were questions of who, exactly, is considered Native American, and who comprises the Native theater "community?" The first of these queries can be traced back to the U.S.'s divisive blood quantum policies, as well as tensions between indigenous peoples on either side of the U.S./Canadian border or across the Pacific Ocean in Hawai'i. The second has to do with who is asked to represent the field, and whether their connections are stronger with the mainstream or with Native communities (both urban and reservation-based). Both ended up spurring competition and in some cases engendered resentment in those who have felt continuously under-represented.

Contemporarily, debates over blood quantum and enrollment persist in the field of Native theater as artists compete for scarce resources and simultaneously question and protect the boundaries of cultural belonging. They also continue within tribes as they set

their own standards for inclusion, and in relationships between tribes and federal and state governments as they grant access to resources and benefits. The system of allotment, which parceled out communally held tribal land to individual Native American men, reserving the “surplus” for the United States and its white settlers, began as early as 1798 (“History of Allotment”). Later, in conjunction with the General Allotment or Dawes Act of 1887, Congress adopted blood quantum standards, which defined and codified individuals’ degree of indigenous ancestry. Adult Indian men who could produce legal proof that they possessed at least one-half Native “blood” received 160 acres of land, and the rest was open for non-Indian settlement. Ultimately, allotment and blood quantum laws resulted in the loss of 90 million acres of Native land, loss of access to sacred sites, and fractional heritage, since Native people could not claim multiple tribal enrollments through these policies. Blood quantum, an insidious policy that imposed capitalist systems of individual identity and property ownership on Native peoples, violently disrupted communal cultural ways of life, and de-humanized individuals by quantifying and fractionalizing their existence.³⁹ The policy strategically reduced the number of Native Americans who could legally make claims to the land they had inhabited for thousands of years.

Under the system of chattel slavery, children of white fathers and black mothers became black, while under allotment children of white fathers and Native mothers became white. In the interest of white wealth creation, blacks had to become visible in order to work the land, while Natives had to become invisible to justify its seizure. Whereas the one drop rule ended up linking blacks who had been through the historical

system of slavery, laying the foundation for a unified resistance, the blood quantum policy was and continues to be divisive in its fractionalization and power to separate indigenous peoples from their land and from one another. It continues to fuel divisiveness with the field of Native theater as well, as companies struggle to set policies about who they will and will not include, and how much weight tribal enrollment and proof of indigenous ancestry will play in their decision-making.

This particular issue seemed to be less of a direct concern at the festival, as I never heard participants question another's enrollment status. Yet, the historical policy still deeply influences the omnipresent sense of competition. What was evidenced in larger degree at the festival, were concerns over whether the artists chosen to have work staged and those chosen to represent the field on the Advisory Committee were based in the continental U.S. or not. While the playwrights both years were primarily U.S.-based, the Advisory Committee was comprised of five U.S.-based artists, and four Canadian-based theater-makers. As some participants remarked (always in private conversations), indigenous artists based in Canada have received greater opportunities for production and access to governmental funding. This is part due to the fact that First Nations in Canada have a different relationship to their federal government, and that "official multiculturalism has played an increasingly significant role in nation-building [there] since the 1970s" (Lo and Gilbert 34). One New York-based participant and artistic leader expressed this particular tension by saying,

You bring down all these people from Canada, and Indian people here are going "Well, we live here; we have to contend with the American

government. The Canadian government says... We don't have to fight. We have to fight these people in Washington for our rights. So why are these people here? They have way more government support. So what is this going to do for us? We live here. What do we go back to? (Fraher 10 Aug. 2011)

A phone call with another Native artist after the festival revealed that there were similar sentiments circulating about Hawaiian-based artists, and thus frustrations emerged when Native Hawaiian, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's play *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu* was selected for one of the coveted staged reading slots in the 2008 festival.⁴⁰ These debates were materialized when a few prominent U.S.-based practitioners of Native American theater refrained from attending the 2008 festival altogether. Their absence haunted the space, and made visible the stakes of resource distribution.

The Public's selection of Advisory Committee members, those who would help procure participants for the festivals and set the topics of the field discussions, raised critical questions about Native representation in/to the mainstream. Who are the appropriate ambassadors to promote and facilitate visibility? Those who run Native theater companies, work for funding agencies, or who have achieved success in the mainstream already – i.e. those who are considered industry insiders – or those that a majority of participants view as community leaders and understand to be integrally connected to Native artists and people at a grassroots level? To undertake this task, the company chose artistic leaders who were well established in professional theater – through training in mainstream institutions, and/or a history of producing within or

outside of Native theater. Many artists in the field, especially those not chosen for the committee, interpreted this process as a selection of intermediaries, and some viewed the chosen individuals with an air of suspicion. This selection process, they felt, reiterated and perpetuated problematic relationships between Native peoples and white mainstream institutions endowed with economic and cultural capital.

Likewise, some artists questioned the Public's institutional partners for the festivals, including NYU's Hemispheric Institute and the National Museum of the American Indian, viewing them as extensions of dominant government ideologies distanced from the actual lives of indigenous peoples in North America. One of the artistic leaders I spoke with noted that

They had all these people involved that had nothing to do with it, like NYU and the Museum and the Indian Social Service Agency and all this. We kept saying "You don't need all that." The museum is the government - we need the community. That's the government's approval, you don't need it. The museum's staffed by 99% non-Indians, and the people that are [Indian] didn't come from the communities. When there's Indians who did [come from the communities] they act like they're scared of them, which they are... And then you've got NYU. What's that got to do with us? And then you've got the Indian Social Services that deals with the people with problems, and what's that got to do with it? (Fraher 10 Aug. 2011)

These comments connect back to the contentious issue of government relations, as well as the critical question of who comprises the "community" for Native peoples and Native

artists. As powerful and integral as the concept of community is to indigenous peoples and Native theater makers, it also has the power to unite and divide in equal measure. For some Native artists with whom I spoke, community refers to tribal nations and tribally enrolled people, while others believe that individuals need not be tribally enrolled to be included in the circle of community. For some, community means indigenous peoples committed to maintaining cultural traditions, languages, and stories outside of mainstream America, and for others success in the mainstream and connectedness to indigenous culture need not be mutually exclusive. For some, community centers locally, privileging a place/people/tribe of origin, while some include the varied identities of Native peoples in their current locale as a part of that term, and still others expand community to mean any indigenous person in North America. Thus the lines of inclusion and exclusion in the Native theater community reside in different and often shifting places. It can be difficult to decipher where the lines are drawn within the field, and when a mainstream company like the Public enters the fray, the boundaries and implications of community become even more fraught.

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson Intercedes, New Strategies are Formed

Despite the tensions that underpinned the festivals, the Public was still quite successful in bringing together a wealth of indigenous theater-makers, crafting new alliances, opening up a space for dialogue, and making room for a Native theater presence in the field. However, another significant issue erupted when the company went on to produce *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* in 2009 and 2010. This white-authored

emo-rock opera re-wrote historical facts about indigenous peoples for comic effect, reiterated dominant narratives of the vanishing Indian, and utilized white actors in redface, ultimately dehumanizing the very people with whom the Public had been in partnership. This betrayal, as it was felt by many in the Native theater community, shook the foundations of trust that had been building over the past three years, and led Native artists to question their future involvement with the Public. In many ways it re-opened the traumatic colonial wound that many Native plays hope to work through and heal. It also undermined the self-determination of Native artists, while foregrounding troubling and stereotypical images. *Bloody Bloody* exacerbated tensions by reiterating the triumph of Euro-American and European constructions of Native American peoples over the realities of their varied and diverse lives, stories, and existence. As this musical garnered national visibility with productions on Broadway and across the country subsequent to its debut at the Public, it overshadowed the work of the Native Theater Festivals, demonstrating the extremely fragile and tenuous state of Native visibility.

For his part, Oskar Eustis quickly became aware of his blindness in producing the show, after colleagues like Richards and others were finally invited to view a dress rehearsal. He remarks that

We made a very serious mistake. While we were engaging Native artists through the Initiative, we were also engaging *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. The two entities were totally compartmentalized. It simply didn't occur to me that we should bring people in to watch and respond to the musical. It was incredibly stupid and shortsighted and I hope it *never*

happens again. My consciousness was still very immature. [The controversy over] *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* was emotionally and politically just awful for me. I hated going through that. It inflicted absolutely real damage on the Native theater community. Never had I made a mistake of that size, to drive such a wedge between a theater company and a community. (25 July 2014)

Eustis' self-reflexivity in the situation, albeit after the fact, reflects an understanding of the consequences of racial representations in ways that go beyond celebratory multicultural reasoning. And yet major damage had been done. Recognizing this fact, Eustis planned a strategic retreat. Following the *Bloody Bloody* debacle, the Public decided to try and rebuild trust with the community slowly, working with individual playwrights and integrating them into all of their many programs. Since the festivals, the Public has commissioned a musical by Joy Harjo, a piece for the stage by singer Martha Redbone (Cherokee/Choctaw/African American), and a play by Rhiana Yazzie (Navajo) in tandem with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and their American Revolutions series. They have also produced Darrell Dennis' *Tales of an Urban Indian* in the Public Lab Series in 2009, and have just staged a new play by Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee/Ponca), *Manhatta* in new series called Public Studio in the spring of 2014. Prior to the fallout over *Bloody Bloody*, the Public had also been working to increase the presence of Native work in the broader field of American theater by engaging other prominent mainstream companies and Artistic Directors from around the country in dialogue. But according to the Public's Literary Manager Liz Frankel, this effort was

moving forward very slowly, as many artistic leaders are reticent to prioritize Native work. Rather, many still adhere to notions of meritocracy and colorblindness, promising to produce whatever work they deem best without considerations of race or gender. This response has strengthened Eustis' resolve to reinstate the Native Theater Festivals at some point in the future:

The convenings and the broader festivals serve a crucial function. That absence is now very noticeable. There is no replacing them in terms of generating Native theater projects and moving the field forward. I think the Public has something to offer [in terms of advancing the work of Native theater], and I don't think anyone else will. So I think we need to.

(25 July 2014)

It remains to be seen if and when the Native Theater Festivals and field discussions will return to the Public. In the meantime, despite the tensions in the field, and the colossal misstep with *Bloody Bloody*, many Native artists have continued working with the Public. The company's cultural and economic capital is too tantalizing to walk away from, given the lack of alternative performance spaces on the same scale. But the difficult labor of rebuilding relationships, and the Sisyphean quest for establishing Native theater's presence must begin again.

Chapter Two: The Politics of Recognition and the Trap of Visibility

Amongst the likenesses of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, Anton Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw, even Tyrone Guthrie himself, larger than life photographs of August Wilson and Lorraine Hansberry grace the new Guthrie's exterior. On their shoulders, the weight of the Guthrie's famous thrust whose audience they uphold, to their backs the rushing Mississippi. Proudly, they stand alongside these elder white men as giants of the American theater. Semiotically, they seem to signal a shifting multicultural American canon as they become visible to the hundreds of thousands of patrons that stream past them each season. Yet their presence here is marked with paradox – on the few occasions when their work has graced the Guthrie's stages, it has been created and produced by Penumbra Theatre Company. Thus, their visibility, while a seeming answer to the American theater's increasing racial diversity, is actually a provocative catalyst for questions. Is their inclusion on these walls a celebratory multicultural gesture that acknowledges and affirms difference? Is it a post-racial indicator that race and racism are no longer factors when determining aesthetic achievement and success? Or does it signal an anti-racist attempt to address and rectify the exclusion of artists of color from the canons and stages of the most prominently acclaimed American theaters? Does their presence here mark out an expanding canon, or does it propose to transform the canon as we have known it? Or, do their images serve as window dressing to lend ethical credibility to an organization that primarily represents and serves white Midwesterners? What, precisely, does their personal visibility on these

walls, and their plays' visibility on the Guthrie stages under Penumbra's artistic direction (re)present?

In the theater, visibility is one of the most sought-after goals, and as these questions reveal, one of the most vexed. The etymological root of "theater" reveals our field's compulsion with visibility. As Richard Schechner and many other performance scholars have eloquently summarized, theater comes from the Greek term *theatron*, or *seeing place*. To make something or someone seen in the Greek theater, was to make it known. Schechner emphasizes that this link is both endemic to the field and to Western knowledge systems as a whole:

The word "theatre" is cognate with "theorem," "theory," "theorist," and such, all from the Greek *theatron*, itself from *thea*, "a sight"; and from *theasthai*, "to view" [...] These etymologies reveal the tight bond linking Greek theatre, European epistemology, and seeing. This binding of "knowing" to "seeing" is the root metaphor/master narrative of Western thought. [...] The Greek theatre that Aristotle based his theories on was fundamentally a seeing place. (30-31)

This fascination with ocularity, Schechner suggests, was heightened in the Enlightenment, through liberal humanist ideals of individual, rational actors coming to know the world through their senses, primary among them, sight. The advent of scientific reasoning meant that people could see the world as a picture and through distance and careful observation, discern universal truths. Through sight, these philosophers proposed,

we might know the world, the universe, and each other – making visibility a powerful heuristic and hermeneutic.

As we examine the relationships between culturally specific artists and the mainstream, we can also trace the desire for visibility through identity politics and representation in the public sphere. Within this realm individuals must become visible in order to be politically recognized and represented. On the one hand, achieving this kind of visibility and recognition is a paramount concern for oppressed peoples who have been made invisible through political policies such as genocide, exclusion, internment, and removal; through their erasure from the core of history, the canons of dramatic literature, and popular media forums; and through the perpetuation of problematic misrepresentations. Without visibility, many people of color have felt voiceless, isolated from the structures of power, disconnected from resources, and subject to abuses of all kinds and even death. For culturally specific artists, gaining visibility and recognition through theater is a means of righting and reversing those deleterious trends. Though the professional theater may only reach a select fraction of the American populace, the culturally specific practitioners with whom I work still envision it as a critical site for generating deeper knowledge and understanding, and for catalyzing empathetic relationships to ameliorate invisibility's impact.

On the other hand, as scholars of performance, cultural studies, and critical race theory have thoroughly detailed in the past few decades, visibility alone is not enough to achieve these transformative goals. Indeed, as they have pointed out, the very framework of visibility is laden with problematic paradox. As Peggy Phelan notes, despite its

political and ethical appeal, “Visibility is a trap...it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession” (6).

While Phelan acknowledges that “under-represented communities can be empowered by enhanced visibility,” she also warns that “the terms of this visibility often enervate the putative power of those identities” (7). Her critique reveals that visibility is dependent upon a relationship between those who see and those who are seen, a relationship that has historically been both troubled and limited. Making oppressed peoples visible has been a means of dominating, objectifying, and possessing them. Even when relational lines of power are less overtly oppressive, they still dictate the terms of visibility and recognition. Elizabeth Povinelli, Nancy Fraser, Kelly Oliver and others deepen this critique, contesting the equation of visibility, recognition, and political power.⁴¹ They demonstrate how under-represented people are forced to conform to liberal multicultural norms in order to be recognized.

In the first half of this chapter, I follow these scholars’ leads, examining how culturally specific companies engaging with mainstream institutions are subject to these same demands. Under liberal multicultural standards, these artists’ identities are most often made visible as “commonly human” or as distinctly “other,” and their stories must generally adhere to Western, Aristotelian dramatic structures and familiar racial narratives in order to gain recognition and praise.

In the latter part of the chapter I engage with a related problematic – the false equation between increased visibility and increased power. As Phelan observes, “If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should

be running Western culture. The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power” (10). Harry Elam, Jr. buttresses Phelan’s thoughts, and points to the ways in which they apply to race in the theater:

Visibility is often not enough. Despite... advances entrenched systems of power and oppression can remain invisible and intact. The increased visibility of minorities in the theater does not necessarily translate into more harmonious artistic or social circumstances. It does not necessarily mean that artists of color operate within an equitable playing field or now can assert more authority over their cultural capital... Questions remain as to how cultural diversity operates in relation to the power of the dominant cultural imperative. (92-93)

Indeed, contemporarily, happy multiculturalism and post-racial logics share the ideal of visibility as an end goal. Adherents to both frameworks may be keen to see cultural and racial difference, but they fail to account for the redistributive or transformative action that a more political/radical/anti-racist multiculturalism calls for – the former (happy multiculturalism) because it ignores power differentials, historical contexts, and ongoing racial inequities, and the latter (post-racial logic) because it constructs a historical break between a racist and unjust past and a present in which racial equality and social justice have been achieved.

In this chapter, I argue that these theatrical partnerships reveal the ways in which the equivalency between sight and knowledge, between seeing and understanding, is flawed. While visibility is necessary, it also presents a limited framework for thinking

through asymmetrical power relations. When working across lines of race and culture, and especially when laboring under different racial logics, visibility can obfuscate, hinder, and even work against culturally specific artists' transformative aims. In what follows, I investigate these gaps, examining the goals underlying artists' and companies' calls for visibility, why they are critically necessary, the benefits of visibility, and the problems that emerge when visibility is upheld as the panacea for the ills of racial injustice in the theater.

Becoming Known

For the artists from Penumbra, Mu, and the Native Theater Initiative, the desire for visibility often signals the desire to be deeply known in nuanced and three-dimensional ways that fundamentally contest the dominant narratives, images, and performances through which people of color have been framed. In their work with their own culturally specific companies, and on a larger scale through these partnerships with mainstream theaters, they aim to reclaim power over superficial and stereotypical images in order to shift perceptions about who African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are, have been, and can be. The hope is that greater visibility might lead to fuller understanding, empathy, well-being, belonging, and the treatment of people of color as having equal worth, reversing the steps in a process that Sarah Bellamy terms the "Four Ds." Bellamy coined this concept to illuminate the cognitive conditions that make oppression, racism, slavery, and genocide possible. The first "D" or first step in the process is to *disassociate*, and it occurs when a person recognizes their difference from

another. In itself this is not problematic. It calls on observers to make assessments of themselves and others, to notice relationality (i.e. your skin is white, mine is black), and to recognize Wilson's call that "We want you to see us. We are black and beautiful" ("Ground" 32). Problems occur, according to Bellamy's theory, when the next three Ds follow from the initial assessment of difference. The second "D" refers to *devaluing* others based on the noticed difference, and the third stands for *dehumanizing* the other which begins with a lack of empathy and objectification. Finally, the fourth and most destructive D, *destroy*, is an operation that, given the other previous steps, alleviates a perpetrator of guilt in response to use, abuse, torture, or even murder. Taken together, the "Four Ds" are evident in the narratives that were used to justify the enslavement of African Americans, the nearly successful genocide of Native Americans, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese Internment during WWII.

This process of recognition and validation works in overlapping and mutually supportive ways for multiple players in the theatrical exchange - the artists themselves; audiences who racially/culturally identify with the actors, characters, and/or stories on stage; and audiences whose identities and/or experience is different from those portrayed in the production. During the field discussions at the 2008 Native Theater Festival, participants articulated how theater that is expressive of their personal and cultural lives helps build confidence, pride, and a sense of normalization for themselves and indigenous audiences; how it constitutes belonging to something bigger than an individual life; and how it can even avert a life of crime and prevent suicide, an endemic which Cayuga First Nations actor Gary Farmer noted "is still an issue among our people" (Conference

Discussion). After a staged reading of Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu* at the same festival, a middle-aged man and fellow Hawaiian expressed his gratitude and pride in the dialogue after the performance in this way:

A very big *mahalo* [thank you]. Because there are a lot of Hawaiians, *kanaka maoli* [indigenous Hawaiians] on the mainland...I think we can't have enough of the story of Hawaiian history. We can't have enough because there's still a lot of demystification that has yet to happen in the mainland. I don't think mainlanders really understand. They can't get past the grass skirts. And I think that tonight was very special, it was a gift because it was a story from a female perspective, totally female...I think that's unique and it's rare and it's really missing from too much when we tell a story...I thank you. (13 Nov. 2008)

For this audience member, the performance marked a step towards deeper understanding of the complexities of Hawaiian history and identity for mainland and mainstream audiences, challenging the dominant trope of the passive, smiling, grass skirted hula girl, while simultaneously instilling affirmation and appreciation.

Likewise, Penumbra's productions at the Guthrie demonstrated their affirmative potential for African American audiences, some of whom were long time Penumbra supporters, and some of whom were witnessing the company's work for the first time on the Guthrie stage. Realizing August Wilson's claim that "We are what we imagine ourselves to be, and we can only imagine what we know to be possible" (Speech), these productions reflected richly textured characters and lives, linking visibility with the

power of positive visualization. As Penumbra's August Wilson Fellow for the first few years of Penumbra's collaboration with the Guthrie, as a facilitator of pre- and post-show discussions, as a dramaturg, and as an audience member, I saw firsthand the poignant impact that these productions had on those who saw them. On the opening night of *The Amen Corner*, a middle aged black couple seated in front of me whispered excitedly to each other, "That's my sister!" in reference to one of Baldwin's impassioned church elders, and "I know people just like her!" In another instance, a young African American woman marveled at the verisimilitude of the set design of the Younger residence in *A Raisin in the Sun*, commenting that she had lived in the projects on the Southside of Chicago, and she had never seen anything so accurately reflected. It brought her immediately back home, she noted, a very rare occurrence in a professional theater space. At performances of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Gem of the Ocean*, myriad audience members vocally responded throughout the performance with "Mmm hmms" and other affirmations to resonant moments of dialogue and staging. And during one of the final nights of *The Amen Corner*, an audience member broke with standard mainstream theater etiquette, shouting out "Can I get an Amen?" in response to a particularly pivotal line. This call-and-response moment of recognition not only dissolved barriers of theatrical decorum between audience and artist, they temporarily transported the intimacy and affective chemistry usually present in Penumbra's auditorium to the Guthrie, demonstrating the power of black bodies and richly contextualized content to change the space itself. Making the art visible here, it seems, catalyzed a sense of understanding,

connection, recognition, and belonging for audience members who identified with the artists, designs, and stories on stage.⁴²

When culturally specific theater is made visible in the mainstream, however, such is not always the case. A moment of contestation during the post-show discussion for *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu* at the Public's 2008 Native Theater Festival provoked a number of critical questions: what happens when the audience viewing a performance is not directly analogous with those who create and present it? If a play is not understood on its own cultural and dramaturgical terms, whose time and labor must be expended to bridge those gaps? In other words, how is visibility complicated when culturally specific work is presented in and for the mainstream?

As intercultural performance scholar Ian Watson and social theorist Pierre Bourdieu point out, seeing is a historically conditioned operation, one which requires a cipher or code in order for the viewer to unlock meaning, especially when that viewing occurs across lines of culture (in terms of ways of life) and culture (in terms of aesthetic principles). Because the cipher for culturally specific theater has not been readily available to mainstream, white audiences – who are not, as a general rule, taught James Baldwin, David Henry Hwang, or Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl in the same way as they are Shakespeare; nor the history of Asian American exclusion or Native American genocide in the same way as the Civil War – they require pedagogical labor to help the work be seen according to its own cultural contexts, racialized experiences, aesthetic standards, and dramaturgical structures. Letting this work “speak for itself” in the mainstream often results in misapprehension, the result of which is the dismissal or denigration of artists of

color, or the reinforcement of stereotypes as audiences view the work through the only lens they have experienced to date.

On the first evening of the Native Theater Festival, settled into a seat in the Public's Anspacher Theater, I watched with a quiet sense of satisfaction and triumph as the lights rose and actors took their bows at the end of the staged reading of *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu*. The play re-imagines a pivotal socio-political moment in Hawaiian history: the encounter between native Hawaiians and the Euro-American missionaries that arrived on their shores in 1820. Traversing the course of five years, the action centers on five women, three Native Hawaiian and two white, and moves from the separateness of each cultural world prior to contact, to their first encounter, to an ever-deepening and complicated set of relationships. As a theater artist, scholar, and educator, and as an advocate of culturally specific performance, I found Kneubuhl's retelling to be both affectively and intellectually engaging, and her portrayal of these women's relationships, and political and religious decisions as heterogeneous, complex, courageous, emotionally trying, and deeply thoughtful. Within the context of the Native Theater Festival, *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu* presented the broader public with many of the crucial ingredients of contemporary Native American work as defined by the Native Festival participants in the series of field discussions that occurred throughout the four-day festival. And yet, despite my (and many others') laudatory interpretation of the piece, a brief but tense exchange during the post-show discussion revealed that not every audience member shared this reaction. Speaking to a panel of Native theater artists, including the playwright, and the Public Theater's Euro-American Associate Artistic

Director, Mandy Hackett, who was moderating the discussion, an older white gentleman expressed this response shortly into the conversation:

Older white gentleman: First of all, I feel self-conscious because of the unanimity of such extraordinary praise to say anything that might seem critical.

Mandy (*leaning ever so slightly forward in her chair while the others on the panel began to lean upright or back, and trying to keep her voice pleasant said*):

Well why don't you try to phrase it as a question so that we can have a dialogue—

Older white gentleman (*quickly, interrupting said*): Can't do that. (*Then, after a brief pause to gather his thoughts, he launched in, his voice filling the space.*)

The feeling that I had was that the submission to the Christian way was too simply drawn and that the conflict of cultures was not as sharp and as visceral as it might have been. I thought, as I was watching this play, of Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* where the intrusion of American imperialism on Japan was drawn much more starkly in terms of class and culture and how resistant the Japanese were, and how they submitted to become better than America in terms of modernism and so forth...I don't mean to be disparaging of what you've written, but for me I didn't sense, except in a few simplistic ways like costuming, the kind of significant cultural clash that you had been talking about.

Mandy (*after a brief pause, and in a neutrally professional tone, said*): Okay.

Thank you. Other thoughts or questions for our panel? (13 Nov. 2008)

I found myself livid, nearly shaking in the wake of this man's statement, which seemed to not so subtly assert that Kneubuhl – a Native Hawaiian – did not know how to tell the

story of her own history. Judging from Mandy's curt handling of his remarks and from the body language of the women onstage, I was not the only one taken aback. Following his comments, the panel members straightened, rigidly stiff and upright in their chairs, their expressions and lips pulled tight. Physically they steeled themselves against his criticism – a layer of armor to protect against a line of thought with a frequent and repetitious history.

As revealed in my fieldwork, and according to the discourse in the field discussion sessions, this exchange is fairly typical of sites of multicultural or cross-cultural theatrical encounter. The gentleman's comments, as well as the visceral responses they provoked, revealed myriad tensions, questions, and conflicting ideologies – not only about this particular play, but also about the space of the festival as a whole. While the festival goals attempted to mark this as a site of celebratory multiculturalism, this electric volley suggests that it was also a space of competing subject positions and bodies of knowledge. With a focus on Native *artists*, it seemed that the festival was intended to be a primarily artistic, production-focused endeavor. Yet, this moment of artistic and cultural contestation made visible that it was also an inherently political undertaking, one that took a stand about who and what comprises the nation and the stories that we tell about ourselves. And despite the Public Theater's well-intentioned desire to raise the visibility and audience's awareness of Native artists and Native plays, this man's response indicates the significant barriers that limit what non-Native audiences (or those unfamiliar with Native histories and aesthetic structures) might actually *see* in one night at the theater.

This is not to say that visibility is not absolutely crucial for Native Americans, given the country's five hundred year history of physical, political, and narrative erasure of indigenous peoples. From colonial Europeans' initial gross underestimations of Native populations in the Americas (Vizenor and Lee 173), to recurring literary and political tropes of the 'vanishing Indian' (Deloria 186-7, Murphy 156), to the contemporary media's perpetuation of these themes (Darby 63), Native Americans have, as A. Robert Lee states, been "breathtakingly un- or misrepresented throughout all the contrary turns of American culture" (Vizenor and Lee 3). Thus, as I discussed in Chapter One, publicly manifesting the sheer existence of Native peoples is one of these artists' primary challenges, and differentiates their struggles from African American and Asian American artists. Within this context, the staged readings of *The Conversion* and two other plays by contemporary Native American playwrights did indeed make visible (for an estimated festival audience of 450-600 people) indigenous stories, peoples, and perspectives usually forgotten or silenced.

However, despite this critical importance, encounters like the one with the gentleman in the audience of *The Conversion* get read as disheartening failure when viewed through the rubric of visibility and awareness – he failed *to see* this particular enunciation of Native identity and history, and the artists failed *to be seen* in the complex and nuanced way they had intended. He couldn't understand this piece as "good theater" – a term I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter Three. This seeming failure marks both the gaps in knowledge between the white audience member and the Native theater artists that created the play, as well as the shortcomings of visibility.

In the first place, the rhetoric of visibility tends to conflate *seeing*, a potentially superficial and ambivalent engagement, with a deeper *understanding* that, especially in cross-cultural situations, necessitates humbleness, self-reflexivity, critical listening, and respect on the part of all involved parties, but especially those coming to this culturally specific work for the first time. It is this latter set of attitudes and practices that theater practitioners and scholars perhaps assume will be inherent in the process, but are often lacking precisely because of the elision between seeing and understanding. Una Chaudhuri insists, for instance, that “Identity-based theater seems to actively and explicitly ‘hail’ its audience and make them aware of their specific cultural and racial background. By doing so it produces a contact zone where its fundamental agenda of *challenging assumptions and shifting grounds* can be immediately realized” (342). While I share Chaudhuri’s hopeful belief in the power of culturally specific theater to catalyze self-reflexivity and to challenge and change hearts and minds, and while I have seen such instances of shifting grounds actualized in myriad performance sites, this particular exchange between audience member and artist panel indicated that such a response is not always likely or possible. With this particular gentleman, initial awareness did not lead to those assumed next steps, but rather was stymied when it came into conflict with his previous body of knowledge about cross-cultural encounter stories and dramaturgical structures. Performance theorist Ian Watson acknowledges this lack of self-reflection and questioning when he says that “most of us see other cultures through the frame of our own” (3), and Pierre Bourdieu further elucidates the reasons why such a disjunction might occur:

Consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. (*Distinction 2*)

The gentleman's ability to see and understand *The Conversion* in the way the playwright intended was limited by his knowledge and ability to name unfamiliar cultural and aesthetic structures. While his remarks did contain factual accuracies (this play *was* decidedly different than Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*), he lacked the code to name what *was* happening dramaturgically, politically, and artistically in the piece. Furthermore, this lack of cultural competence, or even an understanding that there might be different cultural competencies at work, prevented him from questioning and re-thinking his own perspective about Native American theater or cross-cultural encounter stories. And in this case, his comment that he "didn't sense...the kind of significant cultural clash that you had been talking about" also seemed to reveal an implicit assumption that something was *wrong* with the play. So, rather than sparking self-reflexivity, visibility here invoked frustration at the lack of understanding. The cognitive dissonance between his previous frameworks of interpretation and what was occurring in this piece led to him unfavorably compare and potentially dismiss the play. Thus, visibility and awareness fail to address

the necessity of cultural codes in *understanding* (rather than just *seeing*) a Native play. Simply making non-Native audiences aware of a Native play does not necessarily help them to understand it on its own terms, nor does it automatically invoke empathy or self-reflexivity. Though this particular audience member's reaction did not seem to indicate an intentional malice, Edmonton-based artist Doug Bedard commented during one of the field discussions that in many cases non-Native reactions to Native work is laced with outright skepticism and disdain: "I mean you put your heart into something and call it art, [and] people look at you as [if to say], (sarcastically) 'Okay, yeah that's *art* buddy'" (13 Nov. 2008). In such cases where cultural and artistic prejudices are firmly entrenched, visibility itself has little power to prompt self-examination. Thus, visibility and awareness as end goals fail to address the necessity of cultural codes in understanding (rather than just seeing) a Native play, and they do nothing to confront anti-indigenous sentiment.

Pedagogical Labor

It is precisely these kinds of responses, and the failure of indigenous visibility in the mainstream, that lead to the necessity of educational efforts that Native artists derisively call "Indian 101." One of the festival participants, Yvette Nolan, of Toronto's Native Earth Performing Arts, expressed frustration and fatigue at the ongoing necessity of such contextualizing efforts during one of the sessions, saying:

"I've always been so resistant to it [...] I'm tired of saying the Four Colors, the Four Directions, you know, like I'm tired of explaining it...I think you should know about the Directions because you're living on our

land, I think you should know about the Four Colors, I think you should know something about the people who were here first and I think that's your job as people who lived on our land, to educate yourself. Okay so, that's not going to happen and it hasn't happened, so I give up." (15 Nov. 2008)

At stake in this particular debate is the question of who must do the time-intensive labor of negotiating alterity, the work of crossing lines of cultural difference, and creating new kinds of relationships and understandings between audience members and theater pieces. It seems that more often than not, the burden falls to the Native artists themselves, a fact attested to by many of the discussion participants who echoed Nolan's frustration. Larissa FastHorse, in discussing her recent production at a major regional theater, asserted that as the cultural 'expert' "the weight that's on us in these institutions is un-freakin-believable...the education is constant" (15 Nov. 2008). And when Menominee director and actor Sheila Tousey asked a panel about whether any of them were resentful of having to be an "activist, social worker, and psychologist" in addition to simply acting a role, Gary Farmer responded "when you play an Indian, still in today's world, you have to look after the script. When I played the world's biggest Hopi in this film *Dark Wind*, I had to be a Hopi. I had to take the Hopi culture on; I had to defend the Hopi culture to Robert Redford. And that's a drag! ...It's awfully challenging" (14 Nov. 2008). Taken together, these remarks demonstrate the ongoing burden of audience education that Native artists feel obliged to take on when presenting in mainstream institutions and/or to non-Native audiences. In that sense, the particular audience member's comments after

The Conversion seemed to prove tiring rather than productive in this space – a reiteration of a response as well as a set of relationships and responsibilities that have recurred since Native artists began presenting their work to a mainstream audience. For many of the reasons outlined above, however, Nolan’s calls for self-education have not been and are not likely to be met through spontaneous personal inspiration. Merely making Native plays visible does not necessarily accomplish the goals of self-reflexivity and transformation. The Public Theater, then, becomes one of the sites – not for simply making the work visible – but for engaging in this critical educational process. Their pre- and post-show dialogues during the two festivals aimed to do just that, as does Penumbra’s educational contextualization around each of their shows at the Guthrie, and Mu’s panel on “Asians in the Media” at their production of *Yellow Face*.

While the incident of unintelligibility at *The Conversion of Ka’ahumanu* revealed how the rubric of visibility can fail to garner audience members’ understanding when presented with a counter-colonial narrative that challenges dramaturgical expectations, there are other ways in which artists’ goal of increasing audiences’ knowledge can be stymied across lines of race and culture in the theater. The first of these involves the reification of difference (i.e. the distinct racial “other”), and the second, the celebration of sameness (as “commonly human”) – both of which take place under the aegis of visibility and liberal humanist multiculturalism.

Exotic and Non-Threatening Difference

By bringing *Circle Around the Island* onto the Guthrie's stages, both companies ran the risk of reifying the exoticism that has marked the performance of Asianness in the U.S. since its inception. Though the syncretic blending of traditional Eastern performance forms with contemporary Western stories was integral to Mu's original aesthetic, when brought before Guthrie audiences it potentially reinforced ideologies about the exotic and non-threatening difference of Asian Americans. Shiomi has defended Mu's signature style, saying that "cutting yourself off from those cultural roots and those cultural forms in an attempt to prove that you are American is like cutting off your nose despite [*sic*] your face" (22 June 2010), and Josephine Lee theorizes that Mu disrupts Orientalist tropes by refusing to "allow the dancer's body to act solely as either a sentimentalized symbol for the 'old country' or as 'decorative divertissement.'" Rather, she argues that "narrative storytelling [in an earlier piece of Mu's, *River of Dreams*] complicated the visual and aesthetic elements for audiences" (cited in Esther Kim Lee 215). However, for many company members, the choice to present *Circle* represented a step backwards on their trajectory of engaging audiences in contemporary pieces that challenged conceptions of Asian America. As one of the cast members, a young Japanese American woman, confided in an interview:

In a way, performing at the Guthrie felt like we were exotic artifacts. Kind of the way people view Kabuki or Chinese Opera. Or one of those "International Days" in grade school. Like show and tell. I think I would have felt different had the Guthrie produced a non-folktale-ly

Asian/Asian-American show before bringing in *Circle*, because this show was extremely safe and didn't challenge the audience (or the actors for that matter---besides the dancing). Although I do think that the show was beautiful and the story touching, I don't think it broke down any sort of social barriers that plague Asian/Asian-Americans. I definitely felt like a visitor at the Guthrie. I think the show perpetuated the "us-them" mentality. (Ochi 12 Apr. 2007)

Here, the specter of exotic difference perpetuates issues that have marked the performance of Asianness in America since its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century. As Esther Kim Lee details, "The first relationship American theatre established with Asia and Asianness was founded on exoticism and voyeurism" (8). She cites performers such as Afong Moy, a Chinese woman put on display at the American Museum in New York in 1834, and the "Siamese twins" Chang and Eng as early examples of white America's fascination with the Asian Other (8-9). When this sort of 'exotic difference' is promoted within predominantly white regional theaters, it can manifest as what Christopher Balme calls "armchair tourism" (48), and what Dwight Conquergood terms "The Curator's Exhibitionism" (7). Within this framework, the distant is brought close, the unfamiliar is made familiar, and the complex is made digestible.

In *Circle* a bevy of familiar tropes about Hawai'i and hula primed audiences for intimacy with exotic difference. These tropes repeatedly shape both the Hawaiian land and peoples as spectacular, graceful, mysterious, timeless, authentic, natural, and primitive (Desmond 5, 8; Gilbert and Lo 115, 119). Likewise, the *MuView* newsletter

proclaimed that “For Hawaiian born Marcus Quiniones, performing comes as *naturally* as the lyrical wave of his hands or the circular sway of his hips (emphasis added),” and other pieces promoting the performance were liberally peppered with terms like ‘mystical,’ ‘enchanting,’ ‘elemental,’ and ‘grace[ful]’. While these motifs work to reduce historical reflection about Hawai’i, in this case they also problematically simplified the breadth of Mu’s repertoire, and impacted the performers in the piece as the aforementioned comments indicate. Adria Imada claims that a result of armchair tourism with regards to presentations of Hawai’i is an “imagined intimacy” between non-Hawaiian audiences and Hawaiian (whether Native or not) performers, one in which “Americans came to possess Hawai’i in their dreams and imaginations... [and thereby] believe that they belonged to an optimistic, playful, and tolerant nation” (135). Similarly, Imada and other Pacific performance scholars have demonstrated how the American mythos of Hawai’i has shaped it as the country’s truest melting pot, erasing a complicated and vexed history of multiple imperial conflicts and claims in favor of an easy and pleasurable multiculturalism.⁴³ This sense of cultural harmony, when promoted at the Guthrie through the performance of Hawaiianness, tends to confirm the happy multicultural logic of liberal humanism.

In the case of *Circle*’s opening night, this logic was doubly reinforced through a ‘luau party’ that preceded the performance. Patrons were greeted by the live musical stylings of the Hawaiian Sugar Performing Troupe as they stepped off the 9th floor elevator into the Studio’s lobby, and Mu and Guthrie staffers, both participants in the decision to host the party, donned audiences with brightly colored plastic leis. These

playful moves instantaneously drew upon the familiar Hawaiian motifs, shaped audience expectations, and assured a celebratory multiculturalism, all while pulling audiences into an intimate encounter with ‘difference’. In another setting, one that was a regular Mu performance venue or more obviously aligned with culturally specific work, this event may have better reflected the sense of contextualized belonging or reclamation intended, especially for audiences with Hawaiian heritage. Within the Guthrie’s walls, however, the intimate encounter was constrained by what could become legible within dominant frameworks. To some degree, this kind of visibility worked against Mu’s aims of opening up other ways of seeing Asian Americans.

A Celebration of Sameness

On the other hand, and in part to offset the potential for audiences to read the production of *Circle* solely through the lens of difference, Mu and the Guthrie simultaneously framed the production through the rhetoric of “common humanity.” As I discussed in Chapter One, this move tactically works to undo Asian American invisibility and erasure from the national imaginary and racial dialogues. Mu’s and *Circle*’s efforts to become visible through the lens of common humanity illuminate their Equal Rights struggle to be understood as human beings of equal worth, to contest their exclusion and dehumanization, and to gain the value that Enlightenment thinkers gave to themselves as full subjects and citizens. But in a happy multicultural world, claims to “common humanity” are read to mean that everyone has had the same experience of the world – because we have all loved, all lost, all rejoiced, all grieved, all struggled – we must know

with intimate accuracy what one another's lives entail. Dwight Conquergood calls this operation "The Enthusiast's Infatuation" and, along with Tzvetan Todorov and Frederic Jameson, warns that a too-easy identification with the other both trivializes them and forecloses self-reflexivity and deeper moral engagement (6-7). Similarly, in a post-racial world claims to "common humanity" can paradoxically be read as confirmation of an already-achieved equality. This logic proposes that access to power, money, and resources, as well as the ability to pull oneself up by the proverbial bootstraps is equally available to all. Under these logics, becoming visible through the lens of "common humanity" can prevent deeper understanding across lines of cultural and racial difference.

Viewer and Viewed

Another kind of problem with visibility for artists and companies of color working with mainstream theaters has to do with the relational power dynamic between the viewer and the viewed. As Peggy Phelan so astutely points out, and as Harry Elam Jr. and others have cited, the invisible, the *unmarked* can paradoxically hold the most power (Elam 92-93). Making the oppressed more visible does not necessarily shed light on the on the invisible dominant (whiteness, maleness, upper class, aesthetic elite), nor does it lessen its power or fundamentally change the relationship between viewer and viewed. The disagreement over the marketing image for Penumbra's production of *Gem of the Ocean* makes this dynamic clear. With the help of local theater photographer Ann Marsden, Penumbra created a three dimensional image of a pair of African American hands gently cupping a paper boat in a pool of water – an image they felt evoked the

human and personal aspects of the play. The hands indicate the corporeality of African American lives at the beginning of the 20th century, the writing on the paper marks it, as viewers would find out during the production, as a bill of sale for Aunt Ester, and the concentric circles of water bespeak the impact that the smallest action can have on the people and structures surrounding it – much like Aunt Ester’s redemptive influence on all those she touched. All of these semiotic meanings work towards one of Penumbra’s primary goals in staging the entire Wilson Cycle – to re-animate and re-imagine specific moments of the African American experience in the 20th Century, illuminating the ways in which the legacy of slavery in America has impacted individual lives, families, and communities.

The Guthrie’s image, created in conjunction with the design firm SpotCo, also spoke to the legacy of slavery and the imprint of the millions of lives lost in the Middle Passage, though it took a markedly different approach. Rather than a photograph, theirs was a graphic design that invoked the epic nature of the piece. As such, the African American figure became a giant, two dimensional, geometric, faceless silhouette. Hunched over, this phantasmagoric specter carries a sailboat deep under the water, and its head and shoulders become islands upon which two tiny black figures stand – presumably making their way to freedom upon the back or legacy of ‘that peculiar institution’. According to Bellamy, the Guthrie staff argued that this image would be more visually provocative, resulting in greater ticket sales, and would transfer better into black and white print media pieces (28 Apr. 2008). The Guthrie’s image eventually won

out, with Bellamy agreeing to it begrudgingly, a tactical acquiescence amidst ongoing negotiations.

In the semiotic debate over this promotional image, we become witness to a number of revealing facets of the institutional relationship and the problems of visibility therein. The Guthrie's attention to artistic quality and economics allowed them to, perhaps unintentionally, create and circulate an image that displayed a dehumanized black body in a position of perpetual suffering, an image that would be the first encounter many patrons had with the production. And paradoxically, though the black body is central to the image, any force of domination is noticeably absent. Blackface historian Michael Rogin comments on this contradiction, and the ways in which visibility through performance and its accompanying images can become a means of erasure and evasion: "Far from ignoring people of color, the white gaze renders them invisible...not by averting the eyes but by staring so as not to see. Focusing attention on blackness protects whiteness as the unexamined given" (27). In the Guthrie's image, whatever force keeps the black body prostrate is unseen. Just as this image puts blackness front and center while erasing the peoples and conditions that made slavery possible, so this co-presentation allowed the Guthrie to present a company of color while simultaneously and strategically forgetting their own historical role in minorities' unequal access to the spaces and resources of institution like theirs. As Peggy Phelan notes, "Gaining visibility for the politically underrepresented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda" (26). Thus, not only do the images reveal the competing sets of values and racial logics at work in the partnership,

they illuminate the ways in which the institution of slavery can become visible, yet fail to restore the humanity and specificity of African American people that Penumbra sought to achieve through their image and their staging of *Gem*.

The Desire for Transformation

One of the most fundamental goals of culturally specific companies working towards greater visibility is the transformation of social inequities and injustice. Penumbra makes this most clear in their educational and contextual materials, when they distinguish their “art for social change” mission from “art for art’s sake,” and Mu’s institutional purpose of addressing social justice bespeaks the same intent. Though it was not an explicitly stated goal of the Native Theater Festivals, many of the participants articulated a wealth of ways in which indigenous performance has the potential to transform the American theater as well as broader Euro-American epistemologies. For the most part, these companies and artists are not aiming for a direct redistribution of resources outside of the theater, though they hope to illustrate injustice in ways that might provoke witnesses to act in the world. They do, however, hope to shift theatrical practice in regards to race. Especially in and through their partnerships with companies like the Public and the Guthrie, these culturally specific companies aim to regain the means of theatrical production over dominant ideologies and tropes, challenge dramaturgical structures, and gain access to levels of cultural and economic capital that have been unequally distributed.⁴⁴ Their presence in these mainstream spaces, and the regional companies’ willingness to partner with them is already shifting these dynamics, as I

demonstrated in Chapter One. But upholding visibility as an end point, though a sometimes necessary tactical maneuver, can prevent the achievement of these goals. In the rest of the chapter, I explore a few key ways in which visibility obfuscated or prevented transformative results while revealing competing sets of values within these partnerships.

The Yellow Face Panel and Differing Concepts of Support

The conflict that emerged over Mu Performing Arts' panel on "Asians in the Media" prior to their opening night performance of *Yellow Face* illuminated the companies' divergent ideas about providing support in cross-cultural relationships. While both companies were intent on making David Henry Hwang's play about mistaken racial identity visible for their audiences, less clear was how they would handle events outside of the production itself. Throughout the Guthrie's promotional materials and public rhetoric, they proclaimed their "support" of the local companies they brought in, and framed their partnerships (both cross-cultural and not) as providing a "service to the community" (Dowling, Playbill for *Amen 3*; Miller-Stephany). Ben McGovern, the Guthrie's Director of Studio Programming at the time, shared with me that "we very deliberately, we support technically and in terms of marketing and so forth, but artistically we're completely hands off... We say, "You should do what you feel as artists and we'll support it purely on a technical level"" (21 July 2010). According to McGovern and other personnel I spoke with, access to the Studio space and its technical capabilities are paramount for the Guthrie in providing support to visiting companies. What is less

clear is how support is configured when dealing with culturally specific companies whose missions include anti-racist goals as well as aesthetic aims.⁴⁵ When Penumbra presented their work on the Guthrie's mainstages – the Wurtele Thurst and the McGuire Proscenium – they encountered little to no resistance in scheduling a series of pre- and post-show educational activities that explicitly addressed race and racism. As the August Wilson Fellow for Penumbra, I personally helped take groups of high school students through the history of the Black Arts Movement, co-facilitated dialogues with elder learners on racially restrictive housing covenants in the Twin Cities, and moderated panel discussions, including one on “Black Female Leadership and Spirituality in *The Amen Corner*.” Yet, Mu's attempts to contextualize their art in the Studio space were stymied before finally coming to fruition.

One primary reason for the resistance to the pre-show panel had to do with logistics. According to Randy Reyes, who was organizing the discussion forum for Mu, his initial requests were met with favorable interest. However, as the request traveled up the procedural pipeline, it became clear that there were not systems in place to support such an event. How would it be ticketed and staffed? How would technical needs like lighting be dealt with? Who would pay for the extra expenses associated with these requirements, which were themselves dictated by union regulations? Thus, the protocols attendant in the smooth running of an organization the size of the Guthrie meant, in this case, that the smaller culturally specific company might not be supported in the ways they deemed necessary for confronting a social justice issue. While Reyes understood

that this was largely attributable to institutional structures, he also expressed his subsequent frustrations:

Working with Sheila there was no doubt [whether the panel should move ahead] – it was all awesome, awesome, awesome. But it is frustrating to have to go through all of these hoops and protocols. I’m like, “You know me!” Then to have this protocol – it’s like, is there any room for humanity? For thinking, “Wow, this is a very important thing!” We are an Asian American company and we have these important issues. Can’t you figure it out? Why can’t *you* talk to Sheila? These are the thoughts that come up afterwards that are indicative of the non-profit regional theater system and how huge it is. (14 May 2014)

The concerns Reyes voices are important for all artists, and no doubt are felt by other companies partnering with the Guthrie as well as many of the Guthrie staff themselves whose options are limited by rigid protocols. But his disquiet is especially pointed in that the company is already struggling against issues of Asian American dehumanization and trying to undo those processes through their work and its accompanying contextualization. When the protocols of the organization stand in the way of human relationships built on years of working together (Reyes was on staff in the Guthrie’s Education department and has been the featured star in numerous Guthrie productions), the result is greater labor for Mu as they work to achieve their anti-racist mission. This has Reyes, as Mu’s new Artistic Director, moving towards relationships with smaller, more nimble and flexible venues to present their work. He comments that at larger

institutions like the Cowles Center in downtown Minneapolis where Mu presented their 2013 taiko concert, “we couldn’t afford the catering, so we couldn’t feed our audiences or artists for a community that so desperately needs that. At the Southern Theater we could feed the audience during the show. These other organizations are not built for us! I don’t want to make those sacrifices anymore. I want it to be built for us” (14 May 2014). For Mu, and other culturally specific companies, it is not simply about making their plays more visible. It is about being able to contextualize the art, being able to dialogue directly with audiences in their educational efforts to shift perceptions, and being able to serve their communities in ways that meet their particular needs.⁴⁶

Furthermore, because the Guthrie’s mission lacks an overt and cohesive set of racial policies, tensions around race and culture get taken up and interpreted in markedly different ways throughout the behemoth organization. Based on the individual personalities, relationships, and priorities of Guthrie staff, their responses variably took on anti-racist, post-race, colorblind, or happy multicultural perspectives. This was made clear in the different ways that they approached the possibility of the panel discussion, and it left Mu artists and administrators to speculate about the racial logics and subtexts at work. Reyes, for instance found a willing and supportive partner in Sheila Livingston, and read the other resistances as primarily procedural, even though they incited questions and frustration. Rick Shiomi’s initial response was to read the Guthrie’s hesitancy as an indicator of David Henry Hwang’s cultural capital, and he was left wondering if they did not think Hwang important enough to warrant a pre-show panel, despite being the most well-known and decorated Asian American playwright (22 June 2010). Mu’s Managing

Director Don Eitel got the sense from his conversations with top Guthrie staff that the issues the panel would address were too volatile, and since conversations had already begun in the Twin Cities about the casting controversy over the Children's Theatre Company production of *Mulan Jr.*, they did not want to stir the political pot. Eitel also wondered if the Guthrie thought that Hwang's appearance on a panel for Mu's production might diminish the hype for his presence associated with the Guthrie's production of *M. Butterfly*, which would follow shortly after *Yellow Face* (1 May 2014). In other words, making Hwang visible prior to *M. Butterfly* might lessen his symbolic capital for Guthrie stakeholders and audiences.

My interpretation of some Guthrie staffers' hesitancy is that it was a protective measure to shield the institution from critique, and to preserve the happy multicultural logic upon which the company publicly frames its partnerships. Not only was *Yellow Face*'s content overtly political, it could (and did) serve as a launching pad to address inequities in racial casting and employment in the Twin Cities and across the country. With a panel discussion bringing these issues into direct dialogue with audiences, racial tensions could escape the safe boundaries of the stage and the space/time of the production, potentially implicating the Guthrie. This critique touched a nerve. It spoke not to issues of injustice outside the theater walls – the neighborhood segregation of Chicago in the 1950s, for instance, or the racism faced by blacks moving to northern steel towns like Pittsburgh during the Great Migration – but implicated the contemporary theater field itself in systematic acts of exclusion and misrepresentation. As Mu moved from celebration with *Circle* to critique with *Yellow Face* and their panel, they risked

exposing the limits and boundaries of celebratory multiculturalism. The companies agreed, it seemed, on making cultural and racial difference visible. Making visible the racial inequities in the field was another matter.

Blurring the Lines of Cultural Production and Ownership

For mainstream companies like the Guthrie and the Public, partnering with culturally specific companies like Mu, Penumbra, and Native Voices at the Atrium is a progressive step in reversing historical trends of cultural appropriation in the theater. By making African American, Asian American, and Native American companies visible as the creators and producers of culturally specific art, these institutional relationships go some way towards according credit where it is due, and affirming minority artists' self-determination. This long-awaited attribution of cultural expertise and ownership is one of the reasons leaders like Lou Bellamy have hailed Penumbra's relationship with the Guthrie as a national model. And yet, these partnerships do not necessarily equalize the playing field as a whole, nor do they present an irreversible trend given the prevalence of dominant ideologies and expectations.

Perhaps one of the biggest impediments to Penumbra's visibility and autonomy within their collaboration with the Guthrie is the fact that critics and audiences are quite often not aware that the production is Penumbra's in the first place. While all of the Guthrie's marketing materials and playbills include Penumbra's logo, and while they frame each presentation as "A Penumbra Theatre Company production of..." this fact is frequently lost in reception. The local reviews for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, for

example, demonstrated varying degrees of understanding of the artistic ownership of the production.⁴⁷ Likewise, in prominent preview articles for *The Amen Corner* in the Minneapolis Star Tribune and CBS, Penumbra's authority was not-so-subtly erased from their work when the production was listed as the "Guthrie Theater's "The Amen Corner,"" and Bellamy, rather than the company, was noted as the producer (Preston, "No Research Required;" "Curiosity: Q&A"). In these articles, journalists placed emphasis on leading actress Greta Oglesby's return to the Guthrie stage after her award winning performance in Tony Kushner's *Caroline or Change* in 2009, a production that was the sole domain of the Guthrie. In this way, the media obfuscated the difference in cultural production and ownership between a Guthrie and a Penumbra production, implicitly equating the two. Whether or not these editorial omissions were intentional, they worked to undo the very elements of autonomy that Penumbra fights to achieve within the partnership. This kind of critical framing of the art, in combination with audiences' tendency to associate the building in which they witness a production with its artistic ownership, results in a critical loss of recognition. If audiences fail to understand that *Ma Rainey* or *The Amen Corner* are Penumbra productions, then many of the supposed benefits of a collaboration as articulated by Penumbra staff are lost. Diminished is the potential for theater-goers to grasp the unique ensemble and aesthetic as Penumbra's, for the company to draw audience members across the river to their own space in St. Paul for future productions, and to develop them into subscribers and donors to bolster the company's long term sustainability. Instead, the Guthrie receives the recognition and accolades for a production in which they had no artistic input, a fact

which has financial as well as artistic consequences. Such framings erase Penumbra's aesthetic and cultural expertise, while allowing the Guthrie to build their reputation for presenting culturally specific art in the eyes of the public. And this fact has ramifications when they move on to present plays about and/or by artists of color without the partnership of culturally specific companies.

Tensions over the possibility of a Lynn Nottage festival at the Guthrie illuminate the tenuous relationship between visibility and culturally specific companies' artistic control. In early 2014 the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported that the Guthrie was contemplating a celebration of African American playwright Lynn Nottage's repertoire, following their successful features of Tony Kushner in 2008-2009 and Christopher Hampton in 2012-2013 (Preston, "Another Playwright-Centered Festival"). Nottage, who was trained at Brown and Yale Universities, and who is on faculty at the latter of her Ivy League alma maters, was commissioned by the Guthrie to develop a new piece which is scheduled to debut in 2015. *Reading Play* would anchor the festival, and it won Nottage and the Guthrie a \$50,000 grant from the Chicago-based Joyce foundation.

Long before the Star Tribune reported on the festival, Penumbra had acquired the rights to produce another recent award winning Nottage play *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, which had achieved acclaim off-Broadway and at Chicago's regional Goodman Theatre. Given the companies' multi-year partnership, Penumbra suggested that the companies could co-produce one or more of Nottage's pieces, but the Guthrie declined (Lou Bellamy 2 Jan. 2014). Hanging in the balance in this debate was Penumbra's cultural authority and expertise, and the sustainability of the companies' partnership. At

stake, questions of who had the cultural rights and imperative to produce Nottage's plays, and who would receive the benefits of the shows' cultural and economic, social and symbolic capital. The Guthrie might have argued that they had a track record with Nottage, having staged her play *Intimate Apparel* in their 2005-2006 season,⁴⁸ and that Penumbra had no such claim to Nottage's work, having never previously produced any of her plays.⁴⁹ For Penumbra, however, this conflict undermined their cultural authority and resurrected one of the dangers of cross-cultural collaboration as articulated in Bellamy's 1997 critique "The Colonization of Black Theatre":

Will major regional theatres across the U.S. respect the expertise of black organizations that understand and maintain art and culture in their communities, or will they understand an endeavor like the Penumbra/Guthrie collaboration to be a license to produce and do what they will regardless of the effects upon organizations like Penumbra and the communities they represent? [...] Should black institutions now, because white institutions have "discovered" its art, surrender the stewardship of that art and literature so that they might be shared with a broader audience? Personally, I find it difficult to trust these institutions' interpretations or their motives. Their "discovery" intentional or not, has the cumulative effect of creaming and greening the cultural history and creative impulses of those they seek to admit. (588-589)

In this instance seventeen years later, Bellamy's concerns are as relevant and poignant as ever. Though Dowling responded to Bellamy's initial critique by saying "We shouldn't

colonize the work just because we are larger” (*Penumbra Theatre Company Season Brochure*), it is difficult to interpret the Guthrie’s refusal to work with Penumbra on the Nottage’s plays in another way.

When read through differing racial logics and threads of liberalism, however, the conflict becomes clearer. Whereas old-fashioned racism justified the appropriation of minority cultural materials on account of their producers’ supposed inferiority, the prevailing post-racial logic presumes that racial equality has been achieved, and thus cultural materials belong to everyone regardless of their creators’ identity affiliations or the contexts out of which they arose. Under this logic, identity politics is no longer necessary, and subjects (or individual artists) are free to choose their identities, loyalties, and circles of belonging. In the American theater this post-racial logic is confirmed when selected writers and artists of color, especially those trained within mainstream educational institutions and acclaimed in and through mainstream theaters, are accepted into the multicultural American canon. When regional theater companies like the Guthrie produce their work, they performatively confirm those artists’ status as equal to the great white European and Euro-American (most often male) writers, they shape their own status as a premier American center for theater that produces “both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures” (“About the Guthrie”), and they ensure the “free” flow of cultural materials amongst supposed equals.

Penumbra’s anti-racist framework, however, ties into a different strand of liberalism that is informed by a history of oppression, cultural expertise, and collective self-determination. Bellamy’s comment that the Guthrie cannot produce African

American material on its own contests the free flow of cultural production and re-asserts Penumbra's cultural and aesthetic expertise based on that history. His remark alludes to the fact that though individual artists may be freer now than in the past to choose their partner organizations, they are not freed from this history or this struggle. His thoughts also speak to the reasons the companies partnered with one another in the first place – not simply to make the work visible, but to acknowledge Penumbra's authority in the arena of African American cultural production, not simply to include black artists on the Guthrie's stages, but to share in the various forms of capital that accompany such productions. In denying Penumbra involvement with Nottage's work on their stage, the Guthrie seemed to undercut these claims and their partnership.

The promise of visibility, then, as hope-inspiring as it appears, is a fraught and highly problematic rubric for measuring success in collaborations between mainstream and culturally specific companies. While making oppressed peoples more visible in mainstream spaces can raise awareness and provide a platform for affirming cultural difference, focusing on visibility as an end game can simultaneously prevent the kinds of transformative goals that culturally specific companies hope to enact. Increased visibility alone cannot shift racial politics, reconcile competing notions of support, shed light on the invisible dominant, or propel a more equitable distribution of resources. Indeed, as I have shown in this chapter, increased visibility for minority artists and companies can ultimately result in increased labor on their part, for the benefit of mainstream institutions and audiences. The concept of visibility, like the concept of “good stories” that I will

explore in the next chapter, is a deceptively simple and utopian sounding goal which deeper analysis reveals to be inevitably flawed.

Chapter Three: Unpacking “Good Stories:” Negotiating Aesthetic Standards

Whether proclaimed from a critic’s headline, enthusiastically articulated by an Artistic Director to a room full of donors, or offered contemplatively amidst an artist and administrator field discussion, the mantras of “good stories,” “good art,” and “good theater” are the indefatigable heroes of contemporary cross-cultural collaborations. Concise and ever malleable, these simple phrases find continuous purchase amongst artists and audiences, critics and theater staff in describing theatrical success, especially when it comes to the mainstream. Take, for example, this handful of recent examples.

During a field discussion at the Public Theater’s 2008 Native Theater Festival, no more than a few minutes after the opening introductions, the value of “good stories” was established in earnest. Responding to a question about whether and how Native performance should be brought to the mainstream, Rose Stella (Tarahumara First Nation), the Artistic Director of the Centre for Indigenous Theatre in Toronto, argued that: “If you do something with heart, people are going to listen because they can’t help it... I know that we’re talking about how do you get to Broadway, how do you get into the mainstream, but you really have to begin with your own story. I just think it’s really important to begin with what is meaningful to an individual” (13 Nov. 2008). “The way we get to the mainstream is to really have a universal message” concurred Kim Snyder (Oglala Lakota), an actress and playwright. “If you’re dealing with art in an honest way, in an organic and honest manner... you will reach people, you will. It is a given because it is honest. And that, everybody relates to on a universal level” (13 Nov. 2008). Charles Weldon, the Artistic Director of the Negro Ensemble Company added confidently, “I

think a good story has no ethnicity. And so you stay true to yourself. I'm not a writer but I feel like what happens is that when somebody writes a good story it doesn't matter if it's black, white, Native American, whatever—it's a good story. And if people see that good story then they bring in that wider audience" (13 Nov. 2008).

A Guthrie senior administrative staff member seconds the shared value of "good art." When I asked for his thoughts on the potential commonalities and differences between the Guthrie's and Penumbra's mission and vision surrounding the companies' partnership on *Gem of the Ocean*, he responded, "Vision I think is similar in that we want to expose as many people to good art as we can" (Scott 22 Apr. 2008).

A 2008 Minnesota Public Radio article about Mu Performing Arts' upcoming performance of the musical *The Walleye Kid* at St. Paul's Ordway Center for the Performing Arts confirms the same theory, pronouncing "It's Not Just Asian-American Theater, It's Good Theater" (Combs).

The rhetorical framings of "good art," "good theater," and "good stories" - deployed repeatedly by all parties involved in these cross-cultural partnerships - appear to equalize racial difference and tensions and confirm multicultural and aesthetic commonalities. Performatively and tautologically these phrases carry persuasive weight. Here at last, they assure us, is the thing we can all agree on and celebrate. After all, who could possibly be against a good story? When we get to the heart of the matter, isn't this what both theater makers and audiences are essentially longing for?

And yet, if we scratch the surface of these phrases, myriad questions are revealed. In the first place, what, *exactly*, constitutes "good" in each of these instances? *Who* has

the authority to bestow this designation - the playwright who wrote the script, the literary manager and artistic director who will decide whether or not the play gets produced, the audiences that witness the production, or the critics who will shape its reception? Who or what might these stories be good *for*? Is a good story determined in terms of literary structure, semiotic meaning, and other aesthetic factors? Must a story resonate with audiences across racial and cultural boundaries in order to be good? Is it judged by its ability to survive for centuries or its newness and immediacy? What role do culturally dominant expectations, stereotypes, and narrative tropes play in establishing the legibility of new dramatic stories, and what counts as “good”? If a “good” story has no ethnicity, then why have the majority of stories by artists of color been excluded from mainstream stages and canons? And finally, how do these designations shape the racial dynamics of the American theater landscape and access to the country’s most prominent stages?

In this chapter, I argue that while regional and culturally specific companies do share a set of values about “good stories,” including those dictated by the structures and constraints of professional theater, this broad language actually reveals their deeply conflicting and competing aesthetic and cultural philosophies. Ultimately, I contend that the rhetoric of “good stories” masks the limits of artistic legitimacy and cultural identity within the regional theater forum, and makes visible the relationships between the deeply entrenched dramaturgical expectations of audiences and their implicit racial investments. Left unquestioned, the rhetoric of “good stories” allows post-racial logics to continue to operate in these partnerships, leaving culturally specific companies and artists hanging in a tenuous balance, continually at the mercy of mainstream cultural tastes.

Throughout this chapter I have two primary tasks, one is to articulate the rhetoric of “good stories”- the ways that artists and administrators deploy the term, and the ways that they understand its underlying philosophies, principles, and commitments; and the other is to illuminate the techniques and practices that constitute “good stories” – its dramaturgies and expectations. I weave both of these tasks into the three sections of the chapter. The first section reveals the values about “good stories” that mainstream and culturally specific companies share, while the second section examines the specific ways in which they differ. Finally, in the third section I analyze four controversies or productions through which divergent understandings of “good stories” became clear. Within the contact zones of the partnerships, debates over meritocracy and colorblindness, self-determination, unfamiliar dramaturgical structures, and the dangers of celebratory multiculturalism belied the imagined commonality of “good stories.”

Shared Values: Establishing Consensus

As we begin to unpack the complexities of what is meant by the invocation of “good stories,” it is critical to distinguish the ways that different artists and theater administrators utilize this terminology. As opaque as the moniker of “good art” appears, it refers, in its best sense, to aesthetic values that both the mainstream and culturally specific companies and artists involved in these partnerships hold dear. In order to arrive at mutual decisions about the shows to be produced under the auspices of these collaborations, companies have had to stake out common ground. The most foundational of these commonalities lies in the very framing of the organizations themselves – they are

all bound, to some degree, by the structures and values of professional Western theater.

Governed by hierarchical systems, these companies are helmed by Artistic Directors who are tasked with selecting the “good stories” from the many potential options, and are staffed by professional artists, the majority of whom have received training through tertiary education and the professional theater itself. Adherence to the principles of the English language and Aristotelian dramaturgical structures are the norm, though variations can and do occur, especially in indigenous work. Companies share in affirming a notion of an American theatrical canon, which includes both the “classics” of the European and Euro-American traditions and pieces from African American, Native American, Asian American, Latino/a, and other cultural and racial contexts. As they honor these specific sets of plays, they honor perform the “masters” who wrote them, and this authorial deference becomes another shared value about the origins of “good stories.”

The most powerful logic underpinning their commonality, however, is the appeal to liberal humanist multiculturalism – the idea that “good stories” are both specific and universal. These stories, they argue, are grounded in precise and particular detail, and yet speak to audiences across lines of difference as well as space and time. They offer a reflection of “our shared humanity” and when performed effectively, catalyze empathy and human connection. Taken together, these values about “good stories” reinforce the companies’ belief in their commonality, and form what Jacques Rancière would term a “consensus,” or an “idea of the proper” (Corcoran 2). In other words, they confirm the dominant aesthetic order of professional American theater, to which mainstream

companies have always belonged, and within which companies like Mu, Penumbra, and Amerinda – one of the Public’s Native Theater partners – hope to be recognized.

Differing Values: Enacting Dissensus

While culturally specific companies and artists share a belief about the professional American theater with companies like the Guthrie and the Public, they also pose a challenge to the dominant aesthetic ideology that awards the highest value to stories from the European and Euro-American traditions. In insisting that their stories are also “good art”, they enact dissensus. Not the mere opposite of a consensus, a dissensus, according to Rancière is a “redistribution of the sensible [...] based on a logic of equality that reveals the arbitrariness of that distribution for political participation and artistic practice” (Corcoran 1-5). Their demand to be included in the American theatrical canon calls into question the entire hierarchical system that excluded them in the first place, chipping away at the lacquered artifice of neutrality that binds the canon together.

The simultaneous calls for consensus and dissensus by American artists working from a culturally specific milieu are perhaps nowhere more clearly articulated than in August Wilson’s “The Ground on Which I Stand.” In his remarks, Wilson marked out in no uncertain terms the pillars of American theater shared by mainstream and culturally specific companies, as well as the divergent terrain that the two sets of institutions could not possibly reconcile. His comments illuminate the contours of “good stories” and “good theater” from the specific subject position of an African American artist in ways that continue to resonate eighteen years later. First and foremost is Wilson’s faith in the

professional theater in America and its unwavering grounding in liberal humanism. He proclaims in his conclusion, “I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition, I believe in its power to heal, “to hold the mirror as ‘twere up to nature,” to the truths we uncover, to the truths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities” (“Ground” 46). Further supporting this notion, he asserts that “all of human life is universal, and it is theatre that illuminates and confers upon the universal the ability to speak for all men” (45).

The cross-cultural collaborations that I examine in this chapter inhabit Wilson’s paradoxical framing quite well, not coincidentally given his company member status with Penumbra Theatre, his philosophical alignment with Artistic Director Lou Bellamy, and his (and the speech’s) impact in the broader landscape of American theater, especially as a torch bearer for culturally specific work. In many ways these artists follow Wilson’s dissensus-making political struggle, which is “not a matter of rational debate between multiple interests; it is above all, a struggle to have one’s voice heard and oneself recognized as a legitimate partner in debate” (Corcoran 9). Their deployment of “good stories” becomes, in this sense, a recognition of their legitimacy with the American theater, a confirmation of their value, and an indicator of their ability to set their own aesthetic standards for success.

While it is critical to recognize that culturally specific artists’ use of the “good stories” designation serves to legitimize their work within the body of American theater, it is equally important to understand that it serves as shorthand for a set of specific and unique characteristics. These include self-determination; contesting stereotypes by re-

writing dominant narratives; addressing social justice issues; deeply contextualizing the work in history, memory, and cultural praxis; and portrayals of survival and survivance.

Self-Determination

The first of these – self-determination – was infamously articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1926 clarion call for theater “about us, by us, for us, and near us” (134). August Wilson’s insistence on self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense in “Ground” follow this genealogy. As Lou Bellamy joins this inheritance, he defines Penumbra’s work as “artistically excellent, thought-provoking and culturally specific theatre,” produced by the company “hailed as the definitive interpreter of August Wilson...” (Playbill for *Gem 6*). Bellamy opens his Artistic Director’s statement in the *Gem of the Ocean* playbill with this notion of definitiveness (based, in part on Wilson’s comments on Penumbra’s 1993 production of *The Piano Lesson*), which is repeated, mere inches away, in Joe Dowling’s statement, and throughout the literature on this partnership. In characterizing this definitiveness, Bellamy articulates the following ingredients: a genealogy of the company that integrally incorporates Wilson, making the two virtually indivisible; an ensemble approach grown out of a thirty year history of a group of artists working together; and African American cultural specificity and authenticity that can best be expressed by people who have lived an African American experience and spent their lifetimes engaging in its artistic production.⁵⁰ The result, as Bellamy describes it, is “an unfiltered statement...a black aesthetic, dealing with a black play, done by black people, with black leadership. It’s just pure, and that’s what they’re going to see” (28 Mar. 2008).

Mu Performing Art's new Artistic Director, Randy Reyes, follows DuBois' ideal and Penumbra's example, noting that good stories are best when "told in a compelling way, acted by Asian actors, directed by Asian directors, designed by Asian designers, written by Asian writers" (13 Apr. 2007). "We need to empower ourselves with a unique process through a voice of our own" he notes. "Beyond what the critics say and where we are performing, I think that we have to set what "professional standards" are to us. I think we know when we have a good show [...] *Circle Around the Island* showed that we can produce a viable piece of theater" (13 Apr. and 20 Nov. 2007). Recent conversations with Reyes make clear that the company continues to think through the specificity of Asian American aesthetics as they are particular to Mu. Compelling storytelling for them arises in hybrid forms in productions of new work like Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay's *Kung Fu Zombies Vs. Cannibals*, which blended political histories of southeast Asia with hip hop physicality, martial arts, comic book inspired graphics, a lived DJed soundtrack, and post-apocalyptic visions. For Reyes and Mu, pieces like these reflect the complex intersectionality of contemporary Asian American lives and identities.

Likewise, in a recent article introducing the new theaters of color coalition in the Twin Cities, Rhiana Yazzie, the Artistic Director of the New Native Theatre and a participant in the Public's Native Theater Festivals, spoke to the necessity of indigenous self-determination. "I can't imagine the non-Native community getting the Native story right. It still gets couched in the mechanism of the mainstream point of view, which is completely different from the indigenous perspective...there's such a basic non-understanding of our history that it cannot happen without our voices" (Kellen). The

indigenous perspective Yazzie speaks to was highlighted during festival field discussions, as participants distinguished specific dramaturgical conceits from mainstream assumptions. These included stories that follow a communal collective rather than a single protagonist, circular rather than linear conceptions of time, and the understanding that performance can be efficacious in addition to its representative power. Native self-determination, then, has to do both with combating unknown histories and shifting (and even transforming) dramaturgical expectations.

Contesting Stereotypes, Contesting Dehumanization

Closely linked to the “by us, for us” and self-determination veins, another crucial aspect of “good stories” for culturally specific theatres is the power to contest and complicate pervasive and hegemonic stereotypes of people of color embedded within the country’s dominant narratives. “Good stories” in this sense respond to a history of American dramatic practices that have framed imaginings of racial diversity for two centuries: from melodramatic redface constructions of Native Americans as noble or ignoble savages, to derogatory caricatures of African Americans in blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville, to yellowface creations that conceived of Asian Americans as either the model minority or perpetual foreigner.⁵¹ These portrayals have dehumanized people of color, influenced public misperceptions, reinforced racial discrimination, and negatively impacted public policy. Thus, the goals of *Penumbra*, *Mu*, *Native Voices* and their corollaries include crafting multi-dimensional stories of minorities’ lives and concerns, and expanding the possibilities of what can be staged and imagined about the racial

diversity of the country. Their “good stories” aim to humanize a person and a people, to repair the impact of what Penumbra’s Co-Artistic Director, Sarah Bellamy calls the “Four Ds” (Disassociate, Devalue, Dehumanize, and Destroy). Humanizing stories, then, are meant to catalyze empathy by giving nuanced and textured voice to the lives and concerns of those who suffered under these conditions and their lasting legacies. By putting flesh on the bones of the forgotten and crafting rich and detailed characters, artists hope to prevent future atrocities by helping audience members better understand others’ plights, and even perhaps see elements of themselves reflected across lines of difference.⁵²

A few examples from plays presented within these partnerships illuminate how culturally specific artists re-write and re-right dominant tropes. In *The Conversion of Ka’ahumanu*, playwright Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl complicates a well-known historical figure: Ka’ahumanu, the queen regent of Hawai’i in the 1820s, a woman both revered and disdained for her personal and political conversion to Christianity. While Kneubuhl does not undo the historical event of the actual Ka’ahumanu’s conversion, she paints a more nuanced narrative by elucidating the fact that this was a strategic political decision as much as if not more than a religious one. Ka’ahumanu arrives at this choice, in Kneubuhl’s play, in relation to both missionary influence and to her sense of responsibility to her people and the imperial conditions that are pressing themselves upon their lives. Far from someone unable to understand the consequences of her decision – as dominant histories would have us believe – Ka’ahumanu demonstrates strategic thinking, not only about her own cultural practices, but those of the Europeans and Euro-

Americans as well. What becomes evident in Kneubuhl's revision of this cross-cultural encounter, then, is the lived complexity of Ka'ahumanu's life and the response-ability of indigenous artists to speak back, both politically and artistically, to narratives that silence and forget their perspectives, their ongoing presence, and their resistance – both past and present.

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson literally corporealizes the history of Africans in America vis-à-vis the body of Aunt Ester. In humanizing nearly three centuries of African American experience, he crafts a woman who has born and lost children, a character both symbolic and earthly, caring and cantankerous. Aunt Ester illuminates the complicated depth of both an individual and a people. She is simultaneously a mother, an advisor, a seer, a joker, a healer, a teacher, a lover, a maker of potions, and a holder of dog shit. She imperfectly distributes compliments and critique amongst her loved ones. She has the power to marshal both Christian and Yoruban cosmology in the service of the City of Bones ritual, and yet she eats, gets cold, and needs her feet washed and toenails clipped. She is a woman who exists on multiple levels, both human and superhuman, all of which were made visible in Penumbra's staged production at the Guthrie. By allowing the voice of African America to speak through this aged yet powerful woman, Wilson offers audiences the opportunity to witness both the pain borne from this experience and the fierce and enduring survival of a people.

Social Justice Concerns

While the re-writing of dominant narratives from culturally specific perspectives is in itself an act of social justice work, another key to understanding “good stories” is by their implicit or explicit incorporation of social justice content. For Penumbra, good art in this regard is not neutral, and it necessarily opens up dialogue with the community (Lou Bellamy 13 Feb. 2009). It also means challenging the audience to move beyond the surface flow of the text, by making directorial choices that act as meta-commentary and illuminate the social justice concerns in the subtext. For Mu, a recent shift in their mission statement, spurred in part by a multi-year grant from Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, has meant a more explicit focus on social justice and thematic content that impacts their community. Their staging of David Henry Hwang’s *Yellow Face* in the Guthrie’s Dowling Studio in 2010 was reflective of this shift, as it engaged audiences in the debate over colorblind casting and the practice of casting white actors in roles designed for Asian Americans. Using a combination of self-deprecating humor, satire, documentary-style vignettes, and didactic monologues, Hwang’s play and Mu’s production posed questions about the limitations of assimilation, national and cultural belonging, and the persistence of structural racism.

History, Memory, Culture

Whether re-writing dominant narratives or making new culturally specific stories audible and visible, minority artists’ “good stories” are steeped in the history, memory, and culture of their particular racial and ethnic locations. They are, as August Wilson

would say, “fired in the kiln” of a specific cultural experience, and seek to define that experience from within its confines. These plays often call audiences to revisit some of the more painful moments of our collective American past, to remember what normative histories perpetually forget. For instance, Wilson’s entire 20th Century Cycle, in which he wrote a play for each decade, remembers and reanimates the transition out of U.S. slavery and its lasting effects throughout the 1900s. In *Gem of the Ocean*, performed by Penumbra at the Guthrie in 2008, he transports us back to the heart of this transition, and in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, presented in 2011, he demonstrates its ongoing impact in the music industry of the 1920s. In each of these pieces his characters echo the philosophies of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, and embody the wisdom of the Sankofa. As Aunt Ester, the fiery matriarch and keeper of the flame that appears in *Gem* says, “I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain’t afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them otherwise they’d eat me up” (1.5). Her project is taken up by her ‘gatekeeper’ Eli and ‘protégé’ Black Mary in the ritual journey to the City of Bones, in which their song refrain is simply “Remember me” (2.2); and is echoed by Citizen Barlow who hears this call, crying out “They saying remember me” (2.2). Through song, story, and the power of oral histories, Aunt Ester and those surrounding her carry on the memory of the past. To forget where one came from, and those who came before, Aunt Ester insists, is to forget who one is. This forgetting, in turn, allows others to determine one’s value and narrate one’s history: a dangerous operation that remembering actively contests.

Survival and Survivance

This sense of survival is another critical ingredient in culturally specific artists' understanding of "good stories." Through their content as well as their public presentations in these collaborations, these stories of survival create forums for embodied responses to dominant narratives, space to contest and disrupt problematic practices of erasure. Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor describes this kind of critical Native presence as *survivance*, a term which he distinguishes from mere survival by saying that "Survival is a response; survivance is a standpoint, a worldview, and a presence...survivance is resistance and hermeneutics" (93). Vizenor makes clear in his definition a kind of self-reflexive Native presence that takes a stand, challenges dominant expectations, and is in itself a process of interpretation. For indigenous American theater makers this is especially critical for educating audiences that Native peoples still exist in North America. Darrell Dennis' play *Tales of an Urban Indian*, presented on the Public's mainstage in 2009, and *Thieves*, a play by William S. Yellow Robe, Jr., produced by Amerinda at the Public in 2011, present and presence Native lives in contemporary U.S. and Canadian settings, demonstrating not only indigenous survival but their lives within the urban core. The three Asian American characters in Mu's *Cowboy Versus Samurai* survive in small town Wyoming despite being the targets of racial slurs, having bricks thrown through their windows, and even, for one of them, a perpetual search for his country of origin. Revealing the depths of pain that characters endure as a result of oppressions can be important as well, and both Rick Shiomi and Lou Bellamy point out that this was crucial for writers at previous points in the trajectories of Asian American

and African American theater. But each of these fields has since moved on according to Bellamy and Shiomi. Now these writers are more interested in discovering what happens after those moments – the strength and resilience that carries the characters through. Survivance is evidenced as the Younger family walks out of their apartment on Chicago's south side in *A Raisin in the Sun*, heads held high as they prepare to move into the all white neighborhood of Clybourne Park despite that community's resistance. And it is embodied in *Gem of the Ocean* when, following Solly's bloody death at the hands of Caesar, the young Citizen Barlow clothes himself in Solly's coat, hat, and walking stick, and sets out into the night to take up his literal and symbolic fight for justice.

“Good Stories” for Mainstream Companies

In addition to qualities like compelling characters, committed and capable storytellers, and high stakes, regional companies like the Guthrie and The Public also have a set of values attached to “good stories,” values which can be illuminated by examining their mission statements. Though each statement reflects the company's unique understanding of their role in the American theatrical landscape, there are notable commonalities:

...The Public Theater is dedicated to achieving artistic excellence while developing an American theater that is accessible and relevant through productions of challenging new plays, musicals and innovative stagings of the classics. Conceived nearly 60 years ago as one of the nation's first nonprofit theaters, The Public has served as an advocate for the theater as

an essential cultural force in leading and framing dialogue on important issues of our day. These core democratic values inform all aspects of The Public's activities. Toward this effort, The Public continues to be guided by a philosophy of inclusion, which takes on many forms... ("About the Public")

The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world. (Playbill for *Gem 5*)

One of the key parallels worth noting in these statements is the companies' interest in both the 'classics' and 'new work.' The former, we may presume refers to the European and Euro-American canon beginning with the Greeks, through Shakespeare and Moliere, to 20th century writers such as Ibsen, Shaw, and Chekhov, and 21st century icons such as O'Neill and Williams. The classics focus at the Public is heavily weighted towards Shakespeare, while the Guthrie's repertoire aligns with other regional theater companies in its broader approach. The latter seems to include anything written in the past 50 years, but especially points to brand new plays receiving their first production at these institutions.

With the "classics" there is a noted sense of propriety, cultural capital, and a track record of proven critical and box office success, and with "new work" the emphasis is

often on the discovery – of new stories and new playwriting talent –by the company in question. Each of these designations carries with it economic advantages – the classics can be relied upon to bring in the funding necessary to keep the organization in the black and allow them to take risks on less vetted pieces, while new work possess a commodity value that attracts audience members seeking immersion in the experience of originality. To be sure, culturally specific companies are also interested in these economically incentivized values, however the valences of classical and new work shift and become complicated when companies like Mu, Penumbra, and Amerinda partner with the larger institutions that belong more comfortably within the Euro-American traditions, and that possess a greater share of taste-making cultural capital.

Within the Euro-American tradition, the binary distinction of “classical” and “new work” makes sense. For artists who understand themselves as fitting into the Western dramatic trajectory, this is primarily a temporal designation, a marker on a teleological line stretching from Aeschylus to the present moment. This is not to say that all plays older than five decades are considered classical, of course. Many do not continue to receive attention and accolades in the present, and as such fall out of recognition. However, when speaking of dramatic literature by African American, Asian American, Native American and other cultural minority artists, the simplistic binary begins to break down. In part this is due to less entrenched and cohesive canons in these fields. But it also has to do with a disjunction between the existence of each of these bodies of work and their acknowledgement and production in the mainstream.

For instance, when Penumbra produced James Baldwin's 1951 play *The Amen Corner* at the Guthrie in 2012, Baldwin was hailed as "a true American Master" by critics (Olive) and "a major American artist" by Joe Dowling, while simultaneously being "introduced" to the Guthrie's repertoire and audiences (Playbill for *Amen* 3). In this sense, Baldwin is retrospectively added to the "classical" canon, a move which both celebrates his accomplishments and reveals the implicit racial and cultural context of that designation and its past omission of writers of color. Similarly, Mu's first co-presentation with the Guthrie was Filipino Hawaiian artist Marcus Quiniones' piece *Circle Around the Island*. While it was staged in the Dowling Studio, a space dedicated primarily to the "new work from diverse cultures" aspect of the mission, the piece was over ten years old and had received a full production years prior in Mu's mainstage programming. Michael Dixon, The Director of Programming for the Studio at the time, was clear that Dowling selected this piece because of its proven track record of success, as well as Quiniones' virtuosic performance in the production (29 Nov. 2007). The question then becomes how new is new? For Mu, this piece was arguably a "classic" in their repertoire, and even perhaps the broader Asian American canon which began to take shape in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But the wording of the Guthrie's mission seems to negate the possibility that a piece of work might belong to both the "classical" and "new" categories, and conveniently masks "classical" drama's whiteness. In terms of the larger scope of the Guthrie as presenter, the mission's wording also seems to indicate that work by "diverse cultures" is solely "new," erasing a rich history of dramatic literature by minority playwrights, and positioning the Guthrie as discoverer of these "diverse cultures" that are

only now, through their “support,” becoming visible. This also positions the Guthrie as the archivists of the future canon, limiting the possibility of the thinkable with the companies and pieces they choose to put on their stage.

For companies like the Guthrie, the “classical” attribution often carries more weight in terms of cultural and economic capital, and it maps onto the spaces that pieces are allowed to be staged. Good classical stories make it onto the larger 700-seat proscenium and 1,200-seat thrust stages – as in the case for James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and August Wilson, while good new stories are presented in the 200-seat Dowling Studio. In large part this is a strategic economic move, as pieces or playwrights that have name broad name recognition are likely to sell more seats. However, this also means that plays by Asian American writers, the vast majority of which do not have the notoriety of Wilson, are necessarily relegated to the smaller space on the ninth floor. Interestingly enough the David Henry Hwang play *M. Butterfly*, which was the first Asian American play to be produced solely by the Guthrie (without the partnership or input of Mu Performing Arts) was presented on the Wurtele Thrust, while his newer play *Yellow Face*, produced by Mu, was staged in the Studio.

Speaking of culturally specific work as “good art” can also be a strategic means for people, usually white artists and administrators working in regional companies, to avoid the painful and awkward moments that arise when race and racism are explicitly named. “Good theater” celebrates that sense of liberal multicultural “common humanity” and shared aesthetic values, while masking past and present racial inequities and tensions. Joe Dowling’s Artistic Director notes in the Guthrie playbills for Penumbra’s productions

are reflective of this rhetorical emphasis. Only once in the four programs does he directly address the visiting company's cultural and racial mission, saying "The Twin Cities are fortunate to have the skill and dedication of Lou Bellamy, whose work for over a quarter of a century has offered his audience a unique insight into the literature of African American culture" (Dowling, Playbill for *Raisin* 6). In the first co-presentation on *Gem of the Ocean*, any allusion to race is noticeably absent, and in the *Ma Rainey* and *Amen Corner* programs it exists only in broad, veiled language that is superseded by testimonials to the company's artistic quality and legitimacy, such as "Their mission is unique and the work they produce reaches great heights of achievement" (Dowling, Playbill for *Ma Rainey* 3), and "Penumbra continues to give witness to the power of theater to illuminate diverse lives and cultural values...[and] is one of the most precious jewels in the Twin Cities theater community" (Dowling, Playbill for *Amen* 3). Given the coded wording of "unique missions" and "diverse lives and values", audiences may assume that the productions they are about to see are non-white, but any further deductions about their specific racial focus are left for Bellamy's comments in the columns adjacent to Dowling's.

For a company relatively new to partnering with culturally specific organizations, these wording choices are not necessarily surprising. Indeed, they align with rhetorical trends in wider societal discourses. As performance scholar Michelle Dent notes, "In mainstream America today, there is a paralysis, anxiety, and fatigue over using "incorrect" language—even if this incorrectness is a way to speak across the lines of cultural difference" (44-45). This reticence to name race and racism is, as Dent

comments, pervasive across the country in the wake of the very visible resistance movements of the 60s and 70s and the highly politicized culture wars of the 80s and 90s. For companies like the Guthrie who have been taken to task by critics and artists for their predominantly white season selections (more on this later in the chapter), overt discussion of race and ethnicity are kept to a minimum. When viewed as a strategic move, this evasion is a protective measure to minimize potential fallout from any publicized “incorrectness” that may escape the lips or pen of a staff member or artist. Not speaking of race also aligns with the post-racial logic of colorblindness that the Guthrie adopts in much of their mainstage casting decisions. This policy might also be understood as a tactical corrective to the corrosive impact of the “Four Ds,” especially in terms of regional companies’ prior exclusions of artists and plays of color. The difficulty within the contact zones of these cross-cultural partnerships, however, is that Penumbra’s and Mu’s work asks audiences – either directly or implicitly - to honestly confront the country’s racial history. Their work demands that witnesses take seriously the weight of racism, its ongoing impact and its historical legacy. For Mu and Penumbra, this is part of the foundational criteria of “good stories.” Thus, avoiding naming race – even when calling plays like *Raisin* a “seminal work” or *Ma Rainey* a “masterpiece” - presents a disjunction between two distinctly different versions of “good art” (Dowling, Playbill for *Raisin* 6, Playbill for *Ma Rainey* 3). The post-racial model not only erases valuable cultural heritage and identity, it does the disservice of dismissing past and current racial injustices.

Furthermore, when actions follow this evasive rhetoric, not naming race allows mainstream artists, staff, and audiences to forego the work of getting to know or deeply understand “the other.” The Guthrie staffer’s comment at the beginning of the chapter: “Vision I think is similar in that we want to expose as many people to good art as we can,” was preceded by an admission that “I don’t know Penumbra’s mission, so I don’t really know how...it relates to ours” (Scott 22 Apr. 2008). These thoughts bolster the Guthrie’s rationalization of the partnership in terms of “high quality” art, but reveal a critical lacuna in regards to the foundational purpose of the company that they are bringing in, as well as their specific understanding of “good art.” To “know” a company, in this sense, is to be aware of their artistic quality, but does not require knowledge of their mission as it relates to race and ethnicity. This was, after all, one of the defining reasons Penumbra was invited to produce at the Guthrie in the first place – to lend “authenticity” to a production that the regional company could arguably not mount on their own. In fact, as Penumbra’s Managing Director, Chris Widdess discussed, Penumbra’s involvement at the Guthrie came in response to a board initiative spurred by negative critical and media reaction to the Guthrie’s predominantly white first season (11 Apr. 2008).

While developing a deep understanding of collaborating companies’ missions may be more properly the domain of the Guthrie’s Artistic Director, this staffer had been in weekly and even daily communication with Penumbra staff, was a key player in the contract negotiations, and had easy access to Penumbra’s mission statement which was printed in the program that sat on his desk during our interview. Even if recitation word

for word was impossible, he might have at least commented that the company was African American or presented work from an African American perspective. Furthermore, if a top Guthrie official lacks even this cursory understanding of the visiting company, what might this indicate for the rest of the staff and their ability to work smoothly with Penumbra and/or contextualize the production for the public? This gap further revealed itself as I reflected on our entire hour-long interview: race, ethnicity, and/or culture were not mentioned except in a momentary slip – arguably the most interesting moment of the interview. It became evident that “knowing” was here limited to the artistic domain. If Wilson wanted his work to allow white America to see him and his characters as “black and beautiful,” this intention was being missed (or if not missed, at least unspoken or silenced) by prominent members of the Guthrie staff. In this way, the aesthetic language of “good theater” prevents understanding, critical reflexivity, and deeper cross-cultural dialogue – there is no reason for it if the work is not perceived as racially or culturally distinct.

In the Contact Zones: The Conflicts that Reveal Philosophical Differences

Underpinning Claims About “Good Stories”

Distinction, Meritocracy, and Colorblindness: The Guthrie’s 50th Season Controversy

When the Guthrie Theater announced their 50th anniversary season lineup in April 2012, a firestorm erupted in the local media, catalyzing charged debate from artists, critics, and the general public. The primary points of contention: the lack of representation of women and artists of color. Out of eleven Guthrie productions and four

collaborator presentations slated for the companies' two main stages, the Wurtele Thrust and the McGuire Proscenium, only one, *Pride and Prejudice*, was written by a woman (their production of Homer's *An Iliad* was co-adapted by a woman), and only one, *Nice Fish*, would be co-directed by a woman. Directors and playwrights of color were conspicuously absent from the lineup. Though partnership deals were in the works at the time of the announcement, they were not yet finalized and thus could not be publicized. As the Dowling Studio programming unfolded after the original announcement, it became clear that Mu Performing Arts would present their production of Rick Shiomi's *Yellow Fever* in the Dowling Studio during this season, and Pillsbury House Theatre, another local company that produces culturally specific work would present two shows illuminating the African American experience – *The Brothers Size* by Tarell Alvin McCraney and *Buzzer* by Tracey Scott Wilson, both directed by black male artist Marion McClinton. However, as these shows would be presented in the Studio space, they were not considered a part of the official season. So, while stories by and about people of color would be happening in the building, they were once again relegated to the ninth floor Studio after a number of years of greater prominence on the mainstages. Instead, the stalwart's of the Guthrie's nearly 50 year repertoire, Shakespeare, Goldoni, and O'Neill, along with contemporary writers Christopher Hampton and Jon Robin Baitz, would dominate those spaces, and white male directors and in many cases actors (for instance, the Propeller Theatre's all-male cast for their two visiting productions of Shakespeare plays) would once again be front and center. Given the company's prominence both locally and nationally, this absence was immediately recognized and fiercely criticized by

theater makers. Minnesota Theater Alliance leader and theater director Leah Cooper commented in a Minnesota Public Radio article:

For artists it's insulting and degrading to see so little regard for representation by the state's largest performing arts institution. But for all our citizens - audiences, artists, donors, volunteers, tax-payers, students - this is mainstream arts telling us that the voices and stories and perspective of women and people of color are not important, not relevant, not worth telling, sharing or knowing. The Guthrie has a tremendous amount of talent, resource, and community support with which its artists could be broadening our experience, inspiring us to greater empathy and deeper understanding of ALL the people in our world. And like any theater, they depend on growing and diversifying their audience to thrive. So the continued bias against women and people of color in leadership and authorship is either embarrassingly myopic or willfully negligent. (Combs, "Where's the Diversity")

Cooper's critique saavily takes up the Guthrie's own rhetoric of national and state representation as well as the liberal humanist ideals of empathy and common understanding and offers the possibility that the absence of women and people of color may have been an oversight. Others were less conciliatory, calling the season "Sad. Tragic. Wrong" (Combs), and insisting that the vocal critique of the state's largest non-profit theater company was "a long overdue reaction" (Royce, "Guthrie's 2012 Lineup"). Dowling was initially enthusiastic in announcing the season, calling it "so varied and

immediate” (Combs). In the face of criticism, however, he retreated to a defensive stance, and eventually took the offensive, saying that the critiques were “self-serving arguments that didn’t hold water” (Combs, “Guthrie Theater’s Debt”).

At issue in the melee was the ongoing debate over the definition of “good theater.” In timely and visceral ways, the controversy over the season revealed deeply held beliefs about the relationship between culture (in terms of a society’s arts and letters) and culture (in terms of racial and ethnic communities), artistic and political representation, and the limits of legitimacy on mainstream stages. In instances such as this announcement, I argue that the language of “good stories” masks the fact that despite mainstream companies’ incorporation of culturally specific companies’ artists and work, their understanding of “good theater” can always trump those of the culturally specific artists with whom they work, re-affirming cultural hierarchies and ultimately reinforcing hegemony and problematic racial logics.

On the one hand, given the company’s history and the track records of other ‘mainstream’ companies in the Twin Cities, the Guthrie’s season selection was more the norm than the exception. Dowling has never been one to shy away from the fact that the Guthrie values the canon of European and Euro-American dramatic literature as the epitome of “good art.” On the other hand, the Guthrie’s own rhetoric, especially in the build-up and move to their new riverfront space, frames their vision and programming in ways that are inconsistent with this season selection, and positions Dowling directly in the line of fire. First and foremost among these is the company’s mission statement, which touts a multicultural expansion of their ethno-racial and aesthetic reach: “By

presenting both classical literature and *new work from diverse cultures* [emphasis mine], the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world.” Though Dowling reacted to criticism about the white, male-heavy lineup by arguing “it is too narrow a perspective to see bias in one particular season” (Royce, “Guthrie’s 2012 Lineup”), the prominence of the “diversity” statement in the mission betrays his defense. If “new work from diverse cultures” is central to the very core of the Guthrie’s programmatic identity, it was not reflected in any of their eleven mainstage selections. Moreover, this was not just *any* particular season; it was the 50th anniversary season. Such a monumental landmark for the Guthrie and the regional theater system at large heightens the significance of the selections, as a symbolic marker of the past five decades and an indicator of the vision for the next five decades. Programming an all white, male season in these circumstances appears to reaffirm and celebrate the racial and artistic status quo.

Likewise, in staking out their status as “an American center for theater performance...” as well as promising to connect “Minnesota to the peoples of the world” while serving as a national “destination,” the Guthrie implicitly claims artistic and political representation for the state and the country. With this logic, they liken themselves to those larger imagined communities, which come with the attendant responsibilities of fairly and accurately reflecting the citizenry. This season lineup, however, is hardly reflective of the Twin Cities metropolitan area’s changing demographics, which, according to a report by Minnesota’s Metropolitan Council will nearly double its share of people of color, reaching 40% in thirty years (Mador). Critics

of the season appeal to this logic, claiming that excluding artists of color is tantamount to failing to recognize and include critical segments of the population.

The Guthrie promised racially and culturally diverse work in garnering funding for their new building, but as those promises seem to only partially be fulfilled in the first seven years in their new space, critics have begun to wonder if this rhetoric was merely clever capitalization on the diversity commodity. In this sense “good art” is not merely tethered to representation, it can also be hinged on logics of accounting and quantification, which rest on the logic of capitalism. In other words, “good stories” are those that will sell tickets, a result which is dependent on consumer desires, and theater consumers often desire what they already know. August Wilson bemoaned this fact when he exclaimed in “Ground” the ways in which subscribers hold larger regional theater companies hostage to outdated repertoires. Ironically, the Guthrie was founded in an effort to escape the capitalist logic of Broadway, in large part because the economic pressures were understood to dilute the quality of “good art”. Now, in their multimillion dollar building, the Guthrie is beholden to the very market forces they sought to avoid, and “good art” is thus limited to productions that are guaranteed to generate substantial incomes. So, in many ways, the economic realities of the Guthrie’s size restricts both what qualifies as “good art” and its potential for representing Minnesota or the nation in terms of its changing faces, stories, perspectives, communities. Here the strictures of a professional theater company are deeply at odds with the promises of representative democracies, as they maintain the right of a single individual (the Artistic Director) to select who and what will speak for the state and the nation. Because of the need to

maintain economic stability and aesthetic superiority, mainstream companies are often not willing to amend their selection processes towards messier, more democratic ideals. This means, however, that the representation – whether of Minnesota, or a New York subway stop in the case of the Public – is still profoundly selective and narrowly constructed. And in that process, artists of color can be forgotten, excluded, and asked to wait until the next year to see themselves in positions of power.

In all of this, the Guthrie could take it as a testament to what has changed in their programming, that with the increasing incorporation of more playwrights and directors of color on the mainstages, their absence now becomes increasingly noticeable. But their decisions for the 2012-2013 season reveal the troubling reality that despite seeming ‘progress’ for cultural diversity, it can be postponed or eliminated at any moment to return to the status quo. For all of the company’s rhetoric about the importance of cultural diversity in their programming, whether in their mission statement or the playbill notes for partner companies’ presentations, this value is ultimately limited and contingent. When culturally specific work is desired and subsequently brought into the building, they can hail it as a multicultural coup. But just as quickly they can return to all white male work, and deflect criticism by claiming to combat tokenism, as Dowling did when the debate progressed: “...one thing I want to be very clear about, tokenism is the worst thing you can do...I employ people because of their talent...It is a very stern task to direct on a stage of our size, and I am responsible to the board for the shows we produce” (Royce, “Guthrie’s 2012 Lineup”). With this statement the company’s gendered and racial logics swiftly morph to support whatever choice they make, as they move from celebratory

multiculturalism that embraces difference, to a stance that Omi and Winant describe as the ‘neoconservative’ position, which understands equality as not treating individuals differently. This kind of colorblindness betrays an implicit racial bias, however, in implying that minority artists are not as capable as white artists, and reveals racialized, gendered, and institutional privilege in defending their authority to determine who is worthy of the designation of “good artist.” This defense also fails to recognize structural inequalities within the regional theater system, and strikes a cultural, artistic, and personal blow against the very theater makers the Guthrie has built a relationship with since their move to their new space in 2006. In this way, racial representation becomes a commodity, something to be highlighted when it serves the organization, and something to be shelved and defended against when it is not necessary or desirable. The idea of “good art” or a “varied and timely season” then becomes a hegemonic rhetorical tool to defend the status quo, garner the consent of the theater-going populace, and silence those who might disagree.

The general public’s online commentary on both the Star Tribune and Minnesota Public Radio’s blogs illuminated a wide variety of racial logics as well as fierce loyalty to the Guthrie and their adherence to the European and Euro-American canon and supposedly colorblind policies. Jerome Hasbargen’s thoughts convey many respondents’ belief in universal aesthetics:

When I consider going to a play, musical, concert, or other entertainment, I don't even concern myself with the gender or race of the playwright that I am not familiar with. Their gender and race does not make the

production any better or more worthy of my patronage. To me, they are all artists and are all equal when their names and titles are on a list to choose from. I appreciate good entertainment with a color blind and a gender blind eye as far as the writers, directors and actors go. If they put on a good show and I like what I saw and heard I consider it worth my time and money and I will recommend it to others. I think the bottom line is we all want good entertainment. (20 Apr. 2012)

These comments, which epitomize the call for “good stories” (or in this case, “good entertainment”), reveal an implicit racial bias that simultaneously masks itself as universal, combines colorblindness and white male privilege, and assumes a separation between the political and the aesthetic. They also demonstrate the power of hegemony, in which “the hegemonic group establishes and maintains its dominance by creating...an organic cohesion between leaders and led, and in which the ‘feelings’ of the population are completely imbued with its dominant view of the world” (Macey 177). The Guthrie needn’t exert great effort in defending their choices, or even their authorial right to make them, as a significant segment of the public is largely in sync with their aesthetic worldview.

This argument hinges on the logic of meritocracy, and it is this debate that goes to the very heart of the controversy. Pierre Bourdieu elucidates the workings of this logic in his philosophical and sociological treatise *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. He contends that aesthetic taste is not an inherent ability to identify “good art,” but rather a set of ideologies and attitudes that are taught within families and

educational institutions, and later become conceived of as “natural” and ahistorical.

Ultimately, he argues that the ability to distinguish ‘good’ art from ‘bad’ is a strategic method for reinforcing and legitimating class differences, especially on the part of the upper classes.⁵³ This debate, Bourdieu posits, is not new. In fact, he states that “the definition of cultural nobility is the stake in a struggle which has gone on unceasingly, from the seventeenth century to the present day, between groups differing in their ideas of culture and of the legitimate relation to culture and to works of art, and therefore differing in the conditions of acquisition of which these dispositions are the product” (2). He goes on to note that “acquisition of legitimate culture...tends to favour an enchanted experience of culture which implies forgetting the acquisition” (3-4). Hasbargen’s comments are reflective of that forgetting, as he assumes an absolute neutrality and objectivity in his ability to select “good entertainment.”

The cultural struggle that Bourdieu alludes to has deep roots here in the U.S., and the controversy over the Guthrie’s 2012-2013 season announcement is one of its most recent incarnations. Though many participants in the current firestorm may not be aware of its particular historicity, this broader debate reached an apex and gained national attention for differing racial and multicultural ideologies in the heated dialogue between August Wilson and American Repertory Theater Artistic Director and *New Republic* critic Robert Brustein throughout the 1990s. Their nearly decade-long debate took place in magazine articles, speeches, and a face-to-face meeting, and marked a critical shift in the national theatrical dialogue by bringing prominent and sustained attention to the issue of multiculturalism and its relationship to the professional theater’s belief in meritocracy.

Brustein's review of Wilson's play *Fences* in the May 21, 1990 issue of the *New Republic* ignited the controversy, and Wilson's pivotal speech at the 11th national conference of the Theatre Communications Group at Princeton University on June 26, 1996 served as a fierce response, and was, as Lou Bellamy would term it, a "throw[ing] down [of] the gauntlet" (28 Apr. 2008). Brustein's position, echoed in Hasbargen's comments, epitomized the ideology of universalism lauded by many dominant mainstream organizations. His stance pits talent against race, merit against tokenism, and competing definitions of culture against one another. In a *New Republic* article titled "Unity From Diversity," Brustein posited this critique of multicultural policies in the 1990s: "funding agencies have started substituting sociological criteria for aesthetic criteria in their grant procedures, indicating that "elitist" notions like quality and excellence are no longer functional... It's disarming, in all senses of the word, to say we don't share common experiences that are measurable by common standards. It's also defensive nonsense" (29). "Good art" in this sense applies by the supposed translatability of values into all societies and social groups. While artists like Wilson seem to agree that there are universals to which we all can relate and aspire, they also point to the unequal ways that these 'universal' values have been selected and applied. In "Ground," Wilson attacks this point directly, citing that "often where there are aesthetic criteria of excellence, it is the sociological criteria that have traditionally excluded blacks" (25). Whereas Brustein sees the definition and valuing of art as an equal and apolitical operation, Wilson views the process as always political and rarely equal. From his perspective white European and Euro-American ideologies have dominated what gets

deemed “universal” and “valuable,” and as such his argument is bolstered by Bourdieu’s notion of distinction.

While Wilson’s stance has many followers, especially amongst the leaders of culturally specific theater companies like Penumbra, the responses in defense of the Guthrie’s season selection make clear the enduring power of the logic of meritocracy and the belief in the given consensus about “good art.” The dangers of this ideology are numerous, however. In the first place, the statistics – for the Guthrie’s season or their entire repertoire, as noted above - do not bear out the belief in either equality or neutrality. If this were true, their history of programming would reflect a much wider spectrum of racial and gender diversity. Lou Bellamy enunciates another problem inherent in dominant cultural institutions acting as the arbiters and legitimizers of “excellence,” especially when following supposedly “universal” ideals: “... black artists begin to believe that the approval of these institutions is relevant or even necessary [...] When these institutions become arbiter and interpreter, they even skew my perception of myself” (“Colonization” 589). Operating under the guise of ahistorical universalism as articulated by Bourdieu, the Guthrie and the theater-going public can deploy “good art” to defend a racialized canon, and in so doing exert powerful influence on theater artists’ perceptions. Moreover, the boundaries of the given aesthetic consensus become visible as they are challenged, and as defenders separate out the legitimate from the illegitimate. In the online commentary, thoughtful challenges to the Guthrie’s selections were roundly de-legitimized, their positions and opinions called everything from “unproductive” to “knee-jerk wailing,” “shallow” to “sensationalistic,” and “shameful to their colleagues in

the field.” Dismissing the significance of structural racism and inequality within the theatrical landscape, these vocal supporters of the white-male season suggested that critics “have too much time on their hands,” “should look at actual acts of harassment,” and “just shouldn’t go if they don’t like the shows.”⁵⁴ In these examples, defenders of the consensus deflect, diffuse, even disallow questions about the criteria of “good art” and critics are punished for attempting to enact dissensus and asking to be taken as legitimate partners in the debate.

When “Good Stories” are not “By Us”: White Artists Writing About People of Color

One of the pivotal questions raised by the rhetoric of “good stories” is how a balance might be reached between artistic representation (what is allowed to be shown on stage) and political representation (who is allowed to speak about and for certain experiences). Here questions of theatrical practice intersect with issues of national, cultural, and racial identity, as well as larger debates on U.S. multiculturalism and identity politics. The stakes of these questions are high, as David Krasner notes with a specific example affecting African Americans, “The noxious residue of racial injustice that began with slavery, was exacerbated by minstrelsy, and continued through segregation and lynching must factor into the meaning of race in the theatre. The fact that the referential symbol of segregation derives from the theatrical character Jim Crow, the most popular minstrel caricature, tells us just how profound and costly a burden theatre carries” (586). Krasner returns us to Du Bois’s principles of “a real Negro theatre,” reminding us that they were crafted in this context, to define a “black play” in opposition

to such caricatures and their attendant political ramifications. For culturally specific theatres like Penumbra and Mu which are grounded in history, steeped in community, and driven by mission, it is crucial that “good stories,” are “about us and by us,” and both companies ensure that each production’s director and/or playwright has respectively lived an African American or Asian American experience. In order to achieve accurate aesthetic and political representation, they assert that the complexities of a culture must be defined from within.

For mainstream regional companies like the Guthrie, this is not necessarily the case. “Good stories” *about* people of color may be written *by* them, as in the case of the plays presented vis-à-vis their partnerships with Penumbra and Mu, but this is not a prerequisite. Their productions of Julie Marie Myatt’s *Boats on a River* and Tony Kushner’s *Caroline, or Change*, as well as their presentation of the Vineyard Company’s *The Scottsboro Boys* attest to this, as each were written by Euro-American playwrights. *Boats* and *Scottsboro* also had white directors, while the Guthrie’s resident artist Marcela Lorca – who is not African American - helmed *Caroline, or Change*. The Public, on the other hand, began partnering with artists and companies of color as early as the 1960s, and their repertoire history reflects a stronger alignment with Du Bois’s principles. However, their 2009-2010 production of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, which featured Native American characters (or rather satirical caricatures played by white actors), was created by two young white men – Alex Timbers and Michael Friedman. The driving force behind the Guthrie’s and Public’s decisions to produce these particular pieces has presumably less to do with slighting artists of color and more with economic necessity.

Because they cannot often afford to take a simultaneous risk on two of their key “good theater” elements - discovery and proven success –they opt for the safer financial option with name-recognized playwrights and directors (who are most often white), and leave the discovery element for the cultural and racial content of the material. Promotions for *Scottsboro*, for example, tout the acclaimed credentials of “musical theater giants John Kander and Fred Ebb (*Chicago, Cabaret*)...five-time Tony Award winner Susan Stroman (*The Producers*) and featuring a book by David Thompson (who adapted the script for *Chicago's* record-breaking revival)” (“The Scottsboro Boys”). Similarly, *Caroline, or Change* appeared as the anchor production in the Guthrie’s 2009 festival devoted entirely to Tony Kushner’s work, an artist the company deemed “a dominant voice in American playwrighting [sic]” (Dowling, “Welcome”). With these kinds of critical accolades, it seems that anyone’s story regardless of racial or cultural identity is fair game for a play’s subject matter. Indeed, racial and cultural “difference” becomes a hot commodity in this context, and when written about by Euro-American artists, gains an elevated cultural and symbolic capital status. So while these stories stretch the bounds of artistic representation on mainstream stages – by featuring young Cambodian women embroiled in the sex trade in *Boats*, a self-aware use of the minstrelsy form in *Scottsboro*, an unhappy African American maid and nanny in *Caroline*, and a satirical emo-rock opera in *Bloody Bloody* – they remain conservative in terms of political representation.

In *Caroline, Or Change* Kushner works to unravel the beloved mammy caricature as she appeared in the 1960s, dispelling the notion that black domestic workers preferred lavishing loving attention on the white youngsters they cared for rather than tending to

their own children. This semi-autobiographical piece illuminates his complex boyhood relationship with his African American caregiver, and makes quite clear her thinly veiled disdain for her position. Her resentment at being expected to love the child of a well-to-do white family while her children go without her is palpable, and while she ably fulfills her duties as the home's maid, she refuses to wear the expected mask of grateful subservient. Though Kushner's portrayal certainly illuminates her inner turmoil, it also keeps her locked in the "suffering other" role for much of the production. The promotional graphics solidify this image with a large white teardrop falling conspicuously from her upward gazing eyes. As a predominantly white audience's gaze is focused on this image, foregrounded on the playbill and embodied in three dimensions on stage, the relational dynamic that is evoked is one of sympathy, if not empathy. Though Kushner's portrayal may shift perceptions for those who had not previously considered the emotional life and physical toll of black domestic workers, it also shapes a troublesome kind of humanitarian ethic. As performance scholar John Fletcher notes, "Acts of empathizing for trauma victims inaugurate the place of the empathizer as that person gifted-empowered-tasked to empathize *while stabilizing the other as victim-object* [...] humanitarian empathy is the purview not of the *human* but of the *humanitarian*" (10). Kushner's framing of Caroline's experience ultimately leaves her with little agency and sets up his audience as privileged subjects witnessing her subaltern grief. Though Caroline is friends with another black maid, and though her children appear in brief scenes, she is largely cut off from her community and disconnected from the active strains and struggles of the Civil Rights Movement pulsing around her. Caroline does

decide to go on, and the story ends on a hopeful note. However, the play's ultimate message about change is that it is Caroline's personal attitudes and behaviors that must shift to survive in this tumultuous and segregated society, rather than a necessary transformation of the structures and systems of oppression that keep her isolated in a hot basement. Through Dotty, Caroline's friend and fellow domestic worker, Kushner insists:

“I know it hurt to change./ It actually hurts, learning something new, / and when you're full-grown, it's harder that's true - / it feel like you got to break yourself apart, / it feel like you got to break your own heart, / but folk do it. They do. / Every day, all the time, / Alone, afraid, folks like you. / You got to let go of where you been. / You got to move on from the place you're in. / Don't drown in that basement. Change or sink. / Let go, forget, move on. / This ain't time for prayin'. You got to think.” (115)

In the play and in these lyrics, seismic structural shifts are collapsed into individual struggle and sorrow - the inciting problem is located in Caroline's heart. As such, this well-intentioned depiction of African American suffering dramatically conflicts with the culturally specific “good stories” principles of survivance, community contextualization, and historical memory. At the same time Kushner recognizes a community-engaged effort on the part of Jewish Americans to aid in the Civil Rights Movement: “Jewish-Americans, with their deep understanding of the vital role of the federal government in protecting minority rights, with their deep commitment to social and economic justice, were and are critically important participants in the struggle” (Kushner, Introduction, qtd.

in Playbill for *Caroline* 9). As a member of that community, Kushner alludes to this model of solidarity in his own writing, suggesting that he may be aiding in a similar mode of social justice by telling this story. But nowhere does he appear to question his ability to speak for the person of Caroline and in so doing attempt to define a cultural experience that is not his own. For their part, neither does the Guthrie, nor does the mainstream theatrical field require such self-reflexivity. Kushner's credentials as an individual writer of acclaim allow him privileged access to represent this particular African American experience.

Celebratory Multiculturalism's Blindspots and Hipster Racism:

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson at the Public

In counterpoint to the Guthrie season announcement, the Public Theater embraced the dissensus that ensued when they premiered the new musical *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, first through their lab development initiative in 2009, and a year later on one of their mainstages. At the same time, radically different notions of "good stories" were made visceral in and through the production, leaving the partnerships between the company and the Native American artists they had worked with for the past three years on shaky and tenuous ground.

At the top of the show, the lights shift after a wailing rendition of a satirically ironic emo-rock ballad. Against an eclectic backdrop of lush crimson curtains, crystal chandeliers, and a life-sized artificial, stuffed cow hanging upside down from the ceiling, a family comes into view. It's the late 1700s, a "frontier hut" in Tennessee, and the

family is comprised of Andrew Jackson as a young boy and his parents. In the midst of a quirkily odd confrontation with a cobbler, mayhem erupts. An arrow, shot by an unseen, offstage assailant flies through the window, hitting Elizabeth Jackson square in the back, dropping her in an instant. In seeming contradiction to what we've just witnessed, Andrew Senior declares that her death was a result of cholera, but when questioned by his son, his tune suddenly changes: "No, no, son. (*out to audience*) That's the work of *injuns* (8)!" As he prepares his son for battle, pontificating about taking back the land that's rightfully theirs and making the "land-grabbin' Injuns bleed (8)", another arrow finds its target in the elder Jackson's back. As his head splashes into a bowl of soup, the young orphaned Jackson is visited, the stage directions note, by "*Three young indians [who] enter and dance...to the strains of Prokofiev, taunting him all the while. They're really fucking annoying. Then, they leave*" (8). Alone, Jackson mourns his lost family members and implores the audience "Don't get me started on the goddamn Indians..." (8).

Written by Alex Timbers, with music and lyrics by Michael Friedman, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* is a fast-paced 90-minute musical that garnered recognition as the Best Musical of 2010 by the likes of the New York Times and Rolling Stone, and earned two Tony nominations in 2011, one for Best Book of a Musical. Clearly, by mainstream and professional theater standards of success, this was indeed a "good story." Described in the Public's marketing materials as an "audacious mix of historical fact and fiction" and by New York Times critic Ben Brantley as a "rowdy, smart (and smart-aleck) musical, set to the visceral strains of emo-rock" ("Theater Tickets"), *Bloody Bloody* examines Andrew Jackson's rise from rural southern obscurity to become the

seventh president of the United States in 1828. Portrayed as a young, angst-y, testosterone-filled, ‘sexy-pants’ rock star, this Andrew Jackson is the whiny, feisty teenager in an allegorical coming-of-age story of America. The action traces his campaigns against the English and Spanish; his controversial marriage to an already wed woman; his consolidation of Executive Branch power; his disdain for the powerful, aristocratic, northern elite; and his horrific relationship to indigenous peoples – all of which earned him the apparent fierce admiration of a wide segment of the population, and a reputation as a populist rebel. It is this kind of adoring and unquestioning relationship between politicians and ‘common people’ that the creators attempt to satirize in the musical, and in so doing to draw parallels between recent and historical political administrations. The notorious pseudo-evidential claim for supporting George W. Bush’s election – he seems like a guy I’d like to have a beer with – is tossed into the anachronistic mayhem, as a means to help contemporary audiences examine their own political admirations and decision-making.

Critic and audience reviews, though mixed, offered plenty of praise for the production, calling it “a smart, vulgar, comic-book romp through history” (Lahr), “the product of sensibilities shaped by the topical ironies of Jon Stewart and the profane zaniness of “South Park”” (McNulty), “Remarkably inventive and often hilarious... A dizzying post-modern approach to American history” (Lipton), and “Bloody Good Show” (Vincentelli). Native American theater artists, however, especially those who had been working closely with the Public Theater through the company’s Native Theater Initiative, found themselves in shock and disbelief. Rather than irreverent satire, Native theater-

makers felt confronted with a piece that re-wrote historical fact for comic effect at their expense. Their letters to the Public expressed their sense of dehumanization –both by the musical itself and its predominantly white audiences – an especially egregious affront on the part of a company committed to making space for and helping to amplify Native American voices and stories. At issue for them were a number of concerns revolving around the blatant revision of historical events and figures, none of which may be widely known to the public attending the performances, and none of which were clarified within the production or the contextual materials that framed it. These included the opening scene recounted above - the depiction of Indians killing Andrew Jackson's parents, an act (though historically inaccurate) which seemed to explain if not justify Jackson's calculated campaign against them; the construction of Sac and Fox leader Black Hawk as a collaborator with Jackson and traitor to his own people; a scene in which two Creek women willingly disown a Native child when he's orphaned on the battlefield, ultimately ceding him to Jackson; Native characters played by white actors in metaphoric if not literal redface; and perhaps most problematically, the fact that by the end of the production, all of the Indians have been killed off, reinforcing the vanishing Indian narrative and the supposed success of the American genocide. This construction is hauntingly underscored by the song *Ten Little Indians*, and finally by a tableau of Native specters at the close of the performance – ghosts relegated once more to the distant past.

Native artists wondered how this could have happened at the Public of all places, a company who had been working to promote and support their work and concerns. How, they wondered, could partnerships between Native artists and the Public be rebuilt if the

ground of mutual trust had been irrevocably shaken? How could the Public's artistic staff miss the impact and implications of *Bloody Bloody* when deciding to produce it and send it on to Broadway? And, I might add, what does this incident illuminate about the kinds of "good stories" that continue to be valued and valorized in the U.S. theater landscape, even in the midst of growing cross-cultural alliances like those at the Public and the Guthrie?

The answer that might appear blatantly obvious in myriad other contexts - they simply were not concerned with Native peoples, issues, or politics - doesn't ring true in this case. Through the Native Theater Initiative and its two festivals in 2007 and 2008, the Public Theater had helped promote many of the crucial ingredients of contemporary Native American work as defined by indigenous artists themselves, such as re-writing historical moments from indigenous perspectives and critically intervening in the dominant narrative of the vanishing Indian, making visibly and corporeally clear the fact that indigenous peoples survived removal and genocide and are alive and well in contemporary America. These critical elements also worked to fulfill the Public's Native Theater Initiative goals "to support the work of Native theater artists across North America; to create a forum for field discussion among Native theater artists and professionals; and to further raise visibility and awareness of Native theater artists for New York audiences and the greater field of American Theater" ("The Native Theater Initiative"). Thus, the company's decision to nurture, produce, and promote *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, all without any input from Native artists during the show's creation process – including playwright, director, dramaturg and Ford Foundation

program officer Betsy Theobald Richards, who was responsible for funding the Public's Native Theater Initiative and who was on staff at the Public through a secondment at the time – was even more perplexing. This seeming contradiction heightened the artists' sense of betrayal. In analyzing this situation, we might ask not *why* this musical was produced by a company with a fledging alliance with Native American artists, but what are the differing “good story” criteria that continue to make such choices possible?

Whereas the Guthrie's controversy centered on their maintenance of the status quo and the canon, the Public's controversy with *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* revolved around their investment in producing edgy new work based in the logic of cultural pluralism on which the company was founded and through which they continue to distinguish themselves from other mainstream theaters in the U.S.. When Oskar Eustis first took over as Artistic Director at the Public he heralded the importance of generating new material for the theater: ““The thing I care about most in the world is new work, particularly new American writing that is socially engaged and represents the diversity of America, and that's what the Public Theater stands for”” (Turan and Papp 556). For the Public, *Bloody Bloody* appeared to satisfy this statement and meet all of their good story criteria – it was a brand new piece that they helped to shepherd from its fledgling stages into full production, it appealed to a young audience, it offered a social critique laden with political relevance, it reflected American diversity in some fashion, and at least initially, Eustis believed it to be in line with the Native Theater Initiative values, laying the culpability for the Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears squarely at Jackson's feet (Eustis, Letter). On its own, the value of new work is one which the Public's Native

artist partners heartily agree. Steve Elm (Oneida), Executive Director of Amerinda, one of the Native theater company partners of the Public notes, “I think the whole role of an Initiative or of a presenting theater is to present not just established work, but new, exciting, creative, different work” (25 Aug. 2011). That *Bloody Bloody* was new was not at issue. However, for Native artists it contradicted and even violated their good story criteria: rather than complicating stereotypes of indigenous Americans they felt it reinforced them, rather than re-writing narratives from Native perspectives in order to reclaim power it left racialized power systems securely intact, rather than illuminating an oft-erased history it manipulated historical facts in order to generate laughter, and rather than undoing the effects of dehumanization and illuminating Native survival and survivance it perpetuated the myth of their eradication.

Though the impact of *Bloody Bloody* was hurtful and infuriating for the Native community, this was certainly not the Public’s nor the creators’ intention. Rather, for them another “good story” ingredient took precedence, overshadowing the contentious issues of racial representation. As letters, interviews, and articles would make clear after the controversy erupted, Timbers, Friedman, and Eustis understood themselves to be offering up a harsh (if not humorous), leftist critique of political power and in so doing perhaps even enacting a kind of social justice. Their efforts and their intent were pinned heavily on the satirical form of the production, which presumed a kind of egalitarian interchangeability with regards to its comic targets. In a Capital New York article, Friedman quipped, “We treat a lot of events in the 19th century with a tongue in our cheek or a light hand” (Levine). In this supposedly equal opportunity offender, gays and

the disabled are caught in the satirical crossfire along with Northerners, the English and Spanish, the established political entourage of the historical moment, and Native Americans. The producers hailed this sense of equal offense with a colloquial smirk fitted to the tone of the production: “A.J. kicked British butt, shafted the Indians and smacked down the Spaniards all in the name of these United States—who cares if he didn’t have permission?” (Blank).

The logic underpinning this sense of sarcastic satirical criticism is evidenced in the wider commercial theatrical milieu as well, and the fact that *Bloody Bloody* would be produced in this particular moment is not necessarily surprising. In the same year when *The Book of Mormon* – a satirical send-up of a historically ostracized religious group and a carnival of Latter Day minstrelsy at Africa’s expense was nominated for fourteen Tony Awards, and *The Scottsboro Boys* – an attempted satirical critique of racist perceptions and laws that may have reinforced what it sought to disrupt – earned twelve nominations, we could think of *Bloody Bloody* as one piece of evidence in the complex puzzle of shifting racial, cultural, and aesthetic logics of the early 21st century.

The creators’ and the Public’s liberalism, though markedly different from the Guthrie’s more conservative stance, still reveals lacunae in terms of white privilege - neither of them were under any societal pressure to know the history they were reinventing. This gap stands in stark contrast to the pedagogical burden of “Indian 101” that most Native artists are made to bear when they present their work in the mainstream. In the midst of the controversy, Friedman freely admitted that,

The existential question, of simply needing to establish that ‘we are still here and still alive and still a vital community, that the genocide was not successful, is kind of an existential political point for the native community that doesn’t exist for other communities...Nobody asks whether African Americans are still in the country. Of course they are! ... That is a perfect example of what I was completely not seeing until it was pointed out to me. (Levine)

Friedman and Timbers expressed genuine regret when faced with the negative impact of their depiction of indigenous peoples, and according to those gathered in the meetings held by the Public after the initial outcry, they were willing to reconsider and even make changes to some of their depictions and character titles.⁵⁵ But the privilege that enabled their initial portrayals mixes dangerously with the satirical form in *Bloody Bloody*, amounting to what Racialicious blogger Carmen Van Kerckhove calls “hipster racism” (Lim). In this context, and under a post-racial logic, white male writers are free to blend factual accounts, historical fictions, racial and cultural stereotypes, contemporary pop references, and musical genres without regard to their differing cultural capital, historical impact, or representative power. Rather, all of these elements, as well as racial and cultural identities, become equal commodities, comic fodder for artistic creation and the pursuit of emo-rock opera glory.⁵⁶

The colorblind logic implied by the claims to equal opportunity offense are both reinforced and belied in *Bloody Bloody*. On the one hand, the creators do not take into account inequalities in race, nationality, physical ability, or sexuality as targets of

ridicule, and they use the equal opportunity defense to let themselves off of the proverbial hook for their caricatures. And yet on the other hand their blindness is betrayed by their noticeable exclusion of blacks. Even though they used a free hand in parodying indigenous peoples, African Americans are conspicuously absent in this early 19th century world, despite the fact that Jackson himself was a slave-owner who operated a massive plantation in Nashville, Tennessee. Clearly they understood the political ramifications of mocking African American slaves would not go unnoticed, and so omitted this troubled history. This choice demonstrates a lucid awareness of the racial hierarchies at stake in their depictions. Because Native Americans occupy the lower echelons of these hierarchies, as evidenced by Friedman's quote above, their identities became fair game for satirical focus. As one Native artist who witnessed the production reported,

The song "Ten Little Indians" eerily and callously recants how 10 Indians meet their demise in various grotesque ways, to which the audience roars with laughter. Wave after wave of insults directed specifically at Native people become overdone and repetitive to the point of being sickening. I don't think anyone can truthfully substantiate the claim that this show equally makes fun of all groups, it's just blatantly untrue. (Angry NDN)

Though *Bloody Bloody's* satire was aimed at Jackson and the supposedly populist political tendencies he engendered rather than at Native Americans, it nonetheless used them as comic source material. Thus, for Native artists, not only did the piece violate their values, the satirical form failed once it utilized their identities and altered historical

facts in ways that reinforced rather than challenged pre-conceptions of indigenous peoples.

For some theater critics, however, artistic freedom, particularly as it is enacted through satire, ought to take precedence over individual feelings of insult or betrayal. A *Village Voice* critic in particular de-legitimized Native theater-makers' complaints by labeling them as "politically correct" and making claims that artistic license cannot be tempered, hampered, or in any other way questioned or challenged, even by the very people whose identities it features in the name of satire. Though the valences are different and harsher here than the responses to the Guthrie's season announcement, this response stakes out another battle over meritocracy as well as artistic and political representation. In this case, aesthetic superiority and an anarchic streak, free from ethical responsibility are highly valued:

Part of what makes Timbers' shows so spectacular is that they *are* unlike so much of what's out there now: uncompromising, and not willing to kowtow to the sensitivities or political correctness of anyone, without discretion. Since when was art supposed to be sensitive? [...] Sadly, though, if political correctness (and entitlement politics) wins, it's going to be exponentially sillier, and will -- like Andrew Jackson, incidentally -- help drive the extinction of a vital freedom to New York's art culture that helps make it one of the best in the world: The ability to say and do whatever the hell you want. (Kamer)

At work in this perspective on “good art” is a ferocious repudiation of multiculturalism, affirmative action, and the very programs the Public supports through its mission and programming. Here colorblind racism is enabled through claims to aesthetic purity. The calls for unfettered artistic creation smack of neoliberalism, and reflect Omi and Winant’s neoconservative position in the wake of both celebratory multiculturalism and explicit forms of cultural nationalism. The result is a libertarian backlash against the ‘restraint’ of not using oppressed groups and identities as commodities for lofty satirical goals.

While the *Village Voice* critique of *Bloody Bloody*’s opposition is distinctly different and more strident than the Public’s stance, the company nonetheless enforced the value of meritocracy by heralding the play’s value in various emails and promotions, even after complaints arose and even after they held a series of meetings with Native theater makers to address concerns. While some changes were made to the script, and while Eustis, Literary Manager Liz Frankel, and Associate Artistic Director Mandy Hackett all apologized to the Native community for the piece’s impact and its subsequent breach of trust, ultimately the fact that the Public deemed this an undoubtedly “good story” trumped Native American artists’ concerns. As such, progress in terms of political representation - allowing Native artists to present work *by us*, and *about us* – was overlooked for the sake of artistic freedom.

And yet, at precisely the same time as *Bloody Bloody* was running, plays by Native playwrights Joy Harjo (*Wings*) and Rhiana Yazzie (*ADY*) were being read as part of the Public’s “New Work Now!” series. In this case, the multicultural framing that propelled this work from the Native Theater Initiative into other avenues of Public

programming may have ironically enabled Eustis and his staff to miss the problematic implications of Native depictions in *Bloody Bloody*. The Public's vision of reflecting the racial and cultural diversity of a New York subway stop is markedly pluralistic, as was Eustis' statement at the company's fiftieth anniversary season announcement, "When this place works best...is when as many artists as possible feel they can call it home. So it has been from the beginning and so it continues to be" (Turan and Papp 557). As hopeful and welcoming as this vision is, it does not account for the ruptures that emerge when multiple groups with competing "good story" criteria, not to mention vastly differing levels of cultural, economic, and symbolic capital, call it home. Here the transformative potential of the Native Theater Initiative is limited to work by Native playwrights, and the racial hierarchies of New York transit are reflected rather than challenged within the company's walls.

The Public's gap in engagement with Native artists during the process of opening *Bloody Bloody* revealed the kind of paternalistic danger inherent in the company's sense of civic responsibility. This was something they worked quickly to ameliorate in the wake of Native responses to the production, and Eustis addressed this in an open letter to the community. In marking out his oversights with the process, he noted:

I didn't invite Betsy or anyone else involved with the Native Theater Initiative to read or see the show while it was in development: Betsy only saw it at its dress rehearsal, two days before the first preview. That was a stupid mistake on my part, and I apologize. Given the Public's history with Native work, I should have been much more sensitive to this issue and

taken more proactive steps to make sure the Native artists who are important to us had a chance to see, respond to, and talk to me about the work while it was still in its early stages. [...]I think it is clear the Public needs to take some actions to make sure that Native voices are able to speak to their own history, and I welcome your ideas as to how the Public can provide a platform for that to happen- both in response to BBAJ and independently. (Eustis, Letter)

Frankel and Hackett seconded Eustis' explanation, and repeated an invitation to continue in dialogue.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the damage had been done. Betsy Richards made the decision to work from home for the remaining portion of her secondment from the Ford Foundation, "partly in protest against the management's refusal to make changes to the show in the middle of its run" (Levine). Vickie Ramirez, a Tuscarora playwright and a former member of the Public's Emerging Writer's Group admitted that her enthusiasm in working with the Public in the future would be tempered, and many in the community concurred. But Ramirez also acknowledged that venues for the presentation of Native plays and voices are limited (Levine), a fact that would lead her and Native companies like Amerinda to continue working in partnership with the Public, despite this breach of trust and valuation of indigenous "good story" values.

In the mainstream, *Bloody Bloody* continues to thrive. At the Public it became the second-highest grossing production ever in their downtown space (Levine), and it moved to Broadway after its initial run. Though it only lasted for three months on the Great White Way,⁵⁸ it has subsequently made its way across the country – from high schools to

colleges to professional stagings from Washington D.C. to San Jose, California. St. Paul's History Theatre was considering a production, and Illinois State – the very campus that gave birth to the country's only full-time equity company dedicated to Native American theater had it slated for their 2012-2013 production season until it was met with fierce and eloquent resistance. In *Bloody Bloody*'s case, as evidenced by this overwhelming popularity, "good stories" may be good for mainstream box office success, for titillating white audiences with satirical wit, for challenging pseudo-populist ideologies, and for propelling the emo-rock opera into national spotlights. But in this case, the indigenous artists working with the Public were quite clear – *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* is not good for us.

As I hope I have shown in this chapter, claims about "good stories," "good theater," and "good art" mask complicated sets of aesthetic values and racial logics that are often at odds. Despite similarities in terms of professional standards, culturally specific companies' understandings of "good stories" diverge from the mainstream in their need for self-determination, the contestation of stereotypes and de-humanization, the incorporation of social justice concerns, deep historical and cultural contextualization, and the foregrounding of survival and survivance. Without these crucial ingredients, the broader and seemingly universal language of "good stories" can work to valorize dominant bodies of literature, gloss over the post-racial politics of popular mainstream plays, presume commonality in playwrights' political and philosophical goals, conflate competing dramaturgical principles and expectations, and reinforce hegemonic aesthetics.

In the next chapter, my investigation shifts from the politics of representation to

the politics of redistribution. While all theater companies utilize “good stories” rhetoric for better and worse, the disparities between mainstream and culturally specific companies’ levels of resources illuminate a much starker contrast.

Chapter Four: Redistributive Politics and the Problems of Capital

“‘Race,’ it is clear, is also a two-dimensional social division, a compound of status and class. Rooted simultaneously in the economic structure and the status order of capitalist society, racism’s injustices include both maldistribution and misrecognition [...]

Overcoming the injustices of racism, in sum, requires both redistribution and recognition.

Neither alone will suffice” (22-23).

- Nancy Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*

“It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms” (46).

- Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”

The Guthrie Controversy Reveals Different Investments

A year after the heated and contentious controversy over the Guthrie’s announcement of their predominantly white, male-heavy 2012-2013 season, Artistic Director Joe Dowling confided in a Minnesota Monthly article that he did not comprehend the public outcry nor the critiques aimed at his institution:

“It doesn’t square. I never really understood what the root of all that was.

[...] I think what bruised me most was that we’ve been very supportive of a number of theaters in this community, whether it’s invitations in here—which we’ve done over and over again, subsidizing and developing relationships—or whether it’s the work that we do with those

companies—individual people in the theater going out and working with companies all around the Cities. Not one single member of the theater community said, *You know what, this is not true*. Not one.” (Tortorello)

Through this interview and other public statements Dowling made in the wake of the uproar, it became clear that he was confused, hurt, and angry. The lack of partnering companies coming to the Guthrie’s defense invoked a deep sense of betrayal. By his own admission, Dowling thought he and the company had invested responsibly in these relationships. They had opened up access to the new multi-million dollar Guthrie building, allowing other companies onto their stages. They had acknowledged culturally specific companies’ aesthetic excellence and cultural expertise (albeit in the broad language of “diversity”). They had marketed the work and had made it visible. They had stayed out of partners’ rehearsal rooms, protecting their cultural autonomy. They had presented multiple productions over a number of years, demonstrating an ongoing interest and commitment to companies like Mu and Penumbra. Dowling had personally curated more culturally and racially diverse programming than any Artistic Director in the Guthrie’s history. According to the logic of liberal humanist multiculturalism, he had done everything possible to achieve a diverse repertoire and partner with the local theater community. What more could he have done?

For their part, Mu Performing Arts and Penumbra stayed out of the public debate, commenting neither in support of nor attack against the Guthrie. Yet, out of the public eye they were taken aback by Dowling’s call for their allegiance. Rick Shiomi shared with me that “In that controversy the Guthrie wanted to claim us, but we were paying the

rent” (3 Mar. 2014). In a similar conversation following the outcry, Lou Bellamy remarked to me, “When I select the Guthrie’s season, I’ll defend it” (2 Jan. 2014). These disparate responses to the season debate offer a glimpse into the competing sets of values and expectations at work in and on these theatrical partnerships. Despite their differences, each of the companies saw their relationship as a contract in which value was exchanged, “investment” was made, and loyalty was “earned” (or not) through the lens of capital. But their divergent responses to the season controversy raise a number of questions: How do forms of value circulate and play out in these relationships? What material and immaterial assets are being exchanged, lost, or gained? How does each party think their investment in the relationship will accumulate and pay off? What are the implicit contracts at work here and how are they differently understood by each collaborating partner?

In alignment with the majority of literature in the field and the public discourse around these partnerships, my investigation thus far has focused primarily on the recognition arm of the radical multicultural agenda. In the previous chapters I have explored a number of aspects of these interventions: Penumbra’s aims to attain autonomous aesthetic and cultural control over African American cultural production, Mu’s contestation of Asian Americans assimilation under the moniker of the model minority and liberal humanist multiculturalism, and Native artists’ challenge of their invisibility in the public eye. I have examined the ways in which the liberal multicultural framework of visibility is both critically necessary and woefully inadequate for achieving the kinds of transformations that artists and companies of color hope to make in the field

of American theater. And I have illuminated how the aesthetic language of “good stories” presumes a universalism that obfuscates deeply differing dramaturgical values and expectations, ultimately perpetuating the inequities that post-racial and celebratory multicultural logics ignore.

In this chapter I turn my attention to the material conditions of the partnerships and the various forms of capital that hang in the balance. I propose that the redistributive goals of culturally specific work demand as much, if not more, attention than its goals of recognition. Thus, following Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis, I investigate here how economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital are inherently intertwined, how capital can be converted from one form to another through hidden transmissions, and how this combination of factors tends to reproduce inequalities in the distribution of capital in the field. Because my knowledge about the financial structures of Mu’s and Penumbra’s relationships with the Guthrie is far more extensive than my understanding of the economics of the Public’s Native Theater Initiative, I focus primarily on the former in this chapter.

The Forms of Capital

Bourdieu proposes that capital exists in numerous forms, and following Marx, that it acts as a social relation within a system of exchange. He introduced the idea of “cultural capital” in his text *The Inheritors* (co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron in 1979), spent of much of *Distinction* (1984) expounding upon and refining it, and later elucidated its numerous iterations in his 1986 essay “The Forms of Capital.” Cultural

capital denotes the non-financial attributes or assets one possesses that promote social mobility. In its embodied state it refers to habits of mind and body (such as accent, dress, and a muscular physique), in its objectified state it denotes cultural goods (like paintings or machines), and in its institutionalized state it is recognition bestowed by authoritative bodies (as evidenced in academic credentials or other awards). Cultural capital is closely linked to “symbolic capital,” the status, honor, and prestige that one accrues based on the possession of specific characteristics which are valued, recognized, and legitimated as preeminent within the given social order. With “economic capital” “position and power are determined by money and property, the capital one commands” (Liukkonen). Finally, “social capital,” according to Bourdieu, “is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to...membership in a group” (“Forms of Capital” 51). An individual’s (or institution’s) level of social capital “depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital...possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected” (51). Each of these types of capital operates within systems of domination and ideology, with those in greater possession of each having a distinct advantage in the ongoing struggle over resources.

In the theater, cultural capital is connected to the plays, canons, and artists that an institution can claim to have developed or perfected, the company’s specific aesthetics and embodied performance practices, and the awards they have garnered from authoritative bodies such as the Tonys, Obies, and Iveys. Traditionally, mainstream companies like the Guthrie that can lay claim to star performers and European and Euro-American dramatic canons have maintained a high degree of cultural capital. Yet

culturally specific companies also possess a unique and valuable kind of cultural capital in the field of contemporary American theater - namely the cultural authenticity, authority, and aesthetic expertise they claim for the African American and Asian American experience. Their cultural capital is connected to playwrights like August Wilson and David Henry Hwang, as well as the specific artistic methodologies they have developed and ensembles they have created.

Theater companies accrue symbolic capital as they become recognized as aesthetic leaders, gaining representational power through performances in their own spaces and their presence on national and global stages. Here again mainstream companies have historically held the upper hand, but companies like Mu and Penumbra have, in the past decade, built increasingly national reputations.

Economic capital in the non-profit professional theater refers to the bricks and mortar buildings that some companies possess, as well as the funding streams necessary for running an organization in the black – individual donors; corporate, foundation, and government funders; ticket sales; educational programming income; and ancillary product sales. Here the disparity between mainstream and culturally specific companies is still vast, with companies like the Guthrie operating with budgets of over 24 million, while Penumbra works with 10% of that figure, and Mu with 2.5%.⁵⁹ And while the Guthrie now owns and operates a multimillion dollar, multi-stage complex on the Mississippi riverfront, Penumbra runs a 260-seat theater in a community center in St. Paul, and Mu lacks a performance space of their own.

Finally, networks of social capital in the theater are generated and deepened through the development of volunteers, donors, patrons, subscribers, funders, artists, and artistic leaders – in other words, those who attend, donate, work for, and feel a sense of belonging to a particular theater company. Though each kind of company in these partnerships has their own networks of social capital, the distribution of wealth in this country along intersecting lines of class and race has meant that mainstream institutions have typically had access to much broader and deeper networks.

As the founding of the Guthrie so clearly demonstrates, each of these forms is inherently connected and propels the potential of the others. Tyrone Guthrie's reputation as a world famous director of the classics, as well as his original star-laden cadre of actors, served as symbolic and cultural capital that would promote the state's social mobility, in essence putting Minnesota on the national artistic map. Leveraging this fame, Guthrie and his co-founders were able to garner economic capital to secure a brand new theater facility for their "world class theater." To access funding from individuals, foundations, and government sources, the Guthrie team tapped into the social capital of local networks of wealth, while simultaneously creating their own networks of belonging through volunteer, patron, and donor membership circles. The result was symbolic capital for those members, whose prestige was elevated through their association with the new theater, as well as symbolic capital for the company, as it gained honor and recognition amongst the theatrical landscape. As a whole, this interlocking system of capital has helped the Guthrie maintain and grow its position of prominence and privilege since its inception.

Culturally specific companies like Penumbra, Mu, and those working with the Public's Native Theater Initiative arose out of markedly different sets of capital conditions. As I detailed in Chapter One, Penumbra was founded through a federal job-training grant alongside a host of social services in the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. August Wilson had not yet emerged to endow their endeavors with symbolic capital, and they simply could not compete with the level of fame of Guthrie or its early stars Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn. Robert Brustein's critique amidst his debates with August Wilson, that major regional theater companies were being forced to replace artistic criteria with sociological criteria in programming minority work, forgets that these companies' disparate beginnings were sociologically and racially influenced from the outset, and separated the kinds of financial and cultural capital the Guthrie, Penumbra, and Mu did and would continue to receive.⁶⁰ It is, I contend, the unequal distribution of capital both past and present that propels these contemporary theatrical partnerships. As August Wilson and Lou Bellamy have argued, if culturally specific theater companies were endowed with the same levels of economic capital and symbolic capital, with prominent stages and international name recognition, they would not need to collaborate with mainstream institutions to achieve their goals.

For mainstream institutions, these partnerships offer access to the cultural capital of culturally specific companies' ensembles and aesthetics as well as the potential for economic capital through grant opportunities and the development of individual donors. Thus, as each party enters into their relationships, they hope to gain access to the others' forms of capital, and they hope to see their investments in the partnerships pay dividends.

While culturally specific companies do garner certain material and immaterial benefits from these relationships, I argue that mainstream companies have more to gain and less to lose, a fact which places culturally specific companies in a precarious position. Ultimately, the degree to which mainstream companies' share of capital is more equitably redistributed depends on the racial logics operating in those institutions and their ability to acknowledge their advantage. Thus, despite the gains that culturally specific companies can make in and through these partnerships, continued and increased disparities in capital distribution remain a real danger.

As we return to the Guthrie season controversy and the different companies' reactions, it becomes clear that Dowling understood his investment in local culturally specific companies would pay off in the form of alliances and mutual support in the public eye. This trust and cooperation would be a result of new networks of social capital between the organizations, new circles of belonging in the field of American theater. Shiomi's and Bellamy's reactions, however, did not fulfill this expectation, and the reason was not immediately clear to him. I propose that we can begin to unravel the different expectations and investments by examining the logics underpinning their statements.

Economic Contracts and Expectations

Dowling's remark that the Guthrie had been "subsidizing" relationships with other companies, and Shiomi's comment that Mu was "paying rent," point to critical differences in the parties' understanding of their economic relationship. Who was taking

the economic risk? Who had the larger economic investment, and who would garner greater economic benefit? How was the economic relationship configured, and perhaps more importantly, how did each company perceive these configurations?

When the Guthrie opened their doors and the Dowling Studio space to outside companies, they entered new territory as a presenter. Unlike other venues with whom Mu had worked to present their productions (Mixed Blood Theatre, Intermedia Arts, or The Southern Theater, for example), the Guthrie had a limited track record of presenting and thus had to create contracts from scratch using calculated speculation. As such, they devised a boiler plate template and adjusted the specifications for each production that they presented, in negotiation with their partner companies' Managing Directors. While much of the contract remained the same for each of Mu's and each of Penumbra's productions, key differences evolved in the reconciliation and payment sections – in other words, the formula by which production revenue would be distributed between the companies. For certain productions, including Mu's first production at the Guthrie, *Circle Around the Island*, and some of Penumbra's productions, such as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the contract stipulated that each partner would receive 50% net gross box office receipts. From my conversations with staff at Mu and Penumbra, it seems that all parties were relatively satisfied with this division of income.

Differing interpretations arose, however, when this split was shifted. For subsequent Mu productions, for instance, the Guthrie ended up receiving a considerably larger share of the revenue – 71% for *Yellow Face*, 86% for *Cowboy Versus Samurai*, and 88% for *Yellow Fever*, according to my calculations (Guthrie Theater Foundation). This

was due to the fact that the Guthrie re-calibrated the split to pay Mu a certain initial fee, and then a percentage of the remaining income after the Guthrie had covered their own expenses. In some cases the Guthrie's expenses (as noted in the contract) were not completely repaid by ticket income. As such, Mu only received their initial minimal sum and the Guthrie walked away with a much larger share of the revenue, despite the fact that the larger company also took a loss. In these cases, Mu's Artistic Director Rick Shiomi and Managing Director Don Eitel were disappointed and frustrated with the altered revenue-sharing percentages, feeling like they were subsidizing the Guthrie with valuable artistic products (i.e. cultural capital) and taking the greater financial risk in mounting them (Eitel 1 May 2014, Shiomi 3 Mar. 2014). With Dowling's comment about subsidizing partner companies, we might deduce that he read the Guthrie's loss on these productions (i.e. not making back all of the expense they had put into the show) as a subsidy for Mu. And yet, had the Guthrie mounted their own work in the Studio space in lieu of Mu's production, their expenses would have been much greater. Shiomi and Eitel were aware of this fact, and could read this as Mu providing a subsidy for the Guthrie. Ultimately, each company read the same numbers in markedly different ways, depending on their expectations about their investments and dividends.

Economic Capital and the Potential for Reinvestment

Despite the very real tensions over ticket income distribution, each of the companies understood that one of the significant benefits of these partnerships had less to do with box office proceeds than the potential for new streams of income through access

to new social networks of capital. In other words, successful productions might bear dividends by allowing companies to extract further capital (vis-à-vis access to individual donors and corporate, government, and foundation funding sources) for reinvestment. Yet, the racial and capital asymmetries between companies have allowed the Guthrie to do so more effectively than their culturally specific partners.

On the one hand, gaining access to the Guthrie's larger social networks of capital is crucial for culturally specific companies, and the partnerships do, to some extent, enable that transfer. Mu acknowledges that they have earned greater economic capital due to the increase in symbolic capital they have garnered in being at the Guthrie. As Shiomi notes, this sense of honor and prestige transfers to Mu through their performances in the Dowling Studio. "The perception of the value of the company has changed. People who thought that five hundred dollars was a lot are now giving one thousand dollars annually. When we get good reviews and audience reactions at the Guthrie, we raise people's expectation of us" (3 Mar. 2014). Though the company has not necessarily altered anything about their work, donors and board members now perceive it as more valuable by virtue of being in that space and associated with the national recognition of the Guthrie. Mu's performance there signifies a level of aesthetic excellence that appeals to capital holders, and by their performance they gain access to this social, symbolic, and economic capital. On the other hand, as donors shift their perceptions of Mu, they also reify the Guthrie's position at the apex of aesthetic excellence and symbolic capital.

Furthermore, because the Guthrie has the upper hand in contract negotiations, and because their massive building provides space for them to advertise the partnerships to

the hundreds of thousands who pass through their lobby each year, their ability to leverage social capital is exponentially greater. Two incidents illuminate this difference. Shortly after attending the opening night of Penumbra's *The Amen Corner*, I received a phone call from the Guthrie, asking how I enjoyed the performance, and inquiring about a donation for the Guthrie based on my positive experience of the production. That both companies would try to cultivate donors based on ticket information lists from these productions was not a surprise, indeed it was written into the mutually agreed upon contracts. However, while the Guthrie would share the ticketing lists with Penumbra, the contract specifically stipulated that they would not include the names of any ticket buyers who were also Guthrie donors to Penumbra for follow-up. And yet I, as a Penumbra donor, was being contacted by the Guthrie. Though this act was not contractually prohibited, I was struck by the fact that the solicitation proceeded without any acknowledgment that the production on which they were basing their efforts was artistically not their own. The caller never attributed *The Amen Corner* to Penumbra.

This opaqueness in artistic attribution and the contractual inequality in donor sharing tends to reinforce disparities in individual giving between mainstream companies and culturally specific organizations. According to Michael Kaiser, the President of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, mainstream theaters receive the largest share of their income - sixty percent - from individual donors, while African American companies receive only six percent of their earnings through these channels. That gap seems to expand rather than narrow given these circumstances. Not incidentally, this pattern, along with the reality that culturally specific companies continue to receive the largest share of

their income from government funding sources (Kaiser), indicate that the initial disparities in economic capital between identity-based and mainstream theaters continue decades after the founding of both Penumbra and the Guthrie. Furthermore, when the Guthrie fails to credit Penumbra with the work of *The Amen Corner*, they undermine Penumbra's attempts to establish their autonomy and ownership of their cultural materials – not only in terms of cultural capital, but economic capital as well.

In a related incident, a large-scale photograph from Mu's *Circle Around the Island* appeared in the Guthrie's lobby shortly after the 2007 production under the heading "Partnerships." Like the photos of Wilson and Hansberry on the Guthrie's exterior, the *Circle* photo appears to mark the mainstream institution as a responsible steward of American theater and democratic inclusion. The accompanying text bolsters this reading. Speaking ostensibly to current and potential future Guthrie donors, the poster says "You enable collaborations between the Guthrie and other local theater groups and artists so that we may present the best of our community." Beneath these words, a quote from Rick Shiomi further strengthens this reading: "The Guthrie Theater has entered a new era where its relationships with smaller companies like Mu can be real and effective for both, working to fulfill its promise to become a true community leader." Here, the Asian American bodies pictured are referents to be taken as a sign of the Guthrie's racially diverse programming, and the accompanying text supports this reading. Both signify value in the economy of celebratory multiculturalism. However, as the Guthrie works to convert this cultural capital into economic capital, they do not necessarily deliver any of those financial rewards to Mu.

Moreover, the Guthrie prohibits their partner organizations from using their space to raise capital for their own organizations. As their contracts stipulate: “fundraising events for other organizations, along with fundraising printed materials, fundraising language in programs/playbills and curtain or lobby speeches...will not be permitted in the Guthrie building” (Guthrie Theater Foundation, Presentation Contract for Yellow Fever). So while the Guthrie can utilize their lobby space and bevy of phone bank workers to directly leverage their culturally specific partnerships, they do not offer the same opportunities to their collaborators. The lack of a permanent lobby in Mu’s case, and the small size of Mu’s and Penumbra’s development departments (1-3 people), mean that the ability of these companies to access new social and economic capital is considerably limited. Thus, in both of these cases contractual regulations perpetuate capital inequalities.

Building a Brand, a Building, a Monopoly

A critical aspect of the outcry over the Guthrie’s 2012-2013 season had to do with the fact that the Guthrie had literally banked on racial diversity as a part of their new mission and their new brand:

The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world. (“About the Guthrie”)

By triangulating diversity, state representation, and national presence in their mission, the Guthrie was able to leverage the promise of multicultural work in their new building to garner funding for their multimillion dollar three-stage complex. Thus, to a certain extent, it was the promise of racially diverse programming that helped to subsidize the new Guthrie building. This building, in turn, marks a tremendous win in the battle over economic capital – an asset that would allow the Guthrie to charge rent and control the means of theatrical production, as well as further promote their new brand of racial diversity all under one roof.

In a conversation about the company's fundraising efforts, a top Guthrie staff member with whom I spoke defended the income, saying “we fought for that money” (Scott). No doubt the Guthrie's administration, staff and board did invest significant time and labor to garner funding from myriad sources including the Minnesota State Legislature. However, this colorblind reasoning also assumes equal access to funding, and an equitable playing field in terms of cultural and economic capital in the American theater. What it overlooks is that companies like Penumbra fight as hard as the Guthrie, yet only receive a fraction of that funding, and that it is the Guthrie's cultural capital that makes their resultant income possible. Following Bourdieu, we can see how this is the dominant group's method of masking its dominance – by claiming its superiority as uninterested, un-economic, and natural. The notion that “We fought for that money” belies a post-racial logic that attributes financial reward solely to merit and hard work, rather than as a result of differing levels of cultural capital, which are themselves based on racial difference.

In “The Ground on Which I Stand,” August Wilson dedicated a significant portion of his remarks to critiquing the discrepancy in funding between regional theater companies and culturally specific organizations in the 1980s and 90s. His remarks were not simply a volley in the segregation versus integration debate; they were also profoundly attuned to disparities in economic capital, questioning who benefitted from the present distribution. He proclaimed:

Black theatre in America is alive, it is vibrant, it is vital...it just isn't funded. Black theatre doesn't share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists and supply them with meaningful avenues to develop their talent and broadcast and disseminate ideas crucial to its growth. The economics are reserved as privilege to the overwhelming abundance of institutions that preserve, promote, and perpetuate white culture [...] We need theatres... We need those misguided financial resources to be put to better use. (17, 33)

Wilson contended that black companies struggled financially, despite decades of honing culturally specific plays, aesthetics, and ensembles, while monies were funneled to already flush mainstream regional theatres to produce plays by artists of color or classics with colorblind casts through the diversity mandates of government and nonprofit foundations (Mahala 73). While funders may have seen this as an opportunity to diversify the repertoires of some of the country's major institutions to more accurately reflect the American populace, the result was financially rewarding companies who had no history of producing culturally specific material. Through his remarks in “Ground,” then, Wilson

attempted “to foster the development and funding of large African American theatres on a scale that would enable African American theatre artists to forge nationally recognized careers without needing to participate in the frequently patronizing system of regional theatre production” (Mahala 74). Unfortunately, his goal was not immediately realized nor has it been in the eighteen years since his speech. In the meantime, as Macelle Mahala notes, the Guthrie was able to raise \$125 million for their new building, while Penumbra was unable to complete an \$11 million dollar campaign for a new African American arts center in the late 1990s, demonstrating the ongoing disparity of arts economics within the Twin Cities (Mahala 77). While the Guthrie has been willing to open their doors to Penumbra, Mu, and other local companies who possess fewer resources than they do, the institution has been unwilling or unable to publicly acknowledge this imbalance of power.

In their relationships with the Guthrie, Mu and Penumbra are protective of their cultural materials and wary about pledging support, knowing that the potential dividends of their partnership are hedged against the potential risks. They are acutely aware that as the Guthrie brand grows, so too does their power to monopolize the field. Thus, despite the fact that they have been invited in to the Guthrie building again and again (as Dowling puts it), culturally specific companies still face a number of critical threats. The first is the threat of exclusion, as seemed to be the case initially in the 2012-2013 season announcement.⁶¹ As that controversy revealed, the Guthrie ultimately maintains the power to include or exclude any potential partner company as they see fit. The second is the threat of cultural appropriation, and the loss of control over rights to produce and

benefit economically and symbolically from African American or Asian American materials. In just the past few years the Guthrie received the rights to and substantial funding for Lynn Nottage's *Reading Play* (\$50,000 from the Joyce Foundations) and David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (\$20,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts according to Comb's article "Guthrie Theater's Debt"), repeating the critiques Wilson and Bellamy made nearly 20 years ago, and demonstrating how linked cultural and economic capital are. What might it have meant to fund *Penumbra* and *Mu* to produce those plays? How might that have benefitted culturally specific communities and infrastructures of black and Asian American artists, rather than benefitting a single playwright, and a white cultural institution? Finally, the third threat is the potential dissolution of culturally specific theater companies as mainstream companies like the Guthrie are rewarded for their racial diversity brand.

Utilizing their building and audience base as loci of power and cultural capital, the Guthrie is able to create a multicultural marketplace of performance within their walls. This approach is less concerned with deep cross-cultural engagement and more interested in drawing people into the building, a practice underscored by a senior Guthrie staffer's comments about the formation of their new home as a "destination":

That's certainly one of our goals with this building. If we have three shows on three stages, you can show up on a Friday evening and you can see one show, have lunch at a restaurant, take in a matinee, have dinner at a different restaurant and take in an evening show, and then catch a plane home on Sunday and had a weekend of theater and never left our building.

We haven't gotten there yet [...] we have to provide the fare. It doesn't work if we only have one show in one theater; it really needs to be enough to bring someone in for the weekend. (Scott)

If this vision becomes a reality, then out of town guests would find no need to explore the heterogeneous geography that comprises the Twin Cities, or venture into the African American neighborhood in St. Paul that houses the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center where Penumbra resides. This uni-directional geographic flow works against one of the key findings of Minnesota economists Ann Markusen and David King, who argue that “When arts venues are decentralized across cities and suburbs, it amplifies the panoply of distinct neighborhoods that draw people across traditional boundaries for entertainment and recreation and adds to the amenities of the region as a whole” (6).

Rather, in the Guthrie's model, difference can be viewed safely within the confines of the familiar – familiar that is for the upper middle and wealthy classes that can afford such a weekend. In the meantime, culturally specific companies languish. In “The Colonization of Black Theatre” Lou Bellamy speaks to this potential threat, citing the detrimental effects of white institutions “discovering” and displaying black work: “the debilitation and eventual impotence of black institutions;” and the dissipation of community solidarity that eventually leads to dependence on white institutions (588-589). One of the *Gem of the Ocean* cast members, a long-time artist with both Penumbra and the Guthrie seconds Bellamy's perspective here, noting the monopolistic Wal-Mart effect that such large institutions can have on the Twin Cities theater ecology:

It's troubling because if the larger community, the broader community begins to see the Guthrie as a space that can do all of our work and can speak to it with clarity and authenticity and high production value, then [they might ask] "Why do we need Theater Mu? Why do we need Teatro del Pueblo? Why do we need Penumbra Theatre? Why would we need culturally rich organizations that have our best interest in that preservation when we have the Guthrie to do it all?" (Rambo)

This threat becomes an ever-increasing possibility with a multi-stage complex that requires outside companies to perform there in order to keep the lights on and attract audiences. Not only culturally appealing to the Guthrie, it is an economic necessity. Moreover, if culturally specific companies want continued access to these resources, they are propelled to agree to work with the Guthrie for better or worse – the promise of increased cultural and symbolic capital outweighing the lack of immediate financial benefit or any direct shifts in the balance of economic power.

As Dowling's subsidy comment reveals, the Guthrie perceives themselves as a kind of patron/philanthropist, sharing their building (which they feel they have earned through their own hard work), and their funds in support of and responsibility to the community. As a return on this investment, they expect gratitude, support, and alliance from their partner companies, and recognition from the mainstream for the culturally specific work that they have presented. They aim to be recognized as responsible stewards of racial and cultural diversity. However, as Paulo Freire observes,

In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity,”...That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. (44-45)

Culturally specific companies like Penumbra and Mu do not seek this kind of generosity; they want to see a transformation in the distribution of funding. This is, I suspect, one of the critical reasons why Mu and Penumbra have publicly withheld their support for the Guthrie during the season controversy.

As a different model, the Public’s Native Theater Initiative begins with an understanding about and a desire to address the inequities in capital distribution. In a statement prior to the first Native Theater Festival, Oskar Eustis proclaimed, “There are extraordinary artists, talent and vision in the Native Theater community, a community that often doesn't receive the recognition or institutional support it deserves. We hope this festival is a small step in the continuing process of changing that” (Hetrick). What might this kind of awareness herald for the future of these cross-cultural partnerships and the survival and flourishing of culturally specific theater? How can this self-reflexivity about historical and ongoing asymmetries in capital translate into more equitable relationships? Only when these dynamics begin to shift, and only when these fundamental disparities in capital are acknowledged and addressed might the aims of radical, anti-racist theater in a “post-racial” era be truly realized.

Conclusion

As Penumbra Theatre Company's production of *The Mountaintop* played on the Guthrie's proscenium stage in the spring of 2014, alongside two other productions featuring black actors and directors, a Star Tribune article heralded the moment as a "reversal of fortune" (Preston, "Black Playwrights"). Citing the public censure of the Guthrie following their predominantly white 2012-2013 mainstage season, the article lauded the company for breaking their status quo and presenting three simultaneous productions showcasing the award-winning talent of artists of color. The author, Rohan Preston, characterized this uptick in racial inclusion at Minnesota's flagship regional theater and other companies across the Twin Cities as a "bounty of diversity." Comprising this bounty at the Guthrie, Penumbra's production of Katori Hall's intimate imagining of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last night on earth, local African American playwright Carlyle Brown's new one-act *Abe Lincoln and Uncle Tom in the White House*, and Shakespeare's *Othello*. Elsewhere throughout Minneapolis and St. Paul, stagings of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and a multiracial casting of *Our Town* rounded out the acclaimed "diversity." The article revealed both amusement and skepticism at this change in programming, the former arising from the confusion of Guthrie ushers who no longer knew where to direct African American patrons, and the latter through interviews with local black theater leaders who pointed to the limited time and scope of this "bounty" of inclusion. Yet the article never considers the content of these representations, the plays' disparate philosophical underpinnings, the productions' material ramifications, or the personal and political impacts they might have on public perceptions of race. Under a

celebratory multicultural logic, inclusion and the employment of artists of color is here taken as the end-game, and is problematically elided with the achievement of racial equality.

Attesting to the false equation between momentary inclusion and racial justice, and demonstrating the need for ongoing activism towards racial equity, a new theaters of color coalition emerged at the same time that these productions played out on mainstream stages across the Twin Cities. The coalition's debut reveals ongoing disparities within the racial landscape of the field, both locally and nationally. Thus, as they come together, Penumbra Theater Company, Mu Performing Arts, New Native Theatre, Teatro del Pueblo, and Pangea World Theater aim to provoke the larger questions that celebrations of racial inclusion fail to ask. Working in solidarity, these companies hope to generate productive dialogue about issues of racism and racial representation, and to advocate for the culturally specific stewardship of theater projects. Distinguishing between the vast array of possible racial representations (and implicitly addressing those that the Star Tribune article amasses as a collective), Sarah Bellamy notes,

There's a difference between black theater, and plays with black people in them... One has a social justice imperative that deals directly with the community. The other uses those people -- or representatives of that community -- in ways that are not necessarily beneficial to that community. It's really important that people of color are consulted about the ways in which our cultures are being represented on American stages [...] The stakes are too high right now. Any... misrepresentation or mis-

characterization of who we are has so much leverage in this very vitriolic impassioned environment where we're... grappling with our national history, and we're doing so quite poorly. (Combs, "New Theater Coalition")

Her comments, spoken on behalf of the new coalition, illuminate the consequences of racial representation in a supposedly post-racial age, and speak to the critical need for culturally specific input, leadership, and ongoing dialogue.

It is my hope that this dissertation aids in that necessary conversation, opening up critical questions about the persistence of racial injustice in the theater, and broadening the dialogue to include the conditions that make inequity possible, and the ideologies and material realities that need to shift in order to make real and lasting transformations in the field. Despite the moral and public pressure for racial inclusion, and despite the fact that more "good stories" are now visible and recognizable in the mainstream, we have not achieved a post-racial utopia. Indeed, the very terms of cross-cultural engagement under post-racialism circumscribe what is possible and perpetuate inequity. The critiques that Lou Bellamy and August Wilson leveled in the mid-1990s about the unequal distribution of funds in the theater community are still unanswered, and as such Penumbra has experienced more than one significant financial threat in the past few years, resulting in staff layoffs and a drastic reduction in mainstage artistic programming. Mu's financial base has remained slightly more stable, yet the company is limited in their capacity to grow, and struggles to fulfill all of their programming obligations with only two full time and a few part time staff members. And for Native American theater artists, partnerships

with mainstream institutions like the Public remain one of few outlets for producing work on a large scale, given the shortage of companies specifically dedicated to Native theater. As these examples demonstrate, racial equity is still a far off goal, and post-racialism and celebratory multiculturalism obfuscate the work that remains to be done.

My project attempts to re-frame the dialogue about cross-cultural collaborations, clarifying the field in order to move closer to the goals of social and racial justice. I have offered a theoretical analysis that examines the specificity of singular partnerships between mainstream and culturally specific theaters, as well as the broader logics, pressures, and tensions that continue to limit their potential. I have investigated the specific racial legacies that condition each group's legibility and shape their resistant strategies in the present, and I have articulated how the liberal humanist discourse of visibility is both necessary to contest erasure and how it hinders the transformative goals of culturally specific theater. I have teased out the problematic assumptions of universal similarity and colorblind meritocracy in the rhetoric of "good stories," and I have revealed the insidious ways in which economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital can feed one another, perpetuating asymmetries in the field. If we truly want to make an intervention in the theater landscape, I argue that we have to grapple with these material realities and trouble these modes of intelligibility.

The future of these theatrical collaborations is not yet clear, and holds danger as well as possibility. In the coming year, the Guthrie will hand over artistic leadership to a new individual and potentially shift the direction of the institution. What new dynamics will this change bring to their cultural collaborations and the programming of their own

seasons? At the Public, how long will it take to rebuild the trust of partnership forged in the Native Theater Initiative? How might their critical missteps with *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* serve as a lesson not to be repeated? What other partners will Mu find to support their mission in the way their artists and audiences need? And how will Penumbra move forward in their relationship with the Guthrie, as questions and critiques from nearly two decades ago persist? As the answers to these questions unfold, it is critical that those from within and without continue to question the configurations of the relationships between institutions. As a scholar/practitioner eager to see culturally specific theaters not only survive but thrive, I believe this process is a necessary step in garnering their autonomous representation in the public sphere and advancing the cause of racial justice and equity in the field.

Notes

¹ When speaking about theater companies in this project, I use the plural pronoun to point to the complex and collective structure of the institutions. Though each institution is headed by a singular Artistic Director whose vision and politics greatly influence the organization, each is comprised of multiple artists, administrators, and educators with heterogeneous perspectives.

² I use *cross-cultural* here and throughout as one of many possible options. Dr. Harry Elam, Jr., in his work, often employs the term *multicultural*, which I also deploy, while others might choose *intercultural* (insofar as an interchange occurs between two companies that purport different cultural foci). The choice of *cross-cultural* is not meant to indicate a binary, but rather an active and complex encounter between differently positioned artists and companies.

³ I use the term *culturally specific theater* somewhat interchangeably with other terms that some practitioners and scholars prefer such as *culturally informed theater*, *minority theater*, or *theaters of color*. In utilizing the term *culturally specific theater* I do not mean to insinuate that “mainstream” theaters are devoid of culture or cultural specificity, rather it serves as a way of distinguishing between two broad groups: minority theater companies and artists that define and describe themselves, in part, based on cultural identity, and mainstream theaters whose cultural identity is not usually made immanently visible within their self-description. By *mainstream* theaters, I refer to the majority of professional theaters in the US that appear race-neutral, but that are in fact grounded in white European and Euro-American canons and run primarily by white artistic and/or administrative leaders. In my particular study, mainstream also denotes a larger institutional size, as the Guthrie and Public operate with budgets in the tens of millions. While the Guthrie fits all of these criteria, in alignment with many regional theaters across the country, The Public Theater is differently situated in that they have more actively and self-reflexively engaged with issues of race than other companies of their size and stature. Also, in terms of audiences, the mainstream is a markedly white, economically privileged theatre-going population. I work to tease out these distinctions in my research.

⁴ It should be noted that the Guthrie had not produced any work by either of these playwrights prior to their appearance on the new building in 2006. The only August Wilson piece that had been staged at the Guthrie before this was Penumbra’s production of *Fences* in 1997. When Penumbra staged *A Raisin in the Sun* there in 2009, it was the first time Hansberry’s work had appeared on a Guthrie stage.

⁵ In this, the Guthrie’s racial policies and politics are in alignment with regional theater companies’ practices across the country.

⁶ I use the term *tactics* throughout this project as it has been defined by Michel De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and as a concept which he differentiates from *strategies*. He notes, “Strategies...conceal beneath objective calculations their connection with the power that sustains them from within the stronghold of (their) own “proper” place or institution” (xx). They are able to “produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces” (30). If *strategies* are the calculated actions used by those with power to perpetuate their ideologies and cultural capital, then *tactics* are the responsive actions used by those without power, within spaces they neither created nor control. *Tactics*, De Certeau claims, are a “maneuver within the enemy’s field of vision,” (37) and serve to “use, manipulate, and divert” the spaces and intentions of those with power (30).

⁷ Yoshino uses the term coined by sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1963 book *Stigma*. Goffman distinguished covering from passing by noting that “passing pertains to the *visibility* of a particular trait, while covering pertains to its *obtrusiveness*” (Covering 18).

⁸ Each culturally specific company and field understands this logic in a unique way which I will tease out further in Chapter One and throughout the dissertation.

⁹ Liberal humanism influences the thought of both kinds of companies for better or worse. This logic bears a long and complicated genealogy, and was born out of 17th century Enlightenment thinking that proposed universality and commonality despite the fact that it was predicated on the differences between the races and sexes.

¹⁰ Because tenets of celebratory multiculturalism and post-racialism demand a façade of harmonious relations in these partnerships, conflicts most often emerged and played out in other spaces – in private conversations backstage, over coffee post-rehearsal, or on the phone; through print and online media sources; and in formal speeches or published articles. At the Guthrie this was especially salient, and I never observed direct confrontations between members of partnering organizations. At the Public a notable exception occurred with the controversy over their production of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, when they invited Native artists to participate in face to face dialogues with company staff and the show’s creators. Due to this lack of friction within the rehearsal rooms and performances themselves, my observational ethnographic notes ended up playing a lesser role in my writing than my textual analysis and formal interviews.

¹¹ I use the term Ojibwe because this was the name passed down to me within my family line. Other names for this tribal group include Chippewa (another European pronunciation), and Anishinaabe, meaning “the original people.”

¹² See Guilfoyle, Guthrie, Levy, Morison and Fliehr, and Whiting.

¹³ Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye Darby’s anthologies *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader* (2000) and *American Indian Performing Arts: Critical Directions* (2010) advance these purposes, as does Errol Hill and James Hatch’s *A History of African American Theatre* (2003), Macelle Mahala’s *Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama* (2013), Josephine Lee’s *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (1997), and Esther Kim Lee’s *A History of Asian American Theatre* (2006).

¹⁴ Alvin Eng’s *Tokens? : The NYC Asian American Experience on Stage* (1999) and various contributions to Roberto Uno and Lucy Burns’ anthology *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance* (2002) are a few of many examples of this documentary project.

¹⁵ See Preston, “Onstage”; Romero Wilson and Bellamy; Scott; and Skinner.

¹⁶ See Guilfoyle, Guthrie, Levy, Morison and Fliehr, and Whiting.

¹⁷ See Berkowitz, Zeigler.

¹⁸ 1960 census data indicates that there were only 40,000 African Americans in Minnesota at that time. I am uncertain about the source from which Hill and Hatch derive their estimate of 60,000.

¹⁹ Though I was able to speak with various staff members at the Guthrie throughout my research, Joe Dowling did not respond to my requests for an interview. As such, I have shaped these histories from the perspectives of those Guthrie staffers I did speak with, and through my conversations with Lou Bellamy, Chris Widdess, and other key staff at Penumbra, as well as Rick Shiomi, Randy Reyes, Don Eitel, and other key staff at Mu Performing Arts.

²⁰ I cite Jackson here as one example of what many Penumbra Theatre Company members articulated in their in-depth interviews that were conducted as a part of the company’s Wilson Lab Oral History archiving project. These interviews will be made available at a future date through the Givens Collection of African American Literature at the Elmer L. Andersen Library at the University of Minnesota, along with all of Penumbra’s papers.

²¹ Josephine Lee presents a detailed picture of the influence of Asian American stereotyped and yellowface characters such as Ah Sin (“a wily and unredeemable “foreign” figure who spoke in gibberish” (10)), Fu Manchu (“the yellow peril incarnate in one man” (10)), and Charlie Chan (“a self-effacing, polite, “domesticated” Asian who speaks in broken English despite his native-born status” (11)) in the first chapter of her book *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*.

²² The company began as Theater Mu in 1992. In 1997, Shiomi trained a few eager students in the Japanese taiko drumming form, and soon after the Mu Daiko drumming ensemble was born. Over the next decade, taiko activities gained increasing revenue, booking, and visibility for the organization. As such, the company changed their name to Mu Performing Arts in the early 2000s to better reflect taiko’s significance to the institution.

²³ Shiomi comments that now with the large numbers of Korean adoptees returning to Korea, either for visits, short stays, or full-fledged permanent moves, their presence and organizing efforts are changing the way that the Korean people and government are seeing them.

²⁴ Shiomi and Johnson note that Korean mask dance was only one of the traditional Asian performance forms that Mu incorporated in their early years. Others included Korean drumming, traditional Chinese music and dance, classical Laotian dance and music, and classical Cambodian music, to name a few. They further clarify that sometimes, but not always, their hybrid aesthetic involved traditional Asian myth or folktale elements. They comment that “We took up this combination of elements because we knew there were traditional performing artists in the Twin Cities who we wanted to involve in theater, too, because they are immigrants and we wanted to include their stories. We believed that combining powerful traditional performance with personal storytelling was a really compelling artistic approach. Contemporary personal narrative was key to these early performances, rather than merely folk tales. Signature pieces of the non-folk tale type were *Song of the Pipa*, *River of Dreams*, and *Mask Dance*. Those that had a similar approach, but included folk tale were *The Walleye Kid*, *Legend of the White Snake Lady*, *The Tale of the Dancing Crane*, and others. Even these plays had very strong contemporary Asian American spins to them. This was key for us. Many of these personal narratives were deeply troubling and difficult to hear, while others were poetic or humorous” (23 Aug. 2014).

²⁵ Shiomi and Johnson recall that the impetus for creating plays about Korean adoption came from their co-founder Dong-Il Lee. In comments to me on 23 Aug. 2014, Johnson notes: “It started with him working with Korean adoptees at camps [in Minnesota] and seeing them from his viewpoint. As a Korean theater artist and PhD student, and one who knew Korean mask dance, he got the powerful idea to link Korean mask dance with Korean adoption. He was a deep believer in the power of Mask dance to heal... This was all linked to coming up with the name “Mu.””

²⁶ I use this term with a sense of ownership, being white and a lifelong Minnesotan.

²⁷ See Abler, Adams, and Borchert; Baldinger; and Orum.

²⁸ Shiomi credits McKnight Program Officer Neal Cuthbert with having a clear vision of the company’s potential, and Mu received their initial funding based on his recommendation.

²⁹ The Guthrie was producing one of the plays that required Asian American actors in the spring of 2010. Though they didn’t use any instances of yellow face in the production, it would have been logical to send a representative of the company to the forum to articulate the Guthrie’s point of view on the situation or audit the conversation. Their absence indicates a sense of being above the political fray, a lack of awareness of the stakes of the conversation, and/or a fear of what might emerge in the dialogue and how it might impact their institution.

³⁰ The self-deprecating humor in Hwang’s work seems to be a tactic the playwright feels a need to use with/for a mainstream audience in order to garner their identification.

³¹ I will explore the term “economic capital” further in Chapter 4.

³² These numbers vary depending on the sources. I took my numbers from listings from the Asian American Theatre Conference 2008 Final Report and the New England Entertainment Digest <http://www.jacneed.com/African_American_Theatre.html>.

³³ It is worth noting that both of these companies have had ongoing relationships with the Public Theater prior to, during, and after the two Native Theater Festivals in 2007 and 2008.

³⁴ This phrasing was coined by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the first Boarding School, Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, established in 1879.

³⁵ In other words, according to Theatre Communications Groups statistics, the Public is unique amongst the few non-profit professional U.S. theater companies with operating budgets of over \$10 million.

³⁶ The term *white* is potentially problematic in that it belies the heterogeneity within this racial designation, as well as its fluidity across the past four centuries of American history. Ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, political and aesthetic sensibilities, and intra-racial hierarchies are all elided under this term. Yet, despite these nuanced differences, white people, especially white men are the beneficiaries of privilege within the U.S.’s racialized societal structures. Thus, I use the term *white* throughout to point to power differentials between majority and minority populations, companies, audiences, and artists.

³⁷ According to U.S. Census data, the “white” population of New York City remained at 90% until 1950, when it started slowly shifting to become more racially diverse (“Table 33. New York”).

³⁸ Oskar Eustis and Betsy Theobald Richards held a similar, but smaller scale convening when he headed Trinity Repertory Theater in Rhode Island and she was at the Pequot Museum in 2001. In 1996, Randy

Reinholz and Jean Bruce Scott, then at Illinois State University, gathered Native playwrights and artists together for a Native Voices staged reading series. This eventually led to their founding of Native Voices at the Autry a few years later. To my knowledge, other than these instances, there have not been major convenings of the field as a whole.

³⁹ Though ½ Indian blood was required to receive land under the Allotment Act, tribes could set their own standards for inclusion in enrollment. As such, they differ for different nations, but according to the American Indian Policy Center, “One-fourth degree blood quantum of the particular tribe in question is a nearly universal requirement. Almost all constitutions prevent people from being enrolled in more than one tribe, regardless of their actual blood quantum. These provisions inherently lead to problems of fractional heritage.” <<http://www.americanindianpolicycenter.org/pubs/enroll.html> >

⁴⁰ Indeed, as debates around Hawaiian sovereignty and the Akaka Bill suggest, the question of whether indigenous Hawaiians *want* to be considered Native Americans and/or U.S. citizens is ongoing and contentious, and many still see the U.S. government as an imperial occupier of their native land. Who is included in the designation, Native American, then, is an ongoing point of contention, and opens up another host of questions.

⁴¹ See *The Cunning of Recognition* by Povinelli, *Redistribution or Recognition* by Fraser, and *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* by Oliver

⁴² In conversations with Lou Bellamy and Sarah Bellamy, both expressed concerns that despite the changes that Penumbra was able to catalyze in the Guthrie’s spaces, the institutional culture and audience experience shifted back to dominant celebratory multicultural models as soon as Penumbra left the building.

⁴³ See especially the work of Paul Lyons, Susan Najita, and Christopher Balme.

⁴⁴ I will explore the various forms of capital further in Chapter Four.

⁴⁵ It also raised the question of whether or not “support” extended beyond the black box Studio space, into their partner organization’s other mission-driven activities within their walls. For instance, though the Guthrie made their building available for the Asian American theater community’s second national conference in 2008, and though Joe Dowling indicated that hearing the voices and stories of Asian Americans was important to him and the company in his opening remarks, there was only one Guthrie staffer registered on the conference attendance list of over 150.

⁴⁶ It should be noted that under the new Director of Studio Programming, Lauren Ignaut, the Studio is changing its policies and procedures towards more flexible accommodations of visiting companies, and thinking deeply about the ways in which form and content speak to each other and audiences, as well as ways that can be supported within the space. In my conversation with Ignaut on 21 May 2014, she spoke of finding ways to lift the walls of the black box, creating a flow into the 9th floor lobby for one particular production, and other such examples. Though change moves slowly in an institution of the Guthrie’s size, Ignaut is pushing to make sure it happens, and that the space can offer companies the support they seek.

⁴⁷ See Gleason, “Ma Rainey Plays the Guthrie;” Huyck, “Ma Rainey;” Papatola, “Ragged Edges;” Preus, “Ma Rainey’s;” Richason, “Ma Rainey Sings;” Sparber, “Bad Luck Blues;” and Zabel, “Penumbra Theatre Company’s Ma Rainey.”

⁴⁸ The only other Twin Cities’ company to produce her work was Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis with a 2009 staging of the Pulitzer Prize winning play *Ruined*.

⁴⁹ I am speculating here, as I was unable to speak with anyone at the Guthrie on this matter. Though I submitted multiple requests for an interview with Joe Dowling, my queries were never answered. The people I did speak with at the Guthrie did not comment on this conflict.

⁵⁰ See Lou Bellamy, Address at First Rehearsal; Papatola, “Spiritual Bond;” Playbill for *Gem 21*; Preston, “Onstage;” Romero Wilson and Bellamy; and Skinner.

⁵¹ To offer just a few examples, the famous Euro-American actor Edwin Forrest commissioned and starred in the 1829 play *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* by John Augustus Stone, popularizing the ‘vanishing Indian’ and ‘noble savage’ tropes. Emerging in the mid-1800s, blackface characters such as Tambo, Bones, and Jim Dandy allowed whites (especially Irish and Jewish immigrants) to criticize the government, women, and the upper classes, all while insinuating that black Americans were content and happy under slavery (Hill and Hatch 95-97). Finally, as earlier noted, Josephine Lee presents a detailed

picture of the influence of Asian American stereotyped and yellowface characters in the first chapter of her book *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*.

⁵² I need to mark that there is an entire body of literature critiquing the operation of empathy, especially in regards to cross-cultural encounter and engagement. Lauren Berlant, Saidiya Hartman, Patrick Anderson and others challenge the way that empathy, sympathy, recognition, and power are problematically conflated under liberal humanism. They illuminate how liberal or dominant understandings of empathy can be used to justify and underwrite oppression, and thus question empathy's capacity to enact radical social change.

⁵³ Bourdieu's study is primarily concerned with class, and while my investigation gives more weight to race, his premise is, I would argue, applicable in this situation. I do not mean to elide these factors in my analysis, given the different historical, geographical, and cultural context of each of our studies, and yet race and class intersect in important ways in these partnerships between mainstream and culturally specific companies.

⁵⁴ These were responses to Graydon Royce's *Star Tribune* article, "Guthrie's 2012 Lineup Starts Diversity Debate."

⁵⁵ From Vickie Ramirez's letter to the Native Theater Listserv: "Alex and Michael were clearly surprised at the factual errors they did make and were willing to concede that correcting some would not change the point of view of the show. They also didn't seem to object at the idea of the fact sheet. Or at least they didn't object in person. [...] I should say, Alex and Michael have been nothing but approachable about this and we did appreciate their generosity in sitting and having this discussion with us."

⁵⁶ For more on "hipster racism" see Catherine Squires' astute analysis on pages 9-11 of *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media & Race in the Twenty-First Century*.

⁵⁷ Frankel and Hackett's letter reads: "We realize that many people are having very strong reactions to *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* as well as questions about The Public's ongoing commitment to Native theater. Our work with Native artists is very important to us. We hope that we can continue to be in dialogue with you about your concerns. We welcome the chance to talk further with you about it. You can address any questions or concerns directly to us and our contact information is below."

⁵⁸ Ironically, as Patrick Healy notes, the financial draw for the Public was the reason the show ended on Broadway. "The show, an emo-flavored musical that portrays Andrew Jackson as the nation's first celebrity president, had critically acclaimed runs at the Public Theater in the spring of 2009 and 2010. Those productions did not consistently sell out but the musical moved to the larger Jacobs Theater on Broadway this fall because the Public and the co-producers Jeffrey Richards and Jerry Frankel believed that a broader audience would ultimately embrace "Bloody" as the critics had. Still, the Public was unable to persuade enough investors to cover its half of the \$4.5 million capitalization for Broadway, forcing Mr. Richards and Mr. Frankel to step in with more money."

⁵⁹ These figures are from the 2007-2008 seasons of each company. The Guthrie reported an annual operating budget of over \$24,000,000 that year, while Penumbra's was \$2,248,158.

⁶⁰ For an in-depth analysis on this topic, see Mahala 6-7.

⁶¹ As I mentioned earlier, Mu's production of *Yellow Fever* in the Dowling Studio was a part of the Guthrie's overall programming for that year. It was not considered a part of the company's season, however. Penumbra did not end up partnering with the Guthrie that year, though they did mount their production of *The Mountaintop* in the McGuire Proscenium stage in the 2013-2014 season.

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