

The Great White Way: The Theater Industry's Inability to Communicate BIPOC

Stories

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The Broadway theater industry holds promise and potential for a robust community of diverse stories and peoples, but the reality favors the white individual and the accumulation of profit for the white-dominated population of creatives at large. This research examines Broadway records of the last twenty years to analyze casting of BIPOC actors, the number of BIPOC production team members, the shows produced each year, and the weight of BIPOC character tracks within each production, along with a case study of Slave Play – the antithesis of a typical Broadway success. The conclusion is made that wide disparities of race and ethnicity are present in the Broadway space, leaving mass potential for discrimination, abuse, racism, unequal pay, and racial stereotyping. Suggestions are made for increased visibility and diversity onstage, all reliant on transformative action to guarantee a safe and representative environment for BIPOC peoples.

The theater industry contains an entertaining assortment of stories and musical numbers that culminates into the single-most commercial theater experience: Broadway. Broadway, a collective of theaters and organizations located in Manhattan, is the highest level of American theatrical pursuits, grossing \$1.83 billion in its 2018-19 season with attendance exceeding fourteen million theatergoers (The Broadway League, 2020). The success of Broadway shows and theater endeavors could be largely due to the affluent white audience that makes up 75% of all ticket sales (Tran, 2019), or this white-majority population merely reflects the work being produced and showcased on the Broadway stage. BIPOC shows, or ones that center around Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) characters in an authentic storytelling experience, do not frequently grace the Broadway stage, but how can an industry that utilizes storytelling of individuals and communities exclude most of the population?

This research focuses on the role representation plays in theater of BIPOC persons and characters, specifically regarding their character track, of one existing to serve as secondary vehicles for the main characters to reach their goal, perpetuating an absence in the centering BIPOC storylines. This correlates to human rights as these portrayals often revolve around discriminatory patterns and racial caricatures who engage in violent or erratic behaviors that prohibit authentic portrayals and safe environments for BIPOC individuals, thus preserving spaces of discrimination. From this, I will be using meta-analysis of various sources accounting for the evolution of these BIPOC characters on the Broadway stage and a case study of *Slave Play* to culminate a conversation of race as seen on-stage, and the journey of how the antithesis of a typical white-centric production achieved Broadway success. This will also focus a light on racial erasure onstage resulting from little authentic representation, and how contemporary theater works centering BIPOC characters, specifically gaining ground following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, are gaining attention for their presence and new command of the commercial theater scene, as opposed to past patterns of gatekeeping and silencing.

Literature Review

The global theater industry is known as the business of commercially produced and performed theater, but this research specifically focuses on the U.S. case of Broadway. This industry collective includes working actors, designers, directors, producers, choreographers, composers, lyricists, writers, technicians, crew members, theater owners, front of house staff, and theatergoers; however, for this research, attention will be placed on each Broadway production's original cast members, production team, and script or libretto.

The theatrical community creates a diverse, creative space encompassing talent, drive, and storytelling with a wealth of experience and possibility to boast artistically and commercially; however, a prodigious cycle of prioritizing the story and work of white creatives continues, leaving an unequivocal absence of authentic representation of BIPOC in story and persons, specifically on the Broadway stage. This targeted dereliction confirms a falsehood that white persons are more qualified for a voice on the highest commercial theater stage, while BIPOC persons employ roles of secondary or subservient nature to their white leads, perpetuating a structure of racial inequity and prejudice, and increasing the likelihood of abuse.

The term BIPOC embodies Black people, Indigenous peoples, and people of color (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This additional specificity of *Black* and *Indigenous* is significant in context as this marks

an unequivocal experience in the contemporary cultural relations, violence, racism, and discrimination. While all people of color (POC) live a vastly different experience to the collective white experience, this specificity is vital to this conversation in American theater, as *Black* and *Indigenous* people hold a critical role in the development and shaping of American history and culture within colonial structure (Dei, 2018, p. 119).

Threat of Discrimination Due to Inadequate Representation

A *racial stereotype* is understood as the generalization of a race into a monolithic role or limited capacity by the racial majority, subverting people and characters of this race into singular tropes or identities, incapable of accessing full range of potential. Racial stereotypes are frequently harmful or derogatory, often leading to a justification of violence, abuse, dehumanization, and discrimination (Manderson, 2018). *Representation* is the visual or communicative reaffirming of one's humanity and lived experience through a demonstration of authentic personhood with accuracy and legitimacy. In order to combat racial stereotyping, accurate and diverse representation must exist to emphasize the complexity and uniqueness of peoples and races. *Social representation* is a substratum of images, assumptions, and public meanings that are taken for granted and widely distributed leading to a structure and coherence to the world through a shared language that helps individuals make more sense of their past, present, and future (Fryberg et al., 2008, p. 210).

The cognitive pervasion of racial stereotypes within media centers, marketing, and subliminal messaging has crafted a disillusion of reality that emphasizes a narrow path or range of possibility for any race other than the American white majority controlling the narrative. Within this, American culture has created a narrative that American history and popular cultural artifacts are exclusively white, with very little space devoted to racial and ethnic minorities in the cultural canon (Erigha, 2015, p. 78).

According to "Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: The Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots,"

Social representations are the building blocks from which the self is constructed. They provide the structure and the language that people utilize to answer the "who am I" and the "who are we" questions. They also communicate who and what matters in society and what is likely or possible for particular groups by simultaneously providing descriptive and evaluative information. Thus, shared social representations provide a constituting framework for identity. (Fryberg et al., 2008, 210)

The created inescapable exactitude of success or potential diminishes the capacity of the human spirit, garnering those of a certain race as not as capable as those within another race of greater

perceived capability, learned and seen through representative accessibility and affirmation. Within these structures and stories that disproportionately portray authentic lives of white characters and persons as holistic (and present all other encounters with non-white persons as monolithic), the accessibility of non-white persons becomes minute, guaranteeing that a structure of white-centric dominance remains engrained into all imagery of human interaction. Inaccessibility to full humanity assurance and celebration through the negative influence of uninformed and derogatory racial stereotypes is well-documented as a major source and justification for violence against these stigmatized groups (Beaudoin, 2008, p. 146).

The narrow-conditioned perception of individuals within these largely stereotyped racial and ethnic groups proposes a devaluation of their humanity, and instead inserts a hypothesis for possible threat or unfavorable interaction, therefore enforcing a narrative of 'othering' that encourages and allows discrimination and racist behavior (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019, p. 375). This pervasive imagery scours to a degree of inability to unlearn and correct biases or learned stereotypes, rendering anti-discrimination policies well-intentioned but virtually useless (Beaudoin, 2008, p. 145).

Theatrical Historic Manipulation of the BIPOC Body & Person

Theatrical character development and portrayal of BIPOC characters hold a significant role in the dehumanization and prominence of racial caricatures that critically visually narrate a social structure of patterned racism and destructive violence. Through the development of theater and theatrical performances in Ancient Greece, the theater became a generative vehicle to communicate the necessary vision of the cultural moment (Young, 2013). From the Victorian period (the late 1600s - 1850s), the contextual portrayal of the Black character via Victorian plays charts the development of racial bias and assumption throughout theater history, hypothesizing that enslavement, through direct implementation and the fight against it, shaped the narrative of Black persons in accessible forms of entertainment, specifically in theater, as it is a mode of cultural commodity available to every class to showcase present constructing racial attitudes in society (Waters, 2007). This era defines racial prejudice by the evolution of the Black character from a noble savage to a comical servant, singularly noting that the Black character is not one of affluence, power, grace, prestige, or complexity, especially in comparison to the white leading characters.

During the period from Reconstruction to World War I, a time when many Black artists were rendered invisible, the fame and achievements of "Black poet laureate" Paul Laurence Dunbar and his depiction of varying characters based upon the lives of Black persons contributed to a humanizing,

authentic portrayal of Black people, which led to some of the first notable mainstream accounts of representation amongst Black people in America (Daigle, 2009). This progression of Black identity, created by successful Black individuals and artists, spurred a prosperous movement of authentic representation which paved the way for a renaissance of Black art and uniqueness (Erikson, 1993). Where representation had merely been subjective to a colonial classification of “othering” based on exploitation and power (Stam & Spence, 1983), the identity created by these BIPOC persons and communities began to change the otherwise constrictive narrative of racial stereotypes.

Historically, there has been a lack of representation in the media and theater arena, as most performance and broadcasting outlets prioritize the colonizing racial majority, especially because they run and fund them. This inaccurate portrayal provides enormous access to euro-centric and white persons, with the vast majority of BIPOC stories neglected, unless they enforce violent or demonizing stereotypes, perpetuating a cycle for the comprehensive visual representation of white people and a narrow narration of BIPOC persons and communities. Methods of colonial invasion into Indigenous or noted foreign spaces mark the disproportionate conclusion of white superiority (Fricker, 2009) and present the classification of developed whiteness into a personified and visible demonstration that illustrates conquering in a heroic lens.

Theater employs an aesthetic experience, specifically one that operates in a political world; therefore, charting the critical and political circumstance through representation and the contradictions that emerge from undermining potential power structures produced and received is a main component of theater (Wakefield, 2019). Hence, theater mirrors the political and social culture and relations of the times, creating a reflective art form meant to encourage further societal understanding through an aesthetic experience. It is also important to note that theater, music, and dance are three traditional art forms linked to human culture and expression, creating a great impact on the human mind (Nag, 2013, p. 2), making a lasting impression for the viewer to cultivate and engrain the newly perceived knowledge into their implicit biases.

Additionally, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are a population left out of the commercial theater narrative, with only a few stories boasting majority AAPI casts or being produced on Broadway, and many of them heavily feature a role centered in white heroism, such as *Miss Saigon*. This could be attributed to a “yellow peril” in which Asian immigrants became seen as posing an economic threat to whites, intent on destroying the social fabric of white American society (Berdahl & Min, 2012, p. 142) lending to great discrimination and racism towards AAPI and Asian immigrants into much of the twentieth century. Patterned discrimination and cultural genocide through Japanese Internment Camps

(Wegner, 2012, p. 26) have shown a mass of prejudice to AAPI, insinuating direct subjugation of AAPI-centered stories and authentic holistic representation in media and Broadway, especially as they are propagandized into a source of economic threat for white Americans - driving the narrative that AAPI shows are not going to be celebrated and successful amongst a white audience.

For Indigenous peoples, this narrow accessibility to authentic representation is likely due to a subversion of Indigenous history within the confines of a colonizer-approved narrative, leaving little room for accuracy, as Indigenous history is marked by extreme violence, genocide, cultural genocide, forced removal, and forced sterilization. Indigenous characters, however, are alive in American culture, but are almost exclusively caricatures dominating the field of sports mascots. Through this, the mental links or stereotypes formed between the social category of what makes an "American Indian" are consistently shown via association to a few traits, images, or behavioral tendencies that are difficult to break (Fryberg et al., 2008, p. 209), creating an unrealistic portrayal of a caricature, rather than a human being. The insistence on the erasure of humanity for Indigenous peoples within media coverage, cultural stereotypes, and accessibility limited to a sports mascot or Disney princess prohibits any informed and authentic representative characters or stories on stage.

Another purpose of Broadway's limited representative forte stems from the economic fuel that drives any profitable endeavor, especially one based entirely on audience reliability and consumption. Seymour proposes, "if a show is selling well with traditional buyers, it's hard to justify marketing to an audience that may not be interested, or even able to attend. There is also reason to believe older white consumers don't feel comfortable attending a show where they will be outnumbered" (Seymour, 2016). The misgivings and apparent neglect of BIPOC could be attributed to the potential economic risk associated with these productions, but instances of representative and financial success exist on the Broadway stage, which diminishes this argument.

Current Context of Theatrical Endeavors

Under a contemporary lens, more diverse and authentic works are finding success on the American stage. In recent years, productions of *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* have prospered, although they function under 'anti-musical' identities, as both feature an unorthodox female protagonist at the center, take place in the American South during the pivotal mid-1960s, had success on Broadway and beyond, and engage in conversations of race, gender, and class (Johnson, 2012). These poignantly inclusive works suggest new ways of evaluating the past, considering the present, and imagining the future. This representation and performance of art is necessary to the American identity, and has been

specifically impactful on the Broadway stage, with *Caroline, or Change* receiving a revival in the upcoming Broadway season (Roundabout Theater Company, n.d.).

However, even as more provocative and contemporary identity-affirming works have reached commercial production, there still exists an imminent prioritization of a colonizing storyline that emphasizes a do-no-wrong white character often imposing themselves in situations and encouraging actions that harm or psychologically manipulate others. *Dear Evan Hansen*, for example, opened on Broadway in 2016 (Dear Evan Hansen Broadway, 2020), garnering a widespread fan base with immense ticket sales including praise from critics and audiences alike, but this piece highlights a white teenage boy's imagination of a best friend relationship with a young man who committed suicide to receive attention from peers and the boy's family - namely the boy's sister, who he has a crush on. The psychological manipulation present in this story, despite the heavy impact mental illness has on the teen, and stories that prioritize the optimistic white colonizer, such as *Book of Mormon*, another musical that premiered on Broadway in 2011 (Book of Mormon Broadway, n.d.), create a narrative that ensures a sense of white-based heroism or likability that does not translate to stories where white visibility is not at the forefront.

Race by David Mamet is a particular story of interest, in its controversy, that premiered on Broadway in 2009. The story centers on a wealthy white man accused of raping a young Black woman in a conversation with his lawyers, one of whom is a Black man, and another who is a Black woman in her twenties. The play openly expresses the intersections of race, privilege, sexual pleasure, and the not-always-ethical origins of the law (Mamet, 2013); however, written and directed by Mamet himself, a white man, gives possible confusion into how truthful, authentic, and informed these conversations on white privilege could be from a successful white man as the voice for the Black characters.

In the Heights, a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical that premiered in 2008, tells the story of a vibrant BIPOC community in Washington Heights from the voice and experience of Lin Manuel-Miranda starring as Usnavi (Manuel-Miranda, 2021). It is a contemporary celebration of color and life, as it had not yet been seen for Hispanic and Latino peoples in a seemingly ordinary story of culture, the importance of family, and the perceptions and expectations of racial stereotypes. It went on to win the Tony Award for Best Musical and had immense Broadway success, showing stories of these persons in their ordinary routines and relationships as worthy of space and celebration.

Choir Boy, a Broadway play with music that debuted in 2018, features a story housed in an all-Black male preparatory school, with a strong academic and ethical rigor, examining the identities of young men navigating a world of queer, Black, and perceived identities through spiritual hymnals

(McCraney, 2015). This story, written and directed by Black men, featuring only one white character, contributes to an informed representative dialogue of the Black male identity, specifically through societal expectations and the disregard of stereotypical boundaries imposed on these boys. *Choir Boy* is among the most authentic works centering Black people that have found success on the Broadway stage, even garnering four Tony nominations and one win (Tony Awards, 2019).

Allegiance, a musical that held its Broadway debut in 2015, tells the tale of Sam Kimura's recollection of his personal struggle fighting against the wrongful imprisonment of his family during Japanese American Internment during World War II. The musical was inspired by the real-life experiences of George Takai, who starred in the production, and featured an Asian American man on the core creative team as the lyricist and composer (Allegiance, n.d.). This production served as the first large-scale commercial Broadway production that directly focused on the life and story of an Asian American man living through direct oppression of the white American society, which ensured not only the telling of this authentic account of history, but also that these lives and bodies directly affected with trauma be addressed and seen, as they had not been on stage prior.

Progression has also been made in strides of female-driven stories, with a Broadway transfer of the West End's cisgender-flipped *Company* starring Katrina Lenk (Company NYC, n.d.), and a Broadway-bound revival of *1776* featuring an all-female cast (Clement, 2020). There have also been several productions to recently grace the Broadway stage featuring majority BIPOC casts, including *Slave Play*, *Ain't Too Proud*, and *A Soldier's Play* (Broadway World, n.d.), but there is still much work to be done to radically change the Broadway theater industry in order to adequately and accurately account for a true reflection of the society theatrical art is indicative of.

Recent Reports of Discrimination

While strides have been made in breaking the glass ceiling and largely gate-kept threshold of Broadway to house these unconventional progressive stories, a mass shut-down due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 incited creatives and artists to come forward with a mass of stories centering abuse, discrimination, racism, pay-gap, manipulation, and big-name white creatives promulgating a culture of silencing. Not only does Google amass a wealth of pages and articles when one searches for "Broadway Racism," but these stories upon stories available at the touch of a button cover a minuscule slice of the blatant racism allowed in these theatrical spaces.

There have been many instances of microaggressions, physical mocking, black face, derogatory and offensive language, qualifying BIPOC actors into a lower level of contract than white counterparts of

the same role status, gaslighting by theater heads during racist acts, silencing, and the complete removal of an artist following reporting instances of racism and discrimination (Broadway For Racial Justice, 2020). Karen Olivio, a prominent and greatly successful actor in the Broadway industry for twenty years and who recently starred in *Moulin Rouge* on Broadway, released a video condemning the acts of blatant abuse Broadway has fostered. She specifically named Scott Rubin, prompting him to leave the business (Olivio, 2021). They cited the industry, which capitalizes on the usage and continued reliance of actors needing jobs, as allowing an environment of harm, one of which they will no longer be a part of, even if it means losing a large paycheck in the process.

The release of Scott Rudin's abusive history, and subsequent neglect from Broadway heads and business leaders to respond with Rudin's removal, prompted a 'March on Broadway: Broadway Fights Back' event for which six demands were released:

(1) Scott Rudin to be removed from the Broadway League – If he is not removed from the Broadway League, we want restoration. We want Scott to publicly choose 20 BIPOC run theaters and donate a LARGE SUM of money to them. (2) A full list of organizations that AEA is working with to help Black, Indigenous, and POC feel safer. (3) A full report of how the 2020 Equity dues were spent and what percentage is being spent to help conversations around diversity. (4) Achieve greater inclusion for trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming artists. (5) We want visibility on how the national council votes for policies. We also want efforts to improve diversity within the council. (6) We want to achieve greater inclusion for artists with visible and nonvisible differing abilities. (Evans, 2021)

The reality of an industry that deeply honors the white individual and story, with absolute disregard and indifference for that of BIPOC, is immensely present and now begins to reach mainstream attention through the courageous truths BIPOC theater-makers and actors make heard. BIPOC theater community members also fight back with forces that strive for transformative action and change, not allowing the industry to return to previous standards of engagement. Some of these organizations include Broadway for Racial Justice, Broadway Advocacy Coalition, BOLD, and Broadway Black (Fierberg, 2020). Actors and artists have also generated public visibility through an open letter and petition entitled, "We See You, White American Theater" signed by the likes of Viola Davis, Cynthia Erivo, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Leslie Odom Jr. (We See You W.A.T., n.d.). Although generative change is not exactly possible within an industry shutdown and global pandemic, the period for revolution is now, and the BIPOC theater community demands accountability, action, and transformative change.

Methods

The first portion of this research will be comprised of a meta-analysis of Broadway records from 2000-2020 to evaluate Broadway productions produced each year, including the casting of BIPOC actors, BIPOC production team members, and the weight of each BIPOC character in each production (lead, supporting, cameo, ensemble, etc.). This data comprises 780 productions over the twenty years. Research was primarily conducted using Broadway World's 'Broadway Shows by Year' tool which details original cast members and the production team documented, along with production details of run, sales, and reviews. The casting analyzed also includes understudies, stand-by roles, and swings, if they are detailed within the documented casting page. Secondary resources were the scripts and librettos of each play or musical to examine the description of BIPOC characters and their role in each story.

Exclusions have been made for any show that has not opened a Broadway run within this time frame, shows that closed in previews, Broadway specials or concerts, 24 Hour Play festivals, and tribute or self-titled shows that feature no character basis or connective story. This examination seeks to address the disproportionate value of effort, complexity, and overall stage time devoted or allocated to BIPOC roles, if the show happens to include these characters and communities at all, and if there are any progressive trends attached to American cultural evolution in diverse representation.

The second portion of research will be a deep examination into *Slave Play*, which made its Broadway debut in 2019. This exploration will serve as a case study into a specific piece of American theater that centralizes BIPOC actors and stories, particularly centered in trauma and 'Master/Enslaved African' relationships in the Civil War era south that affects the lives of biracial couples in a contemporary context. Not following a traditional script, white-centric casting, and normal marketing strategies, this play and its Broadway journey is an integral example of the changing dialogue of American theater and the implicit structural components of white affluence within it. This case study was conducted by attending a performance in 2019, studying interviews with playwright Jeremy O. Harris and cast members, and evaluating and analyzing the production evolution from Yale to Broadway utilizing theater reviews.

Findings: BIPOC Representation on Broadway

Here I have highlighted the research into five main categories of analysis. The first details the number of productions that opened on Broadway within that year. The second is the percentage of BIPOC individuals cast. Next, is the percentage of BIPOC production team members. The fourth category displays the amount of BIPOC characters in leading roles within each year. Finally, the last details the

percentage of BIPOC actors cast in Broadway shows that do not majorly feature BIPOC characters and stories, to exhibit how BIPOC characters function in roles and spaces that are not exclusive to their race, and to see if they employ a realistic demographic within white-centered stories.

BIPOC Representation on Broadway: 2000-2020					
Year	Productions	% BIPOC Cast	% BIPOC Prod. Team	BIPOC Leads	% BIPOC w/ Exclusions ¹
2000	30	26.3%	6.2%	4	14%
2001	26	16.31%	7.94%	4	14.34%
2002	32	24.84%	7.96%	8	20.91%
2003	32	25.66%	11.97%	7	21.77%
2004	27	40.69%	17.77%	12	18.22%
2005	33	36.76%	15.38%	6	27.21%
2006	36	29.55%	14.08%	5	22.59%
2007	33	22.20%	11.20%	3	20.96%
2008	37	26.50%	10%	10	17.87%
2009	40	33.64%	13.62%	9	21.71%
2010	36	29.16	14.89	10	20.75%

¹ Exclusions include: 2000 (*Porgy & Bess*, *Aida*), 2001 (*King Headley II*), 2002 (*Flower Drum Song*, *Topdog/Underdog*), 2003 (*Master Harold.. and the boys*, *Anna in the tropics*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*), 2004 (*Raisin in the sun*, *Bombay Dreams*, *Caroline or Change*, *Gem of the ocean*, *Pacific Overtures*), 2005 (*Latinologues*, *On Golden Pond*, *The Color Purple*), 2006 (*Hot Feet*, *Tarzan*), 2007 (*Radio Golf*), 2008 (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *In the Heights*, *Passing Strange*, *Thurgood*), 2009 (*Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Fela!*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Race*, *The American Play*, *West Side Story*), 2010 (*Free Man of Color*, *Fences*, *Scottsboro Boys*), 2011 (*Baby it's You*, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, *Hair*, *Stick Fly*, *The Mountaintop*), 2012 (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Bring It On*, *Porgy & Bess*, *The Anarchist*), 2013 (*After Midnight*, *Motown the Musical*, *The Trip to Bountiful*), 2014 (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Holler if Ya Hear Me*), 2015 (*Allegiance*, *On Your Feet*, *The Color Purple*, *The King and I*), 2016 (*Eclipsed*, *Motown the Musical*, *Shuffle Along*), 2017 (*Jitney*, *M. Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, *Once On this Island*, *The Band's Visit*), 2018 (*Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*), 2019 (*Choir Boy*, *Slave Play*, *The Rose Tattoo*), 2020 (*A Soldier's Play*).

2011	36	30.51%	13.65%	13	22.96%
2012	40	32.25%	14.59%	10	23.20%
2013	34	36.93%	14.29%	10	22.73%
2014	38	30.16%	17.22%	13	24.42%
2015	39	41.54%	19.67%	19	22.87%
2016	29	41.98%	19.92%	9	26.81%
2017	35	41.38%	22.97%	11	26.27%
2018	30	42.14%	20.40%	8	31.20%
2019	25	40.20%	23.58%	11	30.39%
2020	6	40%	24.14%	3	11.11%

As seen above, opened productions typically range about thirty every year; however, 2020 only represents a two-and-a-half-month period prior to the shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data may appear misleading regarding fluctuations of productions opened within a year-period, as productions with an open-run have longevity potentially for several years in the future - meaning, the number of productions highlighted is not to illustrate how many Broadway shows run per year, but rather the number of productions opened, which more easily illustrates the number of stories employing these BIPOC characters, and the percentages listed.

The trend in the casting of BIPOC actors has increased, and for the past few years has been mostly constant around 40%, while the percentage of BIPOC production team members has not yet reached 25%. The lack of representative presence among the creative and production teams facilitating these productions – and crafting how these bodies will be perceived onstage to the audience – is unacceptable. A great potential for misbehavior and uninformed interactions to dominate these spaces exists if those within these teams do not have the knowledge or lived experience required to safely create workspaces for these actors. Also, if there are only one or two BIPOC creatives on these teams, they might not feel a sense of security in voicing their opinion or condemning discriminatory and racist

behavior witnessed in these spaces. This leaves a massive gap in the protection of BIPOC actors and creatives, leading to a continuation of white-centered spaces that cannot adequately account for entirely inclusive safety for every person involved.

Another observable conclusion presents that BIPOC stories are not actively told from the leading voice of a BIPOC character, as leading roles in a year do not or barely reach double digits, with some years only exhibiting three or four BIPOC leads. The data concludes that large discrepancies between leading white characters and BIPOC characters exist, and are permitted repeatedly, with only a small spike of increased roles. The inadmissible lack of authentic representation across the board is clearly shown through the lack of BIPOC-centered representation, physically showing the audience that BIPOC stories are not worthy of a leading presence and taking up space. With little access to leading representation, young people observe these productions without the ability to navigate a narrative that serves their authenticity fully. Young audience members further perpetuate a status of unequivocal restrictions to potential and capability that is not matched by young white people's view of their examples for authentic representation.

The inadequacy of BIPOC actor employment reaches its maximum in 2018, accounting for just over 42%, a number that does not greatly define or compare to the actual BIPOC population in American society. When excluding productions that create a majority BIPOC space, it drops to 31.20%. The lowest rate recorded is 16.31% in 2001 but jumped to 24.84% the following year. Rates have steadily increased over the last few years, but now remain steadily consistent at around 40%. While this number greatly increased from when the data started, it still does not supplement or reflect the surrounding society that the stage and media should mirror. As stated earlier, theater is a source of political aesthetic and incorporates the socio-cultural weight and breadth of the context it was created and presented in, so accurate reflection of all peoples is necessary to present an accurate representation of the time and circumstance performed.

The specification that a character be BIPOC further exemplifies the prevalence of these shortcomings in casting BIPOC actors. BIPOC actors are not frequently cast in productions that are not specifically written for them, bolstering a narrative that BIPOC humanity does not translate into white spaces. Similar life experiences are not valued when employed by BIPOC actors because they are not stereotypical BIPOC stories, and 'normal' stories are reserved and cast exclusively for white persons. This disparity also contributes to a narrative that BIPOC actors and stories are only shown when they exhibit confrontation with their BIPOC culture or identity, and that they are only celebrated within that context, and not for their represented and holistic humanity.

The reality of this data further validates a great disparity of representation and amplification of BIPOC voices on stage. This is especially important within the lens of Broadway, as it is the most commercial and widely sought-after ideal for American theater as a whole, and often these Broadway productions serve as models for regional or subsequent national or international tours. The casting and portrayal of these productions reach far beyond Manhattan, and the theater industry equates representative worth and preference for white voices and stories.

Case Study: Slave Play

Written in his first year as a graduate playwriting student at Yale University, Jeremy O. Harris crafted *Slave Play*: a three act, intermission-less play centering interracial relationships in a unique form of couples therapy that simulates sexual relationships of ‘Master’ and ‘enslaved African’ in the antebellum deep south at the MacGregor Plantation (Harris, J. O., 2019). This work highlights three interracial couples engaging directly with potential power dynamics passed through generational trauma, as they seek therapy because of the Black partners inability to feel sexual pleasure within their relationships.

The show’s great triumph is eliciting a visceral and provocative response from each theater patron, no matter race or affluence. For every audience member, the Playbill entitled “A Note On Your Discomfort” contains a direct message written by poet, essayist, and novelist Morgan Parker, which states:

This might hurt. This could prod open regrets & secrets & what you find could be shock. But there’s nothing in *Slave Play* that part of you doesn’t already know. The setting: a plantation. Time: irrelevant. Lights up on a Black woman working. Before I saw it, all anyone would “give away” was that *Slave Play* would resonate with me—as a Black woman & particularly as someone who’s tried to post-coitally tell a white lover that when we have sex, there’s a blip wherein I suddenly inhabit an ancestor’s body, & he the body of a pale, pilfering master. Whiteness was difficult for my lover to hear about & mid-thrust ancestral abduction perhaps incomprehensible, but it got said. Pain can be useful once it’s off our chests, even funny. This aching humor is a Black necessity & art form *Slave Play* deftly exercises & exploits. There’s a gun in the first act—it’s a big Black dildo. The cock of the gun is a long Black memory. Illuminating, uncomfortable, but plain as lust. Totally varied in our levels of comprehending the general materiality of Black America, my audience laughed, gasped, & sucked our teeth unsynchronized. We’re saying language but really dealing with power, the poet June Jordan said. We’re saying aggression but dealing with desire; shame but really ancestral memory. We’re saying sex but meaning ownership. The astoundingly sharp Jeremy O. Harris, through scrupulously observed & sardonically genuine characters, has created a work purely

innovative, queering & blue-Blackening conflict, plot, even its title. *Slave Play* is a radical study in American memory: the psychologies of the prized & of the oppressed; the grateful & the entitled; who's top, who's bottom; who speaks, who can't, & who better listen. (*Slave Play*, 2019)

This initial confrontation with potential discomfort guides the audience through an expectation of uneasiness, as they are not met with anything predictable or easy, ensuring a viewing and theatrical experience that encourages conversations and integral examination of personal lives, specifically the biases that govern them.

After several workshop productions at Yale, where they acquired popular traction, the show debuted Off-Broadway through the New York Theater Workshop (NYTW) in 2018, eventually leading the show to a Broadway run at the Golden Theater in 2019 (Bryant, 2019). Neither New York production was met with immediate praise, as the Off-Broadway run was confronted with a petition for removal directed at the NYTW citing 'trauma infliction' garnering 6,363 signatures (Ashley B., 2019). Purposefully leaving much to interpretation and questions unanswered for the largely affluent white population that attends Broadway, and theater productions in general, this show forces audience members into an uncomfortable confrontation with race, their potential contribution to modern reality of racism, and the possibility of racial visibility versus racial erasure. The show has received multiple awards – the Rosa Parks Playwriting Award, the Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award, The Lotos Foundation Prize in the Arts and Sciences, and the 2018 Paula Vogel Award (NYTW, 2018) – and has been nominated for twelve Tony Awards, making it the most nominated play in Tony history (Tony Awards, 2020).

The show, which did not recoup its \$3.9 million capitalization, but did hold over 100,000 audience members during its Broadway run, enlisted various outreach endeavors to ensure the show and Broadway space would reach the diverse collective it needed to. These endeavors included two "Black Out" performances that filled the theater with an almost entirely Black audience, the release of 10,000 \$39 dollar tickets - a price typically inaccessible for a successful Broadway show, the donation of hundreds of free tickets to Black student organizations, a weekly salon hosted every Sunday for audience members to discuss and 'process' the play, and the donation of 10% of the profits to National Black Theater in Harlem and the U.K.-based Black Ticket Project (Harris & Ugwu, 2020). While this play specifically boasted immense success in making it to Broadway, and received rave reviews and high ticket sales, its greatest success came through diversifying the Broadway narrative and audience to ensure an accessible theater-going experience that challenged the status quo of Broadway as a space of

white affluence. The show's audience also consistently contained a make-up of 30% first-time Broadway theatergoers, a number that usually resides in the single digits, if at all (Harris & Ugwu, 2020).

The show has, since closing in January 2020, started the Golden Collection, a collection of fifteen plays by Black playwrights that will be donated to community centers and libraries in all 50 states and U.S. territories to ensure Black theater work is accessible and available to all (Slave Play, 2021). They created this through reallocating funds typically used for marketing materials during award season, as that became rendered obsolete by the COVID-19 pandemic, to fund the Collection, an initiative that Harris and the show's producers spearheaded (Human Rights Campaign, 2021), to continue *Slave Play's* commitment to creating a more equitable and diverse theater industry.

Slave Play's success is an achievement for the work and creatives around it, but it is important to note the context of its success. Harris wrote and first produced the show whilst he was a Master of Fine Arts student at Yale. Would the show be as successful if it came out of a space not consistently boasted as synonymous with intellectual affluence and white legitimacy? If this same show was produced at The Black Rep in St. Louis, Missouri, would it have the same trajectory to the Golden Theater? *Slave Play*, performing in one space before moving to Off-Broadway, with a later Broadway opening, had an atypical production experience, especially for a show as controversial and non-white as this one, creating an unlikely linear path of production, performance, and support. According to the Broadway League, 75% of Broadway theatergoers are white (Tran, 2019), so it is curious how this show, designed to instill discomfort, successfully made it to the most affluent and commercial theater space in America.

White affluence, especially in the development of euro-centric ideals of theater and opera development in the nineteenth century, guaranteed that a once accessible art form to all was shifted towards a means of entertainment for the educated and esteemed white persons (Podda, 2020, p. 2). This standard continued into the twentieth century, leading to the white affluence that maintains audience majority. However, the work conducted by *Slave Play* to diversify the audience and make it more accessible succeeded in spades to create a new example of inclusive Broadway theater.

While *Slave Play* proves to be the antithesis of a traditional Broadway piece and creative makeup, proving that BIPOC stories centering Black characters are resonant, applicable, and successful on a Broadway stage, it remains important to acknowledge the integral implicit biases and structural complexity grounded in whiteness and affluence, as shown through its journey beginning at Yale University. The source of its success could merely reflect the progressing socio-cultural and political narratives alive in the world surrounding the stage translating its way onto the stage, but the source of

potential success through initial cultivation within an affluent and educated space since its foundation is an important discovery worth noting.

Slave Play presents an interesting and antithetical approach to a Broadway story, marketing scheme, audience make-up, and BIPOC-centric casting, showing a different kind of Broadway potential. This potential remains monumental within the current need for change in an industry that widely favors whiteness, but the potential of one show cannot transform the entire industry, especially as *Slave Play* has stopped running. The journey and success of *Slave Play* will serve as a potential catalyst for diversifying Broadway in story, persons, and attendance, but the innate centering in euro-centric ideals of elite education and exclusivity nevertheless remains present.

The work of BIPOC playwrights, directors, and actors must continue to grace the stage and be uplifted by those who have profited from the continual prioritization of the white body and person.

Discussion

This research established that very little BIPOC representation, especially leading or centered representation, has ruled the Broadway stage for the last twenty years. It has also ruled the production team facilitating and dictating productions, creating a potentially dangerous environment for any BIPOC actors entering these environments with little to no address of racial inequity or support from those meant to ensure safety and comfort. Through this lens, Broadway is not a safe space for any BIPOC people in its traditional pattern of white-centric standards to dictate production and its environment. This pattern presents many challenges for BIPOC theater-makers, onstage and off, with no adequate infrastructure to address normalized behaviors of racism, racial stereotyping, and unequal pay, and no critical structure to ensure well-supported diversity and inclusion to create a safe environment for all.

Whilst *Slave Play* exemplifies a non-traditional successful Broadway experience, many shows that heavily feature BIPOC characters and stories do not reach that level of commercial success and frequently remain contained to the Off-Broadway level, endorsing a cycle of gatekeeping and white superiority. These works face misdirection, marking their show as ‘too edgy’ or not accessible enough for the mainly white affluent audience of Broadway; however, *Slave Play* contradicts this stereotype, as it achieved success in sales and reviews.

The reality remains that, while Broadway is singularly located in New York City, frequently musicals and some play productions will succeed past the Broadway production with a national or international tour following it or occurring concurrently. These tours serve as the main point of access for the general public, especially for the majority of theatergoers who cannot travel to Broadway but

seek the Broadway experience at a more convenient location in their proximity. Typically, these productions will entail an identical cast to reflect that of the Broadway production, which is wonderful for those seeking the Broadway version of each show, but still contributes to the narrative centering white individuals and stories. This means, for the purpose of this research, that the casting and production decisions made on Broadway often reach far past New York by way of touring production and cast recording. These vehicles perpetuate standards of whiteness to the entire theater industry, whether a person sees a Broadway show or not. Therefore, accurate, diverse, and inclusive representation on Broadway is necessary to every person that interacts with theater in any capacity.

While Broadway might have gone dark from March 2020 to August 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, productions and playwriting continued nationally, along with a new wave of BIPOC-centric stories and support amid and following the Black Lives Matter protests that created much-needed awareness of white privilege and police brutality. Along with this new influx of creative works, new scholarship funds for BIPOC artists and initiatives, like the Golden Collection, have been created to encourage creativity and facilitate a greater opportunity for BIPOC artists that are typically discouraged from theatrical pursuits, as they are predominantly located in affluent white spaces.

A limitation of this research is the exclusive specificity on Broadway as the highest commercial sector of American theater, not accounting for Off-Broadway, Regional, or community theatrical endeavors. Regional theaters are typically located in areas of historic white affluence, where stereotyping and racism for BIPOC artists are frequent and must be addressed, but for the purposes of this study they were not considered. Another limitation is the inattention to international theater initiatives, works, or artists that do not eventually make their way to a Broadway transfer.

Conclusion

This research concludes that little BIPOC representation directly correlates to the insistence of white affluence and gatekeeping within the theatrical community. Harmful practices of silencing, abuse, racism, and unequal pay directly results from inadequate production and performance of BIPOC stories. This thus reinforces the message to theater-makers and theatergoers that white-centric stories are the only ones successfully being told commercially, and that stories directly confronting race are both infrequent and typically written by white playwrights. While this research scratched the surface of past theater industry conduct, this research did not uncover stories of abuse, stereotyping, gatekeeping, racism, unequal pay, and silencing that are frequent for BIPOC individuals working on Broadway, or various veins of the theater industry. Many resources and articles on these instances are available for

perusal online, and I encourage an examination into those, especially for white theater artists and makers. Inhabiting spaces created and cultivated to enrich oneself through art in a safe environment should no longer be a privilege. The bare minimum is the safety and protection of persons within the foundation and creation of theater, which has long been overlooked and undervalued. Protection from abuse and discrimination is an inalienable human right that must be afforded to all persons equally without fail. This remains the only way to truly engage in this industry and move forward. The bare security of human rights must be upheld in all spaces.

This research shows inadequate attention and continued depletion of the BIPOC individual into a role not worthy of a leading story, or authentic representation disconnected from white support. BIPOC persons do not exist in a secondary role to white persons, so their worth in these stories onstage should not, and can no longer, inhabit roles orbiting whiteness. BIPOC-centric stories must be told to uphold and encourage authenticity to contribute to a growing dialogue and affirmation of representative value. These stories are being written by BIPOC playwrights and are performed in houses across the country, but the extensive white favoring and white superiority in the industry often do not allow these stories to be told on the Broadway-level, and typically confine them to Off-Broadway if they reach New York. The trajectory of these pieces frequently meets hurdles and gatekeeping, prohibiting the celebration of diverse works and the people meant to bring them life. As stated previously, many Broadway shows prove as the example for subsequent productions and receive national or international touring productions that carry this show and its depiction of peoples far past Manhattan, so the need for a diverse and inclusive theater repertoire remains necessary.

Amplification of BIPOC voices and stories needs to be implemented as soon as possible, and the industry must diversify the performed narrative to ensure an accurate representation of all peoples on the street and those that fill the audiences across the world. While in operation under an exclusivity of whiteness, BIPOC persons and stories must be told, celebrated, and centered, but first, work must be done by the theater owners, production teams, creatives, and white artists alike to ensure equitable safety and protection of BIPOC persons. BIPOC theater-makers and artists are courageous in sharing their truth, but they do not hold responsibility for enacting and ensuring change. The institutions that encourage and facilitate racism and abuse remain in charge and have continued to silence calls for action, but every white person within the theater industry equally needs to act quickly and intensely to culminate enriching and celebratory spaces that were nearly nonexistent prior to the shutdown. Basic protection of persons from racism and abuse is the minimum that must be accomplished, and it is up to the unions and theater heads to answer these demands with action.

Although no massive reforms were enacted within the theater industry during the pandemic, radical change must be made to adequately address these issues and structural patterns of racism and white preference. There is a robust community of artists, with diverse stories and unique individuality, that must be celebrated by all theater artists and industry executives to mirror the surrounding cultural, political, and social moments that theater and storytelling are meant for. Theater must reflect the society and stories within, rather than the stories of white privilege and the white people who control the narrative.

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