

Neoliberalism, Gentrification, and Black Theatre in San Francisco and St. Paul

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Abstract

As the organization and makeup of American cities have changed, so have the place of African American theatres in contemporary urban arts ecologies. As institutions that engage a diverse range of artists and patrons at the intersection of racial politics, city planning, and aesthetic production, these organizations both reflect and contribute to notions of civic engagement within a multi-ethnic public sphere at the same time as they articulate the cultural specificities, socio-political realities, and histories of African Americans. This essay addresses how the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco and the Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul have responded to shifting demographics and negotiated strategies for sustaining their organizations and their community ties. Each of these theatres has responded to changes in the urban landscapes in which they are situated in ways that reveal efforts to support working class historically black neighborhoods in American cities where the cost of living has increased and African Americans have been or are in the process of being displaced.

As the organization and makeup of American cities have changed, so too have the place of African American theatres in contemporary urban arts ecologies. As institutions that engage a diverse range of artists and patrons at the intersection of racial politics, city planning, and aesthetic production, these organizations foster civic engagement within a multi-ethnic public sphere. They also articulate the cultural specificities, socio-political realities, and histories of African Americans.

Today, many cities operate within a neoliberal framework that sees art as part of “the creative economy” and a tool for urban renewal and gentrification (Howkins 2002; Clark 2011). At the same time, urban theorists such as George Ritzer (2009; 2012), Michael Sorkin (1992), and Sharon Zukin (1991; 1996; 2011) have lamented the increasing privatization of public urban spaces. They point to the popularity of gated communities, the shifting of universities towards what has been termed “edu-tainment,” the decline of main street, and the rise of big box stores as evidence of this phenomenon. This restructuring of urban space has transformed arenas formerly understood as civic and public into areas that are increasingly experienced as private and consumptive. In the essay “Neoliberal Urbanism: Cities and the Rule of Markets” Nik Theodore, Jamie Peck, and Neil Brenner describe the process of American urban neoliberalization as the “destruction of the ‘liberal city’ in which all inhabitants are entitled to basic civil liberties, social services, and political rights,” and the “‘rolling forward’ of new networked forms of local governance based upon public-private partnerships and the ‘new public management’ ”(2011, 22-23).

Contemporary black theatres reflect the legacy of previous generations who sought to build and support a notion of “the liberal city” that is currently under duress. Penumbra Theatre Company, like many of America’s surviving black theatres, originated out of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 70s but was also nurtured by a neighborhood community center that was founded in the 1920s and thus tied to much older forms of civic engagement and social activism. In my book, *Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama* (2013), I link the founding of Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota with the legacy of the Urban League, the tradition of the settlement house movement, and the establishment of community centers that support and enhance working class urban residents’ quality of life. The continued existence of both the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center and the Penumbra Theatre Company—now two separate organizations—shows a collective interest in that particular urban community to support culturally specific, socially engaged, urban arts programming. These organizations and the people who support them are not concerned with “the creative economy.” Rather, they are concerned with enhancing the cultural richness of their community and increasing “public awareness of the significant contributions of African Americans” (Penumbra Theatre Company, 2014). This interest was and continues to be deeply invested in the concept of the liberal city as a place for civic action and social responsibility. Some of the other black theatres still in existence today that were founded on similar models include The National Black Theatre of Harlem in New York, Karamu House in Cleveland, and The Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute in Seattle.

While public sphere theorists such as Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser offer valuable ways of thinking about multiple, sometimes opposing forms of public action and public attention (2002; 1990), I find the term “counter-public” illuminating yet insufficient for a sophisticated analysis of the work that black theatres do. These institutions are entwined with not only their own distinct communities and forms of public discourse (for which the term “counter-public” is quite helpful), but they are also simultaneously part of larger networks of people and resources in the urban areas they inhabit and, as such, their operations are not at all “counter” , but rather inexorably linked to larger (often dominant) trends and practices of urban publicity. I, therefore, see black theatres as part of multiple, overlapping publics. The mission and practice of civically engaged black theatre are antithetical to the neoliberal trend toward privatization and profit in the cultural sector. In this way, black theatres operate as “counter-publics,” that is to say, spaces where the dominant hegemony of neoliberalism is challenged and other ways of organizing and enacting publicity come into play.

On a macro scale, black theatres are vital parts of pluralist arts ecologies. Just as symphonies, orchestras, and opera companies celebrate the European patrimony of America, publically supported black theatres, dance companies, and arts institutions celebrate America’s African cultural patrimony. The significance of a well-supported black theatre in a multi-ethnic urban area is an indication that the city as a whole values and celebrates its African heritage. Black theatres thus play a role in the performance of the social and cultural identity of the city. In their essay “Reflections on Publics and Cultures,” Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson state that “performative bodies and rational discourse are interleaved as forms of communication in a continuum of human intelligent response to the environment” (2011, 380). Bridge and Watson focus primarily on public spaces such as parks and squares and the corporeal ways that people culturally assert themselves and influence each other in these spaces. However, their theory is

also quite applicable to the practice of black theatre. One way a city recognizes the importance of African American culture is by providing explicit funding and support to the intellectual labor and bodily performances of African American artists. Census projections tell us that in the next half century, “The U.S. will become a plurality nation, where the non-Hispanic white population remains the largest single group, but no group is in the majority” (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). In terms of urban arts funding, planning, and programming, it is no longer controversial to assert that arts programming in pluralist American cities should reflect the cultural backgrounds, histories, and identities of their constituents. Black theatres will thus continue to remain an important component of many cities’ “mosaic” approach to arts administration and support.

Today’s black theatres continue the civic work of previous generations and contribute to the enactment of cultural pluralism within the public sphere. They also, however, reflect and have had to adjust to three decades of neoliberal social and economic forces that have challenged the very existence of many urban black communities. Each of the theatres that I study does unique work and responds to the social challenges and history of the cities they are a part of in different ways. Each offers a different strategy for survival, social activism, and community engagement. While my larger research project includes many institutions from a wide variety of geographical regions, in this essay I focus primarily on just two companies: The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco and The Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota. In order to talk about each of these theatre’s contributions to their urban arts ecologies, it is necessary to briefly trace the cultural history and articulate the current challenges and opportunities of the urban areas in which they reside.

San Francisco—a city once considered a symbol of personal and political freedom and is currently experiencing its second wave of gentrification and displacement since the beginning of the 21st century. The city has recently surpassed New York as America’s most expensive city (Stone 2014; O’Connor 2015). Economic and cultural warfare is occurring in San Francisco right now as middle and working class people are priced out of the neighborhoods they had previously inhabited. The historically Latino Mission district has been the focus of this conflict, most famously symbolized by the Google bus protests of 2013 and 2014 (Barnes 2014; Gumbel 2014; Hollister 2014). This current period of hyper gentrification mirrors previous waves of gentrification and displacement from which black communities have suffered. Understanding these waves is key to understanding the ecology of the city and the place cultural arts organizations have within it.

Historically, San Francisco’s black neighborhoods were established when African Americans came to the West Coast in significant numbers during the 1940s to take advantage of the shipping and industrial opportunities created by the second world war and subsequent economic boom. Because of racism, restrictive housing covenants, and affordability, in San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles, African Americans moved into Japanese American neighborhoods whose inhabitants had been forcibly removed and interned during the war (Lai 2012, 156). In San Francisco, this neighborhood is known as the Fillmore, or more expansively, the Western Addition. After the end of World War II, many Japanese Americans returned to the Fillmore and these two communities coexisted for more than twenty years until two urban renewal projects, A-1 and A-2, displaced more than 13,000 of the neighborhood’s lowest income residents (160). In “The Racial Triangulation of Space: The Case of Urban Renewal in San

Francisco's Fillmore District" Clement Lai details how predominantly black organizations such as The Western Addition Community Organization (WACO) later known as the Western Addition Project Area Committee (WAPAC) and Freedom House fought against the displacement of low income African Americans and the destruction of low income housing. These community organizations legally challenged the redevelopment projects in court and in public throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The work of these community organizations, along with changes in urban redevelopment policy, stalled the completion of A-2, which was officially sunset in 2008. Nevertheless, Lai claims that the early displacement of housing and individuals, along with the construction of the Geary expressway, "effectively destroyed the city's most significant African American and Japanese American neighborhoods" (152).

According to recent census data and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, the black population of San Francisco has decreased from 13% to 6% from 1970-2013.^[1] The current African American population of San Francisco is both decreasing and geographically dispersed. In Oakland and East Berkeley, traditionally thought of as the heart of the Bay Area's black community, African American residents are also being displaced as rent increases and Oakland becomes "the new Brooklyn" (Haber 2014). In her article "Oakland Wants You to Stop Calling It 'The New Brooklyn'" Susie Cagle writes that Oakland's black population has fallen 25% from 2000-2010 largely as a result of the foreclosure crisis and the consequent spate of flipped properties that are now too expensive for working class Oakland residents but a bargain for middle and upper class San Franciscans moving out of a now unaffordable city (2014).

Understanding the decades of hostility towards the development and maintenance of African American communities in the Bay Area is vital to understanding the mission and operation of The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, one of San Francisco's oldest existing black theatres. Stanley E. Williams and Quentin Easter founded the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in 1981. The theatre's two permanent homes were both located in the downtown theatre district surrounding Union Square that includes the Mid Market and Tenderloin neighborhoods. The company lost the home it had occupied for nearly 20 years (since 1988) when the building that housed the theatre was sold in 2007 to the for-profit educational institution, the Academy of Art. There were public protests and boycotts of the Academy of Art, which nevertheless evicted LHT and turned its theatre space into a student gymnasium (Chastang 2007). Although unsuccessful, these protests showed resistance to the profit driven displacements of the 21st century and supported the value of LHT as an important civic institution.

After several years of presenting work in temporary locations, Williams and Easter leased another theatre on Post Street in 2010. The company had to cancel the lease when both partners faced chronic illness and passed away later that year (Hurwitt 2010). In 2011, the newly appointed artistic director, Steven Anthony Jones, announced that the theatre had renegotiated a five-year lease on the Post Street theatre. The company left the Post Street location in 2012, however, "in favor of two new programs: the LHT partnership series and Bringing Art to the Audiences" (Lorraine Hansberry Theatre 2015). During a telephone interview with Jones, the artistic director stated, "Sometimes, if you have a space, that can put you in the most perilous position. The model that works for larger theatres just does not work for smaller organizations. It is so expensive to maintain a space that it really only works for large theatres" (2016). In lieu of taking on the substantial financial responsibility of an ongoing lease in downtown San Francisco,

the theatre has sought to forge partnerships with other artistic and cultural institutions throughout the Bay Area.

From 2008-2015, The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre partnered with major Bay Area theatre companies and listed productions featuring African American playwrights as part of its “passport seasons” (Lorraine Hansberry 2015). When asked about these partnerships during our interview, Jones responded:

When the theatre started the black population in San Francisco was larger and the theatre also appealed to the black population in the entire Bay Area. Those theatregoers tended to support us and not attend the other theatres so much. The Mime Troupe attracted some of that audience and Teatro Campesino and all of the other theatres of color had their own representative audiences. That has changed. The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre’s home audience is still primarily African American but the African American population in the Bay Area has really shrunk... Now, because everybody does black plays, the audience is also more dispersed among the different theatres. What I’ve observed is that people who go to the theatre today go to more than one [institution]. That is why we developed what we called our passport season. We would sell tickets to our subscription buyers to the other theatres in the area that were producing black plays. Our subscription buyers would buy a ticket to see a play at Berkeley Rep[ertory Theatre] or Marin Theatre Company or ACT [American Conservatory Theatre] and we would make a little bit of money from the sale and it allowed us to support some of the programming we were doing (2016).

During our interview Jones also acknowledged that the passport season did not adequately support the independence and financial strength of the institution. “We have stopped doing [the passport season] because it took up a lot of staff time and the other theatres got a little more tightfisted and it just became too difficult financially, so we’ve stopped doing that” (2016).

The 2014-2015 passport season included eight productions, two LHT productions-- the gospel musical “Black Nativity” and “Thurgood,” a one-man show about the iconic Supreme Court Justice. The other five productions listed on the LHT website were produced by American Conservatory Theatre, the Cutting Ball Theatre, Marin Theatre Company, the Magic Theatre, SF Playhouse, and Just Theatre in Association with the Shotgun Players. It was clear to me from looking at this season lineup that the company’s ability to offer an extensive autonomous production season had been profoundly reduced since the loss of its permanent space and the death of its founders.

As is the case in other American cities, the performance of economic power is clear in these kinds of partnerships—arts organizations of color have less and arts organizations that are predominantly white have more. It is extremely problematic in a multicultural city like San Francisco to see this kind of economic disparity between such institutions. It is not enough for white institutions to produce black plays or even to support the productions of a black theatre company. These are admirable efforts, but neither fully enacts cultural autonomy and equality. This is not a criticism of the institutions that partnered with LHT but rather a criticism of a larger

urban arts ecosystem that clearly demonstrates the fact that white cultural institutions are seen as central and institutions of color as peripheral.

Elsewhere I have written about the problematics of this dynamic in which I analyze Penumbra's collaborations with The Guthrie Theatre (Mahala 2013, 74-80). When I spoke to Steven Anthony Jones about this dynamic and asked if similar issues were involved with the LHT partnerships, he replied that these kinds of partnerships were "unequal" in terms of size and resources. He further elaborated:

ACT [American Conservatory Theatre] and LHT have a long history primarily because I have been a member of both institutions. Because ACT was my artistic home for many years, I had access to ACT's costume shop space for free and free is a great price. I did the workshop of *The Jamaican Wash* there. I paid my actors and we did a public reading in the costume shop of ACT. That was good and very beneficial. I wouldn't want to produce there because there is only room for an audience of 60. But they have created that space for small to medium theatres to use and in that way to connect to the larger creative community of the city. ACT has a wealth of space and facilities and they occasionally make it available to smaller theatres... LHT theatre [also] produced *Dutchman* with ACT graduate students. In these kinds of partnerships, the smaller theatre benefits from the very large subscription audience of the larger theatre noticing you and that's a benefit, but it's not as big a benefit as you might think... Right now I'm more interested in collaborations among equals. The passport season was a lot of work and the financials became harder and harder... What I'm looking at now is real collaboration. (2016).

At the time of our conversation, Jones was on the verge of brokering a new partnership—this time with three other small to mid-sized African American performing arts organizations, all operating out of the African American Art and Culture Complex, which is located in the Fillmore neighborhood.

I am really excited that we are moving our offices to the African American Art and Culture Complex (AAACC), which is the home of the Buriel Clay Theater. We are in the process of forming a consortium with the organizations that already have their offices there: Cultural Odyssey, Afro Solo, and African American Shakespeare Company. We have agreed to share this building and its resources and we are all going to produce work there. I think it's exciting, it will help us all to sustain ourselves and we will be working together. That has never happened before. I think that's the way forward for small organizations and all African American theatres are small organizations... By participating in the African American Arts Complex consortium we can pool our resources (2016).

Because the city of San Francisco owns the building out of which the AAACC operates, the costs of office and performance space are substantially subsidized. The AAACC is also directly supported by the San Francisco Arts Commission whose mission is to champion, "the arts as essential to daily life by investing in a vibrant arts community, enlivening the urban environment

and shaping innovative cultural policy,” and whose vision includes “a San Francisco where the transformative power of art is critical to strengthening neighborhoods, building infrastructure, and fostering positive social change” (2014, 10). As rental and real estate prices have skyrocketed in San Francisco, one of the primary concerns of the Arts Commission has been to find ways to support and subsidize historically important arts organizations and individuals that might otherwise be driven out of the city. Taking advantage of the resources of city government, particularly in regards to facilities and performance space seems key to the continued survival of the theatre.

The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre has also reached out to a wider geographical area in an effort to build its audience base. For its “Bringing Art to the Audiences” program, LHT offers a series of staged readings at African American cultural institutions across the Bay Area such as The Museum of the African Diaspora (MOAD) in San Francisco, The Eastbay Center for the Arts in Richmond, and the Oakland School for the Arts. Through this program, the theatre is able to forge partnerships with other African American arts organizations and operate in communities that have twice the African American population as the city of San Francisco.

On February 20, 2016, LHT produced a staged reading of Britney Frazier’s play, *Dysphoria* at MOAD. The ticket price included access to both the reading and the museum attracting and intermingling patrons of both institutions. *Dysphoria* featured a transgendered main character struggling with suicide and drug addiction. During our interview Jones explained why he had chosen to present this work. “Because we are named for a great African American woman artist, every season we produce plays by African American women. Our other major area of focus is on issues of social justice as they relate to African Americans” (Jones 2016). *Dysphoria* certainly fit these criteria and featured characters that reflected the struggles of San Francisco’s many homeless and mentally ill inhabitants. The event featured a talkback where the audience discussed how to acknowledge and process the trauma the play depicted.

Both the programming choices and operational challenges Lorraine Hansberry Theatre has faced typify the current crisis facing working class communities of color in San Francisco. Just as individuals are being pushed out of a city whose vibrancy they have helped to create, so are the arts institutions that make the city such a cultural gem. The fact the theatre has been able to persist in a city that is experiencing massive displacement is a testament to the individuals and organizations who have worked to sustain and protect civic space in an increasingly commercial city.

The recent history of Penumbra Theatre Company (PTC) in St. Paul, Minnesota offers another example of an African American theatre responding to the effects of urban neoliberalization. Penumbra has avoided many of the challenges facing the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre as a consequence of the substantially different urban arts ecology of which it is a part. One major difference between the two theatres is that Penumbra originated as part of the community organization from which it currently leases its space. There is thus a long-term affinity between the theatre, its landlord, and its immediate community. Penumbra is also located in a neighborhood, Old Rondo, whose black residents date back to the 19th century. David Vassar Taylor’s publication, *African Americans in Minnesota* (2002), goes into great detail regarding the cultural import and history of this neighborhood. As its history is fairly well documented, I will

focus mainly on recent and current changes to the neighborhood and the impact of these changes on the theatre as a result of the changing economic and cultural landscape of the Twin Cities Metropolitan area, an area that includes the cities of St. Paul, Minneapolis, and the surrounding suburbs.

The Twin Cities, like many American cities, have seen the dispersal of its black communities through a variety of factors, including destructive planning and zoning, the end of segregationist policies that had previously deterred African Americans from moving into the suburbs, and the gentrification of urban spaces. To get an idea of the changing demographics of the neighborhood of which Penumbra is a part, it is useful to look at recent census data. Penumbra is part of Census Tract 339, which according to data analysis using population estimates from the 2005-2009 American Survey was 49% white and 43% black. Adjacent census tracts to the north, particularly tracts 335 and 336 were majority black at 65% and 76% percent respectively, while census tracts to the west and south (338 and 354) were respectively 38% and 24% black (Bloch et al 2015). The demographic changes depicted in these census estimates show the black community has remained fairly concentrated north of Interstate 94, while areas south of the freeway have been rebranded as part of the Cathedral Hill neighborhood and have become or are in the process of becoming predominately white.

Similar to the creation of the Geary expressway during the 1960s in San Francisco, which displaced members of that city's black community, the construction of Interstate 94 during the 1960s in St. Paul fractured the black neighborhood of Rondo, destroying the main thoroughfare and business center for which the neighborhood was named. On July 17, 2015 city and state representatives officially apologized for the destruction of the heart of this community. Minnesota Public Radio quoted Minnesota Transportation Commissioner Charles Zelle, who spoke at a community healing ceremony. "I apologize," Zelle stated, "I stand before you on behalf of the state and the many people of the Department of Transportation to actually commit to a new era where we do put people ahead of highways, and community ahead of cars" (Simonson and Cox 2015). It is significant that in both of these case studies, the black neighborhoods of each city have been willfully harmed by city and state efforts that have ignored the needs of black communities, particularly in regards to the transportation projects of the 1960s.

While sharing some the challenges faced by the Fillmore District such as displacement and destruction of homes and business in favor of expressways, St. Paul's black neighborhood has been able to maintain some sense of community and representational power through activism and the work of many individuals and community organizations. Residents and allies in city governance, in particular, have directed resources toward the maintenance and support of this neighborhood. The neighborhood has had several prominent residents and supporters such as County Commissioner Toni Carter and her husband Melvin Carter (LaBelle), former police chief William Finney (Emerson 2015), and professional athletes committed to local philanthropy such as David Winfield, the first professional athlete to establish a charitable foundation (Skipper), and his brother Steve Winfield (Imhotep 2014). All these individuals have advocated for the importance of this community and the African American people within it.

The founding of Penumbra during the 1970s was, in fact, one of the ways that city officials sought to support and invest in the Rondo neighborhood. The grant that the Hallie Q. Brown Center received as part of the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was administered by the city of St. Paul. According to Artistic Director Lou Bellamy,

CETA was a federally funded grant that was founded on the belief that there was a body of knowledge inside the inner city that was worth saving, and that given the resources, that body of knowledge could train people and build institutions and so forth. The community center got one of those grants, and I was hired as a theatre expert to come in and administer it. That program ended up becoming Penumbra. That's how it started (Mahala 2013, 5).

The founding of Penumbra offers an example of a city supporting a black community through the support of black theatre.

While the residents of the old Rondo have continuously advocated for the resources needed to support this community, the neighborhood has continued to face and challenge destructive urban redevelopment projects. Recently, neighborhood residents won a major victory when a community coalition called “Stops for Us,” succeeded in pressuring city planners to reinstate the three stops that had been removed from the city’s newest Light Rail line along University Avenue. These stops run through the predominantly black, Asian, and immigrant neighborhoods along University Avenue and were left off of the 2006 construction plan due to “cost efficiency” and in favor of an express line that would take riders quickly between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul. According to “Stops for Us,”

African-American families who had lived along University Avenue for generations... bristled at the idea of yet another infrastructure project tearing through their neighborhood in the name of regional progress but at the expense of the people whose lives would be affected every day. Several groups even banded together to file Civil Rights Act Title VI discrimination complaints with the Federal Transit Administration, as well as filing a lawsuit challenging the adequacy of the environmental review (Babler 2011).

These community groups succeeded in challenging the governing body, Metropolitan Council, and its resistance to including these stops in part by securing the backing of the Federal Transit Authority (FTA). After meeting with members of “Stops for Us,” FTA administrator Peter Rogoff stated that the omission of the stops was “troubling from a civil rights perspective” and helped to revise the criteria for federal funding for the program to include livability and social justice factors (Babler 2011). The new stops were built and feature beautiful public art from neighborhood resident and original Penumbra Theatre company member Seitou Jones. Jones, who also worked on the public art displayed in the downtown St. Paul stops, enlisted arts students from Gordon Parks High School as assistants on the massive sculptures that adorn the Lexington Avenue stop. In an interview with Lisa Steinmann, Jones described his visual art as part of a tradition of “inspiring people and educating people...it’s all part of civic engagement and really teaching folks how to be citizens” (2012). Jones and all of the individuals and allies of “Stops for Us” succeeded in making the new infrastructure of the city serve African American communities

and reflect African American culture. The success of the Light Rail project is a recent example of how the residents of Ward 1, which encompasses all of the census tracts previously cited, have been able to advocate for the needs of working class African Americans. As an arts organization, Penumbra has both contributed to and benefited from the historical significance of this neighborhood as an African American cultural home.

Given the demographic changes to the neighborhood since the founding of the theatre, I asked Penumbra's co-artistic directors, Lou and Sarah Bellamy, if these changes had impacted the theatre and how they sought to position the theatre in relation to these changes going forward. Lou Bellamy affirmed that

Penumbra is now a destination. In the past, more people would be walking by, dropping their kids off at Hallie Q. Brown [daycare facility] or participating in the center's senior program. [The Center] was a hub for the community. That isn't so much the case anymore. People have to leave their suburb and drive to see our shows. That's really different, so in that case geography is really affecting us (2015).

Sarah Bellamy outlined some of the ways the theatre is trying to connect both to local residents of the neighborhood and to a larger, more geographically dispersed black community.

[This neighborhood] is now a very diverse community and as a theatre

company it's sometimes hard to figure out how to interact with that diversity. In the future we'd like to work with the Parks Board, doing some movie screenings or outdoors events because a lot of people that come to Penumbra don't live in this neighborhood and we'd like to have more visibility and show [local] people that we are here. We're also starting a group called "Black Matters," an interdisciplinary group of black folks who will serve as an advisory board to the theatre including church leaders, politicians, and youth. It will be completely interdisciplinary. This group will help us answer the question: Who comprises the black community in Minnesota today and how can we serve its particular needs (2015)

When asked how she thought of community in relation to Penumbra, Sarah Bellamy stated:

"The Penumbra community is a community of people who value the art and who value social justice and we try to stay connected with them in a way that lets their voices in. The "Let's Talk" series is one of the primary ways we do that" (2015).

Penumbra's Let's Talk Series are 90-minute community engagement forums that focus on issues of importance in the African American community. Topics have included both historical and contemporary subjects. The April 2016 forum is dedicated to discussing the legacy and history of the Black Panther Party and features several former party members, including Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins. Another high profile forum was the September 2014 "Let's Talk Ferguson" forum, which took place shortly after the murder of Michael Brown. These forums are always free and allow the audience to engage with African American history and

current events affecting African American people. I see these “Let’s Talk” forums as a perfect example of the important work that black theatres do. They operate as safe spaces for audiences of all backgrounds to work through the effects and impact of racism in America and as such, their social function is very different from that of a multiethnic theatre, which cannot speak as directly to these specific issues and experiences. Black theatres also clearly demonstrate that black people are the experts of black culture. As a non-commercial space that continues to foster public discourse, Penumbra’s programming is desperately needed in what is becoming an increasingly diverse but still profoundly unequal American society.

The above case studies have shown that there are different ways for black theatre to exist, address community needs, and adapt and respond to current socioeconomic realities. Penumbra Theatre Company has benefited from its ties to the community center it inhabits, the rich history and community building efforts of the neighborhood in which it resides, and its substantial community engagement and social justice initiatives. The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre’s tenacious founders believed that black theatre should be a part of the heart of the city’s downtown theatre district and made that dream a reality for more than 20 years. Its current artistic director is seeking to establish a home in the city’s most famous historically black neighborhood by forging a consortium with the other African American performing arts organizations that are housed there. Despite the economic pressures facing artists of all colors today in America’s most expensive city, the theatre community has rallied to support LHT, and the theatre has reached out to African American communities in the greater Bay area in an effort to “bring the art to the audiences.” These are innovative and commendable tactics. Both institutions show the value of working to create and retain the social and democratic practices of the liberal city, practices that are vital to the survival of America’s black theatres and America’s black communities.

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Notes

[1] The Anti –Eviction Mapping Project is a “a data-visualization, data analysis, and storytelling collective documenting the dispossession of San Francisco Bay Area residents in the wake of the Tech Boom 2.0” “About A(E)MP,” The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project <https://www.antievictionmap.com/about/> (accessed February 1, 2016)

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