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TOP DOGS AND UNDERDOGS

CRITICS OF COLOR AND THE THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE

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ABOUT CRITICAL MINDED
Critical Minded's purpose is to build the resources and visibility of cultural critics of color through: direct support to publications and individuals, research, advocacy, and convening.

Founded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Ford Foundation, Critical Minded launched with a national convening of critics in 2017. It emerged from the belief that engaging critically with the ideas and images that surround us is a prerequisite for transforming our cultural landscape and preserving democracy.

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FOREWORD

HAVING SOMETHING TO SAY: THE FATE OF CRITICS OF COLOR

BY SALAMISHAH TILLET

"I'm just really interested in things, and you don't think of it as my force, or my talent, or anything like that. It's just that if you have something to say, and if there is one person willing to listen, then you should just say it." —Hilton Als, "The Role of the Critic"

How did you become a critic? is one of the most frequent questions people ask me. I often explain that my trajectory has been circuitous: I earned my doctorate in American Studies and had been a literature professor for almost decades when I began writing cultural commentary at *The Root* in 2008, and was part of a cohort of women and writers of color who broke through via online publications. While there is overlap, my two worlds often define "critic" differently based on style, audience, training, research methods, and publications. And because my career has been one of both meeting the standards of and merging journalism and academia, my answer is not as helpful or replicable as I intend.

I bring this up as a source of frustration. We are in a moment where many artists of color have unprecedented visibility and have experienced significant firsts. In 2022, Simone Leigh was the first Black woman to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, followed by Jeffrey Gibson as the first Indigenous artist in 2024. In 2023, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was the first predominantly Asian and Asian American cast film to win the Oscar for Best Picture. Notably, 2022, often hailed as Broadway's most racially diverse season, culminated with Michael R. Jackson's *A Strange Loop* about a young, Black, queer usher, winning the Tony for Best Musical. Following suit, *Topdog/Underdog* and *Appropriate*, respectively written by African American dramatists Suzan-Lori Parks and Branden Jacobs Jenkins, won the Tony for Best Revival of a Play in 2023 and 2024.

Yet neither they nor their work exists in a vacuum. Today, there is growing backlash to the institutional commitments and cultural gains made in response to the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Suddenly, corporate diversity initiatives are disappearing, book bans are rising, and demands to exclude topics like slavery from school curricula throughout the country keep gaining traction. All are signs of a potential cultural backslide—one that we need critics, especially of critics color, to anticipate, call attention to, and grapple with for us.

Practically, this means fewer projects will be greenlit, fewer art exhibitions or theatrical productions funded, and more restrictions will be placed on resources. "You're seeing so many Black shows get canceled," television creator and actor Issa Rae said in a recent interview. "You're seeing so many executives—especially on the DEI side—get canned. ... You're seeing very clearly now that our stories are less of a priority."

So, it is within this challenging context that Critical Minded's *Topdogs and Underdogs: Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape,* the first report of its kind, emerges. Authored by critics Sharon Mizota and Oliver Wang, this is an incisive evaluation of the structural challenges critics of color face and a clarion call for change.

It is divided into two parts—a detailed examination of earlier research, including 162 studies, books, and articles from the past twenty-five years, and sixteen in-depth interviews conducted by and with working theater writers and critics. This approach enables *Topdogs and Underdogs* to provide a bird's-eye view and an intimate understanding of the essential relationship between criticism and cultural production while also making the urgent case for why their voices matter so much today.

"Critics of color are often uniquely positioned to expose and deconstruct malign manipulations of the truth because they have seen, repeatedly, how the dominant culture has suppressed, distorted, or omitted their own communities and stories from cultural discourse and the historical record," Mizota and Wang write. Later, adding, "They are more versatile than critics who only draw upon the values and norms of white culture, and their insights are therefore often more resonant and relevant in our increasingly polyglot world."

For artists, critics often play the unique role of the public interlocutor. We also add so much more through our deep engagement with their work. We contextualize meaning, model rigorous conversations, and provide provocative analysis grounded in creativity and often play and pleasure.

And yet, art is never neutral. Instead, as Critical Minded founders Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang reminded us in their *New York Times* opinion essay, "The Dominance of the White Male Critic," in 2019, "culture is a battleground where some narratives win and others lose." They conclude, "At a time when inequality and white supremacy are soaring, collective opinion is born at monuments, museums, screens, and stages—well before it's confirmed at the ballot box."

Given culture's high stakes, those of us here to make sense of it for ourselves and others take that responsibility seriously. Unfortunately, this report shows that what is not equally valued is our labor and, for many, their livelihood.

This begs the new question:

HOW DO CRITICS

STAY BEING CRITICS?

Topdogs and Underdogs shows several factors that make it difficult for people of color to become critics and why it is even more difficult for them to sustain this career. While I've alluded to the paucity of pipelines to recruit, train, and mentor younger critics, the report also underscores how the economic volatility of media organizations makes critics of color more vulnerable than many of their white peers.

As many news organizations undergo corporate restructuring and massive budget cuts, an industry-wide financial precarity has decreased job creation across all specialties or newsbeats. At the same time, on platforms where criticism has traditionally been published, low staff turnover or belated retirements contribute to the scarcity of full-time jobs for younger critics. The ripple effect means that critics of color primarily work as freelancers, part-time writers, or without a contract, further limiting their mobility within the field.

Equally as bad, but more unexpected, is the paradox of the internet. While its democratizing effect has increased the visibility of critics of color and spawned additional forums for criticism, such as blogs, vlogs, threads, chats, posts, and even YouTube videos, this has not led to large-scale diversity in legacy media institutions.

Topdogs and Underdogs also highlights another pattern: publishers and editors primarily recruit from within their networks and, therefore, risk reproducing a racially homogenous ecosystem. The result: we have too few opportunities to hear from those we urgently need to hear from the most.

This is why I found this report's emphasis on theater criticism exceptionally provocative and insightful. Theater remains one of the few industries in which the "review" continues to have a direct impact. It can influence ticket sales, the reputation of the show's creators and creative team, and the longevity or run of the show itself. And yet, it remains one of the more challenging fields of criticism for writers of color to enter.

There are several reasons for this high bar of entry. While there has been an uptick in coverage of regional theater, because Broadway and the West End are gold standards of theater, living and working in New York City or London, respectively, is a premium. Simultaneously, there is a matter of fluency and field expertise. Like any discipline, theater criticism has its own set of cultural references, canons, and formal conventions. But I often find that the requisite expertise to be a critic is as much a matter of training *and* how we are perceived.

Even as critics of color are singled out, and at times celebrated, for their unique points of view, many of those interviewed here shared that they often have a "burden of representation" and additional responsibilities to audiences and artists of color. Furthermore, they feel as if they have to manage heightened expectations and disappointment in their coverage of artists who are underrepresented and, thus, often under-reviewed.

I opened with Hilton Als, former theater critic for *The New Yorker,* who won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. In his talk entitled "The Role of the Critic," he divulges why many of us have chosen this path: a work of art sparks

our curiosity, discomfort, and desire, and then we share that inquisitiveness or wonder with one person or many others through our prose.

This is not Als' or my origin story alone. It is shared all over the country by many critics of color who have yet to be discovered or, worse yet, have already been discouraged out of the career by media institutions and individual publishers.

"Simply diversifying the critical ranks is not enough in the wake of these alarming shifts," Mizota and Wang write against the backdrop of our current political crisis. "This is the challenge that Critical Minded and likeminded funders must address: sustaining opportunities for critics of color to thrive, in order for creative thought and cultural discussions to reflect our society as a whole."

Topdogs and Underdogs: Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape is a road map. It teaches us how to move forward together to address structural disparities and redress severe inequities in our professions. The report's solutions are achievable, and its vision of plurality is just and true.

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INTRODUCTION

"TO EXTEND THE LIFE
OF A WORK—A NOVEL, A POEM,
A PLAY—WE FEED IT OUR OWN."
PARUL SEHGAL[1]

Despite traditional appeals to universal standards, the act of criticism is intimately bound up with a critic's identity and position in the world. To create criticism is indeed to "extend the life of a work," both by conveying something of its nature and content to far-flung audiences, but also by standing in for that audience, bringing one's own background, experiences, and feelings to bear on a work of art. It is in this interaction between work and audience—whether positive, negative, or in between—that culture is shaped. By sharing the workings and outcomes of such interactions with the world, critics play an integral role in helping us to understand and orient ourselves in our cultural landscape.

Criticism happens everywhere, in:

NEWSPAPERS,
MAGAZINES,
BOOKS, TELEVISION,
RADIO SHOWS,
WEBSITES, BLOGS,
SOCIAL MEDIA,
NEWSLETTERS,
PODCASTS,
ONLINE VIDEOS,
CONVERSATIONS,
BOTH PUBLIC
AND PRIVATE

A piece of criticism can be as long as a book or as brief as a social media "like." For better or worse, criticism is now a major driver—both financially and culturally—of the internet, where everyone shares their reviews and opinions on just about everything.

However, amid this abundance, it is increasingly difficult to make a living as a critic. In the last twenty years, debates about who shapes cultural discourse have taken on new urgency in the wake of transformations to the publishing and media industries brought about by the rise of the internet and social media. While there has been an explosion of critical activity online, traditional print media has suffered waves of losses to their readerships and, revenue streams. The contraction of paid opportunities in arts journalism in general, and criticism in particular, is well documented, leading to a severe reduction in the number of critic positions that pay living wages.[2] At a time when critics of color have unprecedented access to avenues for publishing and disseminating their criticism, the structures that previously provided financial compensation for that work are collapsing.

This could be a coincidence in timing, but it's also possible that declining compensation for criticism is partly the product of the profession becoming more diverse. This is linked to what labor scholars describe as "occupational prestige," where patriarchal and/or racist attitudes view labor linked to an increasingly feminized and/or non-white workforce as less prestigious and therefore, less "worthy" of higher pay.[3] However, this effect is often best observed once a profession has significantly changed its workforce composition and, as this study emphasizes, despite increasing diversification among critics, the profession remains largely white and male. Nevertheless, there has been little research done on criticism as a profession, and the impact of changing demographics on its wages is still speculative and in need of greater data-gathering and analysis.

Regardless of their origins, economic precarity and professional fragmentation challenge the criticism profession as a whole. Publications terminating full-time staff positions usually replace them with low-paying freelance work, forcing critics to constantly juggle multiple assignments and other jobs. These economic pressures disproportionately impact critics of color, both in the past and present. This, in turn, sustains decades-old concerns about whose voices "matter" within the critical realm, where "mattering" is clearly tied to financial compensation. The lack of financial support for critics of color has effects that extend to larger issues around whose artistic and creative work gets discussed—or even recognized—with any meaningful level of cultural competency or sensitivity.

And yet, ironically, some of the same forces creating contractions in the traditional print industry are creating new opportunities for critics—especially critics of color—to make their voices heard through multiple, emergent channels and platforms. In the twentieth century, print publication hierarchies and old boys' club–style gatekeeping served to severely restrict opportunities for critics of color and/or women. Over the past twenty-plus years, the rise of internet-era outlets creates the impression that the critical space has become

more democratized. "Internet culture has allowed for an explosion of identity-focused pop culture criticism, giving virtually anyone a platform for voicing their frustrations with dominant narratives," wrote Maegan Clearwood and Hannah L. Jones in 2019, citing feminist critic Jill Dolan: "This shift in power away from white male gatekeepers and into the hands of the many marks a crucial opportunity for change-making."[4]

However, tech optimism has to be severely tempered by the reality that opportunities to write criticism seem inversely proportional to the ability to make a living doing so. As visual art critic Ben Davis wrote in August 2023, "In some ways, more culture writing circulates than ever before, but with fewer resources invested in any individual piece of writing."[5] That extends to the lack of investment in writers themselves, least of all in critics of color. Although we are seeing heartening efforts to establish nonprofit, worker-owned publications and hyperlocal, social-media-oriented news outlets such as Hell Gate* and Courier, it remains to be seen if these new models will be financially sustainable in the long run. Their emergence, along with the presence of more established nonprofit publishers like ProPublica, National Public Radio (NPR), and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), point to the need for fact-based journalism and trenchant, informed criticism as foundations of a democratic society. The old, for-profit model of journalism can no longer provide these public necessities at the breadth and depth required by our diverse populace, and this beleaguered landscape is also complicated by the rise of social media influencers, whose opinionated content resembles criticism but is often paid for by brands. It is increasingly difficult to discern criticism from product placement or advertising, and new approaches are needed if we are to continue to have accurate and impactful cultural debates.

The implications of these challenges aren't just professional but deeply political. As we see the resurgence of book bans and legislation outlawing critical race theory and the expression of trans or LGBTQ+ identities, amid unceasing waves of disinformation, it is more important than ever that we support and promote the independent voices of critics in general, and critics of color in particular. As critic, editor, and Critical Minded founder Elizabeth Méndez Berry asserted in 2018, critics of color bring essential skills and viewpoints to the table:

> Their voices are needed more than ever as a culture war escalates under an administration openly hostile to ideas, critical thinking, and people of color. The tiki torches are easy to spot, but more subtle and seductive forms of supremacy—embedded in the pop many Americans consume without question—must be dissected by people fluent in the aesthetics of manipulation.[6]

Critics of color are often uniquely positioned to expose and deconstruct malign manipulations of the truth because they have seen, repeatedly, how the dominant culture has suppressed, distorted, or omitted their own communities and stories from cultural discourse and the historical record. They

also benefit from "double consciousness," or an understanding of both dominant culture and that of their communities of origin.[7] This duality (or, in some cases, multiplicity) of cultural frames enables them to offer knowledgeable and perceptive insights into cultural productions from both the dominant culture and their cultures of origin. They are more versatile than critics who only draw upon the values and norms of white culture, and their insights are, therefore, often more resonant and relevant in our increasingly polyglot world. Because of this versatility, it is crucial that critics of color continue to be able to weigh in substantively on the cultures of our time.

This report was prepared with the aim of teasing out the nuances and details of the issues confronting critics of color within this landscape, as well as to suggest strategies for addressing them. It is intended primarily for critics and funders, but we hope that others invested in the survival and vibrancy of our arts ecosystems—artists, editors, producers, publishers, administrators, educators, publicists, etc.—will also find it useful in informing and guiding the decisions they make about who and what they champion and to which audiences. This report will no doubt give rise to many new and old questions about the role of criticism, its impact, where it takes place, who is reading it, etc. While this study touches on all of these aspects, it is primarily focused on recording the experiences of critics of color, in particular, theater critics of color, and making recommendations based on these experiences. This report certainly gives rise to multiple avenues of future research to pursue, and we include some of them in the "Recommendations" section.

The report has two main sections. The first is a systematic analysis of 162 previous studies, books, and articles from the past twenty-five years that address various aspects of these aforementioned issues. The vast majority of them focus on particular artistic/cultural disciplines—television, visual art, theater, etc.—and our analysis tries to balance acknowledging discipline-specific issues and drawing larger conclusions that may be useful for all disciplines to consider. To that aim, the second part of our report is based on sixteen in-depth interviews conducted by and with working theater writers/critics. We discuss the choice of theater as a study site in the "Methodologies" section of this report in greater depth, but we felt that the economic and existential challenges currently facing theater in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which echo similar contractions in journalism, made it an especially urgent area for study. Theater criticism, compared to other disciplines, also has a relatively direct impact on ticket sales and the length of run of any individual production and, as such, provides a useful lens through which to understand both specific and general trends within the criticism profession.

Overall, our landscape analysis seeks to provide a series of actionable recommendations that we hope are meaningful for writers, editors, publishers, and especially funders to consider. Writing about the news industry as a whole in their 2020 Ford Foundation* report, *Reconstructing American News*, Katie Donnelly and Jessica Clark identified a dire need for philanthropic institutions to shift their priorities within news journalism, and we feel the same holds equally for cultural criticism: "Up until this point, much of the

focus for funders in this space has been on supporting innovation in products and platforms. It's now paramount to resource new people, processes, and power relations."[8] In particular, Donnelly and Clark express concern over how many current efforts around "engaged journalism" tend to involve "larger outlets reaching out to members of underserved populations rather than elevating them to leadership." These efforts may diversify both perspectives and bylines, but do little to change the biases embedded in the centers of power and decision-making that determine what gets written about. Meanwhile, Donnelly and Clark identify "young white men from urban power centers" as the ones receiving foundation and investor support, mostly for tech-driven projects, while "women, people of color, and those in rural areas have been largely excluded from this arena." To put it another way, funders' preoccupations and anxieties around new technologies only serve to reinforce existing inequities. In short, the call here—which our report supports—is toward a more transformative set of initiatives that don't simply diversify the landscape of criticism, even if that remains a necessary goal, but aim to fundamentally reshape media hierarchies and their distribution of resources. As our report details, finding new critics of color isn't the primary issue in 2025: it's creating sustainable career pathways for those writers.

We see Critical Minded's focus on critics of color as part of this shift toward confronting long-standing power structures and relationships that define and condition who and what gets written about and by whom. These concerns couldn't arise in a more precarious social moment, with increasing judicial rollbacks and legislative attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the workplace and affirmative action in educational opportunities, as well as levels of politically motivated censorship and attacks on civil and voting rights unseen since the days of Jim Crow and McCarthyism. Simply diversifying the critical ranks is not enough in the wake of these alarming shifts. As Donnelly and Clark state, "Equity demands more than just representation—it requires inclusion, advancement, and when needed, making accommodations to ensure that all perspectives are represented." This is the challenge that Critical Minded and like-minded funders must address: sustaining opportunities for critics of color to thrive, in order for creative thought and cultural discussions to reflect our society as a whole.

A NOTE ON TRANSPARENCY

Critical Minded provides funding support for a number of organizations and/or is affiliated with others through its board members and networks. When these organizations appear in this report, they are marked with an asterisk (*), indicating that the organization has received support from or has a relationship with Critical Minded.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at the conditions and challenges faced by critics of color in the United States, with a particular focus on theater critics. Critics of color are confronted with a dire situation as the rise of internet publishing and social media has decimated the traditional print-based model for compensation, which not only threatens people's livelihoods but also hampers efforts to diversify the critical landscape. Critics of color have always contended with forms of implicit and institutionalized bias that have limited their opportunities, and the erosion in living wages for all writers risks further segregating whose voices are read and heard.

This study is the first of its kind. While there have been previous studies of cultural critics in various disciplines, none have focused on the experiences of critics of color in the US. This report is a first step toward what can be a continued engagement and commitment to the better understanding of and support for critical perspectives and dialogues about our shared cultural forms. There is a conspicuous need for additional studies that examine the conditions and challenges faced by critics of color, especially in other disciplines such as visual art, popular music, books, etc.

Our report is based on both a systematic analysis of existing literature on arts criticism in the US (Part One) and sixteen in-depth interviews with contemporary theater critics of color (Part Two). Both halves conclude that what critics of color across cultural disciplines need most are pathways to sustainable careers. Existing, short-term residencies and fellowships remain important, but they are ultimately stopgap measures that do not address the systemic decline of living wages in the publishing and journalism industries. While there is an unprecedented circulation of cultural content appearing online and in print, much of it is under- or uncompensated, leaving viable careers in criticism to an ever-shrinking group of privileged elites.

Critics of color bring much-needed diversity and nuance to cultural dialogues. In many cases, they are more qualified and versatile than their white colleagues to trenchantly interpret and contextualize a wide variety of works. Yet they are often confronted with gatekeeping behaviors that prevent their voices from being heard or minimize their impact. These limit their engagement and career growth in the field, causing some of them to exit the field entirely. In such a reductive environment, where voices of color are few and far between, critics of color also bear the additional burden of "representing" their racial or ethnic groups in ways that white critics rarely have to contend with.

Critics of color also often feel isolated in their work, where they may be only one of a few critics of color in their city or region. They want more opportunities to interact and develop relationships with other critics of color, other critics in general, and with editors and creatives. Because their work is typically not well-compensated, the social and cultural dimensions and effects of their practice are especially important to them. Critics of color need more opportunities for connection, encouragement, and mentorship in order to sustain their work.

Much of what we heard from our pool of theater critics in Part Two reinforced the above points. However, there were several areas where their experiences were discipline-specific, especially in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the overall theater industry. As theaters reopened, critics reported that the creatives behind productions reacted more negatively toward critical reviews, often accusing critics of not being supportive of an industry struggling to recover financially. Critics of color perceive these reactions as often having a racist dimension. Theater critics also struggle with the perceived elitism of their discipline. Given how theater tickets are often expensive and audiences tend to be older and white, some critics experience microaggressions linked to their mere presence at shows.

They see their work as having an important role in broadening and diversifying the audience for theater by making it relatable to other audiences. Finally, unlike the other critics represented in this report, we were able to ask theater critics for their recommendations for how to improve the landscape for criticism. Their responses are reflected in our recommendations for more sustainable financial support and more opportunities for education and community-building among critics and editors.

Our report's recommendations include the following:

01. SUPPORT EFFORTS AROUND HIRING AND LONG-TERM RETENTION OF CRITICS OF COLOR

Critics of color need sustainable forms of income in order to continue writing and lending their perspectives to public discourse. We recommend funding full-time positions for critics of color and/or collaborating with writers, editors, and publishers to explore the viability of new forms and models of publishing that can provide living wages.

02. FACILITATE CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH EMERGENT CONTENT TECHNOLOGIES

As we have seen the rise of the internet transform the publishing industry, it is important for critics of color to have a voice in and provide critical perspectives on the development of the next generation of technologies, including artificial intelligence. We recommend funding fellowships and/or hosting symposiums that counter the deployment of racist technologies in the cultural sphere.

03. BUILD COMMUNITY IN THE CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM

In addition to financial support, critics also voiced a need for a sense of community and encouragement to keep going. We recommend creating or supporting infrastr-ucture for critics to meet and interact with each other and with editors, whether in the form of an online platform, local meetups in different cities, or the expansion of existing training and mentoring programs.

04. ENCOURAGE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH INTO THE CRITICAL LANDSCAPE FOR WRITERS OF COLOR

Critics of color and criticism in general are understudied, and we make several recommendations for areas deserving of future study.

POP MUSIC CRITICISM

We recommend funding a study of pop music critics that utilizes Critical Minded's existing networks through the Pop Conference* and the Word: Life symposium.

CAREER SPAN AND OTHER PROFESSIONS

We recommend a longitudinal study of the career spans of critics of color and how they've changed over the years, including the other professions for which they left criticism.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CRITICS AND CREATIVES

More research is needed into the relationships between critics and creative communities. How has the internet changed these relationships?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIDEO FORMATS

Research is needed specifically into the role these new formats play in the critical landscape. Where is the line between critics and influencers?

PIPELINE FOR NEW CRITICS.

How do people become critics? What crucial forms of support do they need? What role do editors of color play in the development of critics of color?

METHODOLOGIES

We define "critics of color" as writers with ancestry in one of the original peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania, or Pacific Islands who write or speak critically about cultural phenomena such as visual art, architecture, film, music, theater, dance, performance art, food, etc.

This report has two parts. Part One is a systematic review of both published studies from the last twenty-five years that examine the state of various journalistic and criticism fields, as well as more contemporary articles, op-eds, talks, panels, videos, and podcasts discussing the state of arts criticism for writers of color in the US since the 2010s. Most of these previous studies and published works were focused on specific cultural disciplines—music, books, film, visual art, etc.—and the goal of the systematic review was to consolidate these various strands to form the titular landscape for analysis.

Ideally, there would have been a larger body of established scholarship on arts criticism to include, but the reality is that very little of this work has ever been undertaken, and the amount of *current* work—from the past ten years—is even smaller. This is one reason why we turned to published articles/essays as another set of sources. However, we want to make clear that most of these articles are not based on empirical data and primarily include first-person accounts and perceptions. For our purposes, these still constitute valuable forms of qualitative data.

We identified these sources through a process of iterative online searching, starting with institutional reports by the likes of the Pew Research Center and Nieman Reports, as well as research papers in scholarly journals. This approach resulted in very few results that fit our ideal parameters; most of what we found were either studies of the field of criticism or journalism as a whole—*not* focused on the experiences of writers of color—or they were dedicated to debates in Black literary criticism dating back to the 1970s, which were outside of our temporal scope. As neither of these bodies of literature was likely to reveal realities of the *contemporary* situation facing critics of color specifically, we widened our search to include publications widely available on the internet.[9]

This broadened the number of resources for analysis to 162. Afterward, each resource was reviewed, with special attention paid to relevant passages and statements. These excerpts were added to the bibliography itself beneath each entry. We then fed the bibliography into Taguette, a coding software, and coded the notes and quotes according to major themes. This coded data was the basis for the Systematic Review.

It's important to emphasize that the perspectives and experiences of critics of color in this report were inadvertently dominated by critics working in the disciplines of *film and television*; this area ended up being overrepresented in our searches. Although we attempted to ensure representation of critics in other disciplines in the report, our research methodology privileged publications that were discoverable online, and film and television critics are more active in these spaces. As we discuss in our Recommendations section, there is a conspicuous need for future research to be done in other disciplines, including

popular music, food, dance, etc., as there have been little to no previous studies conducted in these cultural spheres.

It is also important to note that this report does not capture the opinions and attitudes of writers who may produce criticism but don't consider themselves "critics," such as novelists, academics, or creatives. As our literature search focused on sources written specifically *about* critics of color, it necessarily excluded folks who don't openly identify as such, or who haven't produced work specifically about critics of color or their criticism.

Part Two focuses on theater criticism in particular, drawing upon sixteen interviews conducted in the fall and winter of 2023–24 with contemporary theater critics of color. The goal here was to collect qualitative data in the form of current testimonials from working critics in one specific discipline, with the aim of summarizing their primary perspectives and concerns, and then comparing those to the conclusions drawn from the Systematic Review. We decided on sixteen as the optimal number of interviews we could schedule and conduct within the time frame established for this report and because it was easily divisible between the two researchers who conducted eight interviews each.

The focus on theater critics of color was partly influenced by the perceived effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the theater industry. In 2020, theater productions abruptly shut down, leading to economic losses that forced some companies to shutter entirely. Since the end of the lockdowns, audiences have been slow to return, resulting in anxieties about the collapse of the subscription ticket model and the viability of live performance as a whole. We thought it was an important moment to listen to theater critics and record their experiences in a sector that is currently going through significant change and adaptation.

To ensure a diverse and representative cross section of interviewees and to formulate relevant questions, we hired experienced theater critics/journalists of color to assist with selecting the interviewees, to help develop the interview questions, and to conduct the interviews themselves. We circulated the job description through direct emails to potential candidates and used both convenience and snowball sampling. We also emailed potential candidates through the Underrepresented Theater Critics Google Sheet. After interviews with four finalists, we selected Kelundra Smith and Steven Vargas, both veteran writers on arts/culture, especially in theater.

As noted, we worked with Smith and Vargas to first select the sixteen people to be interviewed, who were chosen to reflect differences in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and career stage.[10] Each researcher interviewed eight critics in approximately hour-long interviews, using this standard set of questions developed alongside the report's authors:

01. How long have you been doing theater criticism?

02. How did you discover theater criticism as a career, and how have you navigated the industry? What were the crucial relationships or organizations that helped you in your career?

03. Do you make a living exclusively as a theater critic? What streams of income help you continue to write criticism?
    A. How much do you make per review?
    B. Who is paying you?

04. What are the prominent barriers and challenges you've experienced in pursuing theater criticism? Have you experienced difficulty getting access to previews or tickets?
    A. Is this access different depending on the type of production (Broadway tours, NY productions, local productions)?

05. How have recent events (pandemic, collapse of the subscription model, etc.) impacted your work as a critic?

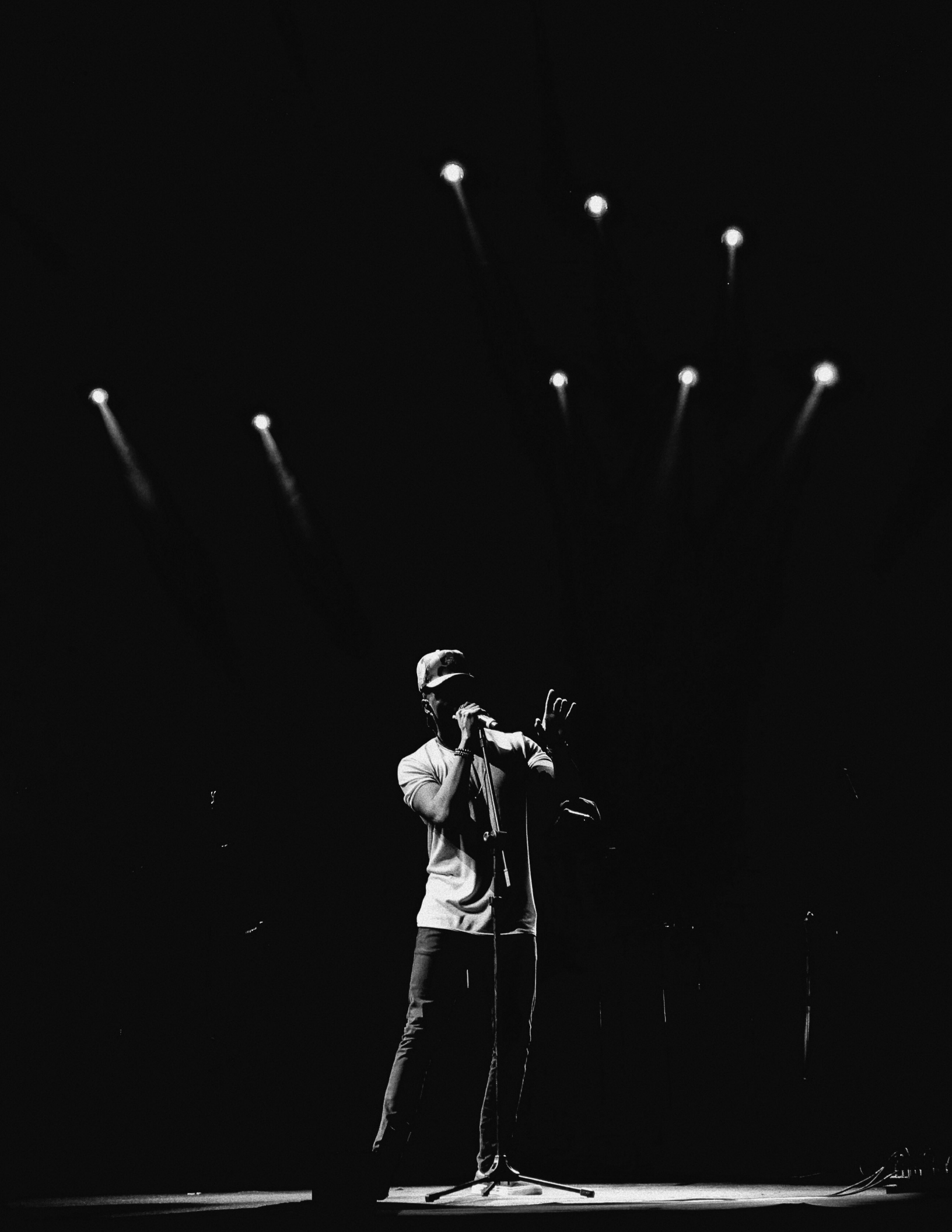
06. How has discrimination (based on race, gender, sexuality, etc.) limited your ability to do your job as a theater critic? Do you feel like others assume you will positively cover shows because of your background?

07. How do you think people view theater criticism? Has that perception changed since you've started in the industry? What do you hope would change?

08. What does the future of theater criticism look like to you? How do technology and social media play a role in where the industry is going?

09. How can funders like Critical Minded help support critics of color and criticism in general?

Both researchers were encouraged to ask additional questions as each conversation and time allowed. The interviews were conducted between October 2023 and February 2024 over video conference and recorded. These recordings were transcribed using the transcription software otter.ai. The researchers who conducted the interviews then corrected the transcripts and wrote a summary of each interview. The report's authors then coded the transcripts using Taguette, which, in turn, created the qualitative data that served as the basis for our analysis.



PART ONE

SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

As explained prior, in reviewing the last ten to twenty-five years of research/writing on the state of criticism—either in general and/or specifically for writers of color—we sought to identify major areas of concern, especially those that lend themselves to *actionable solutions.* However, in order to understand the need and urgency of those, we first need to acknowledge some of the realities facing various critical professions, especially around the *lack of diversity among critics*.

This concern has been a consistent issue across most spheres of journalism, not only within criticism. A 2015 Pew Research Center report on diversity in the general journalism profession underscores the matter:

> Although minorities (including black, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American and multiracial populations) make up over a third of the U.S. adult population (35%), they make up only 22% of the local television news workforce, according to a study by the Radio Television Digital News Association. The figure is even lower for daily newspapers, where only 13% of newsroom employees are minorities, according to an annual survey of newsroom employment by the American Society of News Editors (ASNE). These figures have changed little over the past two decades.[11]

Trying to analyze the demographics within arts/cultural criticism is challenging since, as far as we have been able to determine, there has never been a comprehensive study of the demographic diversity of cultural critics in the US across all disciplines (music, theater, film, visual arts, etc.). However, in reviewing a handful of reports from the past *twenty-five years*, there are some insights to learn regarding specific disciplines.

From 2001–2005, the now defunct National Arts Journalism Program (NAJP) at Columbia University's School of Journalism, helmed by András Szántó and Willa J. Conrad, published a series of reports on the state of arts journalism and criticism.[12] Overall, they found that approximately 10 percent of architecture, visual arts, and classical music critics were of color. The first report in 2001 found that out of forty architecture critics surveyed, only three identified as other than white.[13] Similarly, a 2002 NAJP study found that 10 percent of of visual arts critics were of color, while the program's 2005 study of classical music critics quipped, "Writers of nonwhite ethnic backgrounds can only be found with a microscope," adding, "The average classical music critic is a white, 52-year old male, with a graduate degree. Just one in four critics is female, and only 8% are nonwhite."[14] At least across these three disciplines, critics of color were substantially underrepresented, especially compared to the general population of the United States at the time of these NAJP reports, which, according to the 2000 census, was approximately 23 percent non-white.[15]

Similar patterns are found in other disciplines, whether regionally or nationally. A study done by Steve Rendall for Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting

(FAIR) in 2010 looked at the ethnicity of reviewers of politically themed books in the *New York Times* Book Review* from January 2009 to February 2010. It found 96 percent of the reviewers were white.[16] A 2020 article by Kitty Drexel discussed the Boston Theater Critics Association, noting that of eleven current members, none were of color.[17] In film, a 2018 report by the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative* found that barely 23 percent of film critics were of color.[18]

Because of the general rarity of these studies, longitudinal comparisons are difficult to establish. However, in visual arts criticism, a 2019 study by Mary Louise Schumacher for Nieman Reports found that critics of color were approximately 15 percent of the field, up from the 10 percent noted in the NAJP's 2002 study.[19] However, despite this increase, art critics of color are still underrepresented relative to the US population as a whole.[20]

The implications of these trends are stark and significant, not only in regards to who is writing but also in terms of what is being written about and how. The phrase "diversity of voices" isn't simply about statistical markers; it also has deep implications for *what* art and culture is written about and *how*, as well as the ways in which that culture is identified and defined in the first place. The absence of critics of color often aligns with a *dearth of cultural competence* in criticism as a whole.

Nearly thirty years ago, a 1996 article in the periodical *American Visions* featured this plea: "The Robert Henry Johnson Dance Company wants to hear from black critics. The white response to the company's work has been positive, but the dancers feel an imbalance, in that recognition of their excellence is always framed by white standards."[21] As a professor of Latinx studies Arlene Dávila wrote in 2019 of visual arts criticism, "Mainstream art reviewers are infamous for their hostility to anything that indexes race or ethnicity in the art world, especially when it concerns racial minority groups with which they are unfamiliar." She goes on to describe a common lack of knowledge about Latinx communities, such as the assumption that all Latinx people are Mexican, even in New York City, where the community is largely Puerto Rican and Dominican, and the lumping together of artists from Latin America with Latinx artists in the US.[22]

This ignorance results in criticism that resorts to stereotypes and clichés, reflecting whatever a critic happens to know about a community of color. For example, in 2017, Tanuja Jagernauth and Regina Victor wrote, "Many white critics share this inexplicable phenomenon of writing about artists of color and describing their work in terms of cultural foods," citing a review by a theater critic who used words like "kumquat" and "jasmine rice" to describe a work featuring Asian characters that had nothing to do with food.[23] Similarly, Drew Hayden Taylor wrote about "spot-the-trickster syndrome," where Indigenous productions are plagued by constant allusions to trickster characters or metaphors regardless of context: "Not all Indigenous cultures even had a trickster."[24]

As part of the Latina/o Theatre Commons 2013 National Convening, actor Sandra Delgado exclaimed, "I never want to hear another critic compare

a Latina/o play to a telenovela."[25] In "Cultural Microaggressions in Theatre Reviews: A Call for Dialogue," the Latina/o Theatre Commons Steering Committee stated, "To call for a Latina/o play to have more 'Latino flavor' is an act of exoticization. Latina/os are not exotic. We are not a flavor. We are human beings. We are Americans."[26]

The lack of cultural competence also manifests in a different way: a seeming avoidance of meaningful critical engagement. In a 2020 article, theater critic Arifa Akbar noted how white critics were often reluctant to rigorously assess the quality of works by artists of color. "It felt as though white critics were embarrassed—perhaps to reveal their ignorance, or that they would be called racially insensitive. But it meant a lot of them ducked out of actually doing the job properly," she said. Film critic Cate Young addressed this as well in a 2019 article, where she attested that cultural ignorance can result in critics being unable to assess when a representation is stereotypical or problematic.

> Culturally specific subject matter tends to be misunderstood or underestimated by straight white male critics who lack the experiences needed to parse and appreciate the stories that female and minority filmmakers are trying to tell. But the opposite is also true: a lack of experience means white male critics have no context for the problematic depictions in minority stories.[27]

In some cases, the lack of critical engagement may be driven by anxiety about being wrong and/or negative reactions from readers. In a 2020 roundtable discussion, pop culture critic Candice Frederick said:

> I don't think a whole lot of white critics actually review a lot of black content, and when they do, there's a sense that outright saying it's terrible is something they won't do, even if it is. Or what I've been seeing a lot more lately is just complete silence. Completely ignoring it.

Writing in 2014, author Aimee Phan put a finer point on how this impacts the book world:

> What's preventing books by authors of color from being picked up and assigned to a reviewer? While it would be easy to assume editors are lazy or uninterested, the answer probably has much more to do with fear. ... In short, they're scared to talk about race.[28]

Pham also cites an informal 2011–12 study done by writer Roxane Gay and her graduate assistant Philip Gallagher that looked at the race of authors whose books were reviewed by the *New York Times*: "90 percent of the books reviewed by the *New York Times** during that time period were [authored] by white writers, leaving a 10 percent sliver for writers of color."[29] While we don't know how much of that disparity in coverage is due to the fear that Pham mentions,

it likely factors in to some degree. This report's co-author, Oliver Wang, has previously written about how a "comfort zone" of cultural/community familiarity can create a form of implicit bias around how works of art are written about, attended, and/or promoted.[30]

To provide a more concrete example, in a 2018 episode from the podcast *Hard NOC Life,* film critic Jen Yamato discussed the reception of Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs*, in which the country of Japan was used as "set dressing," and characters speaking Japanese were not subtitled:

> As frustrated as I am with the film itself and with Wes Anderson's seemingly narrow perspective on this Japanese culture that he apparently loves so much, I am more frustrated with the film community and writers and critics because so many critics wrote reviews, just glowing reviews, that barely skimmed over the issue of how Japan is used in this movie.[31]

Yamato noted that film critic Justin Chang, who is Asian American, was the only critic who raised the issue.

Meanwhile, the severe underrepresentation of writers of color means these critical lapses largely go unremarked. Writing in 2017 about the film *Detroit*, Anne Branigin suggested,

> *Detroit*, a film that revolves around black trauma, is being lauded as an "important" and timely film—but, by and large, not by black critics. And because black people (and people of color, generally) are so underrepresented in mainstream film criticism, their issues with *Detroit* are mere drops in a sea of overwhelmingly positive reviews. We deserve better than that.[32]

The contraction of sustainable writing opportunities—an issue we will repeatedly reference in this report—only exacerbates these issues. The 2001 NAJP study of architecture critics described how full-time critics, who were largely white and male, wielded an outsize influence: "Together, the full-timers write for newspapers with a combined circulation of more than six million. If these critics praise or condemn a project, there are few places readers would encounter a second opinion."[33] There is no evidence that a quarter-century of time has either increased the number or diversity of full-time architecture critic positions, thus making NAJP's concerns even more paramount now.

Such gaps are part of the reason Cristina Escobar and Nicola Schulze founded their own outlet: Latina Media Co. In a 2022 interview, Escobar said that cultural gatekeeping in the critical establishment is "the third rail for advancing representation in media," because critical discourse helps define what is "good." "If we're not in that conversation, then not only are our needs not being met as audience members, but those stereotypical portrayals aren't even being challenged," she said.

As we stress, the lack of diversity isn't merely a problem within the cultural criticism profession; it has grave implications for the larger artistic/cultural

sphere as it impacts whose work gets noticed, discussed, and, thus, made visible within that sphere and for posterity. A critic's review of a work may be the only way it enters into the historical record. Film critic Carlos Aguilar wrote in a 2021 essay that if critical "assessments come from a nearly homogeneous subset of the population, that most certainly affects which art becomes part of the celebrated canon and what fades into obscurity."[34] Artists also understand how criticism affects the contextualization and historicization of their work. Canadian playwright Yolanda Bonnell (Ojibwe) announced in 2020—to much controversy—that she didn't want white critics to review her play, *bug*, explaining, "The lack of IBPOC [sic] voices in the media—at a time when arts' coverage is shrinking—means white critics are often the gatekeepers of success."[35]

Editors' or writers' personal biases and preferences are also a factor. Arlene Dávila recounted the experiences of a young woman of color at a major art publication in New York City who encountered editors who would not greenlight coverage of art exhibitions outside of the "grid of MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Drawing Center." She also noted that shows by artists of color "do not get written about because critics do not want to go to Harlem or the Bronx."[36]

In the restaurant world, the lack of diversity can lead to critical judgments that reinforce classism and racism by positioning European cuisines above those from other parts of the world, as restaurant critic Korsha Wilson discussed in 2019:

> The homogenous old guard, focusing its coverage on fine or "elevated" dining—and the select restaurants outside of those spheres that it has chosen to hold up in order to maintain the pretense of a fair shake—while often disregarding everyday Caribbean, Asian, South American, Mexican, and African restaurants, sends distinct messages to white readers (here are places you'll like) and readers of color (your spaces don't deserve coverage beyond a cheap eats section).[37]

Another form of erasure has to do with differences in how people access or experience cultural works. Laura Hayes quoted food writer Michael Twitty on how Black diners often have a very different experience of a restaurant than other diners:

> "Imagine you're a black food critic and you get typical black seating by the kitchen or the bathroom," Twitty begins. "If I'm writing about a restaurant and they don't know me from Adam or Eve, they assume I need to be with the rest of the black people. But if you're not black and you reflect an upper middle class background or beyond, your ass gets put in the window. I've been [to] tons of places where I don't get treated well until I pull out my book. I don't want to be special. I just want to be equal."[38]

Without more critics of color being empowered to share their perspectives, this discriminatory treatment never gets written about or critiqued, and

restaurants have no incentive to change their biased treatment of Black patrons. What this situation says about criticism, wrote Critical Minded's Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang in a 2019 *New York Times** op-ed, is that "the spaces in media where national mythologies are articulated, debated and affirmed are still largely segregated. The conversation about our collective imagination has the same blind spots as our political discourse."[39]

These issues also have important economic repercussions for artists and makers. In a collectively authored 2017 "Call Against Critical Bias," a host of writers, mostly academics, wrote of theater criticism, "Critical endorsements directly impact ticket sales and the length of a show's run, in addition to making or breaking a playwright's opportunity for future work."[40] In the restaurant world, chef JJ Johnson observed the same thing, saying, "You want these people to write about you because they do have the power of putting butts in seats."[41] In the film world, the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's "Critics Choice 2" study found that:

> Given that white male critics rate movies with underrepresented female leads lower than their underrepresented female counterparts, this could influence a film's financial performance. Amplifying the role that women of color play in the conversation surrounding films with underrepresented leads could have the potential to increase revenue surrounding these movies. While only preliminary, the findings here demonstrate that in the ecosystem of filmmaking, inequity in film criticism is one piece of a chain of decisions that can affect what audiences can access in the theater.[42]

Ironically, in trying to be cognizant of economic divides, white critics sometimes end up softening their criticism of works by creators of color for fear of damaging their future earning potential. Pop culture critic Soraya Nadia McDonald said in a 2020 roundtable that white critics often feel "hamstrung, about how to be cognizant of the lack of opportunity that black writers and film crews get, and the effect that a negative review could have on future work, while balancing that with honest critique."[43] In trying to acknowledge social and economic inequities, white critics do a disservice to artists of color by not being as critical as they would be of a white artist. This kind of compensatory attitude says as much about the qualms of white critics as it does about the seeming intractability of diversifying cultural production in general. Further compounded by an increasingly small corps of editors and ever-shrinking coverage, it becomes harder for works by artists of color to receive rigorous and culturally appropriate evaluation.

Criticism from a creator's own culture of origin can help raise the profile of creators of color. "Black critiques of Black art are actually good for business," wrote journalist Kathleen Newman-Bremang in 2021. "They're good for Black art. And whether the takes are negative or not, they are good for the betterment of Black creators."[44] Chef Kwame Onwuachi wrote something similar about Black food writers:

> Their enthusiasm can't be tamed. They understand the cuisine, but most importantly they understand what a restaurant like mine means for the industry. It means more people who look like [Black chefs] JJ Johnson, Nyesha Arrington, and Gregory Gourdet, to name [a] few, will eventually get to open up places of their own.[45]

Back in 1980, scholar and director of a Black theater company Rhett S. Jones also recognized the interdependence of Black cultural production and culturally sensitive criticism and called explicitly on funders to support both:

> The absence of informed black criticism is, in part, responsible for the short lives of many black theatres which attract the attention of a funding agency and perhaps have their grants renewed once or twice, but lack an impartial, though sympathetic critic to comment on their work and not only keep them in touch with the black community but provide a reasoned assessment of their activities for funding sources. If some of these sources are as serious in their concern for black community and the black arts as they insist, they might begin by developing an independent corps of critics, white and black, who would be qualified to evaluate black theatre in the context of the black community.[46]

Creative pursuits and criticism form a mutually reinforcing cycle: works that are written about in serious and relevant ways help raise the profile of their creators, who can then go on to make more work. The same is true for critics: opportunities to write tend to lead to more opportunities. As we'll see in the next section, critics of color often find themselves in a similar situation to these Black theaters, where they may receive a smattering of initial opportunities only to find a lack of sustained support for their work.

CHALLENGES FACING CRITICS OF COLOR

This section of the report looks at the challenges critics of color face in doing their jobs. Common challenges that emerged across disciplines in multiple sources are grouped into the following categories:

1. Impact of the Internet
2. Economic Precarity
3. Gatekeeping
4. The Burden of Representation

1. Impact of the Internet

The rise of the internet at the end of the twentieth century quickly precipitated a crisis in the publishing world that continues through the present day. There

is little question as to how the internet disrupted the decades-old, ad-driven financial model of most publications while also creating new opportunities and platforms for critics to find work, albeit often at rates far lower than in the pre-internet era. This turn of events has been well documented elsewhere, but this section reviews the internet's impact on arts and culture critics generally and critics of color in particular.

The first disruptions were felt as coverage of vanguard or "underground" artists began to shift away from print sources toward new online platforms. Scholars András Szántó, Daniel S. Levy, and Andrew Tyndall wrote about this trend in a 2004 report:

> Especially in the last 10 years or so, the arts and culture underground has fallen out of touch with newspapers to the point where dailies and even alternative weeklies may not be in the loop about significant artists and events, while the internet is becoming the preferred source of information for young readers.[47]

If anything, these prognosticators underestimated the impact the internet would have. It wasn't just consumers of "underground" or alternative outlets who shifted their reading practices but generations of mainstream audiences have also moved away from traditional news outlets, print or otherwise, as freely available content and opinions on the internet—especially social media—undercut journalism's reliance on subscriptions and advertising as its funding base. The proliferation of such "free" content on the internet has led to a devaluation of the work of critics, an argument made by theater critic Kelundra Smith in 2017:

> With the democratization of publishing offered by the internet, many traditional media outlets have succumbed to economic pressures, and in many cases the first jobs to go are the arts reporters and critics. This has created an environment in which theatre critics have to justify their existence and importance—especially since, outside of New York, theatre artists are seldom waiting on pins and needles for the first-night review in the papers to determine the fate of their show.[48]

Such changes were evident in visual arts criticism as well. Referring to a report on the state of visual arts criticism by Szántó from 2002, art critic and journalist Mary Louise Schumacher did her own survey in 2019, noting how visual art critics had moved from traditional jobs to less secure online and independent ones.[49]

> The large majority of respondents worked for daily newspapers then, while less than a third of the current group do. Indeed, nearly half work for web-only outlets today, many hustle to write for multiple publications, and nearly a quarter are running their own, independent platform, at least part of the time, according to the new numbers.[50]

Referring to the diminishing market for hip-hop criticism, music critic Greg Tate put it more bluntly in a 2021 roundtable, "Internet killed the Black music journalist star or the Black music star publication."[51] (More information on the economic straits faced by critics of color can be found in the "Economic Precarity" section.)

ONLINE OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

At the same time that the rise of internet journalism and criticism resulted in economic contractions in the publishing world, it also created more opportunities for critics of color who previously may have been marginalized in traditional media. The advent of blogging, vlogging, podcasts, and social media has provided easy, inexpensive access to self-publishing and has allowed critics to find an audience independent of traditional media gatekeepers. "I think Tumblr and Instagram provide a great opportunity for representation we don't otherwise see in mainstream media," said culture columnist Jeneé Osterheldt in a 2018 article. "Social media offers a platform where we can hold space by sharing art that inspires us and represents us, highlighting unsung work and promoting shows that critics otherwise ignore."[52] Scholar Marc Verbood made a similar argument in his 2014 analysis of the aesthetics of online film reviews:

> The ascendance of peer-produced content not only challenges the hierarchical model of cultural evaluation, which is still in use, but adds an extra dimension ... as the field opens up to critics without institutional ties, popular aesthetics will probably become a more commonly applied ideological framework in the critical assessment of culture, thereby eroding the traditional consensus formation of critical assessment.[53]

Yet, despite this democratizing spirit, there is ample evidence that the internet has not radically undone traditional hierarchies of status, power, access, or compensation that continue to privilege "legacy" print publications to the detriment of critics of color and others from similar, marginalized backgrounds. In a 2018 article, journalist Tre'vell Anderson described how preferred access to screenings and film talent is still often reserved for writers from traditional outlets, "and traditional publications tend to have traditional critics." They went on to quote YouTube film critic Wendy Lee Szany, who described how critics working in video are given less film festival access than those writing for text-based publications: "When they look at a YouTube film critic, they think, 'Oh, well, it's just another video' and we're not serious or professional enough to be able to go to TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival] or Cannes or Sundance,* or South by Southwest even."[54] (For more on the lack of access to press screenings and previews, see the "Gatekeeping" section of this report.)

For reasons discussed in the introduction to this report, critics of color face long-standing barriers to working at traditional publications, resulting in a lack of coverage in these outlets of works and events by and for communities of color. A 2014 report on Black and Latinx news consumers found that:

> The two largest minority groups in the United States—African Americans and Hispanics—are in many ways using digital technology for news at similar rates as the American population overall. Yet these Americans do not believe that the growth of web and mobile media has fulfilled the promise of more coverage, and more accurate coverage, of underserved ethnic communities.[55]

The fact that internet publishing is free and open to anyone also, paradoxically, exacerbates economic inequity. Interviewed on a 2018 podcast, Elizabeth Méndez Berry said, "I think the kind of democratization that has resulted from online spaces is amazing ... the massive problem is that the economics are all off, right? So many people are writing for free ... they're writing for free on social media."[56] Because it doesn't come with press access to new works and events or, for that matter, financial compensation, the much touted "democratization" brought about by the internet reinforces and reproduces existing economic and social divisions.

Another problem with the transition to the internet is the flattening of discourse brought about by mass datafication. While critics have traditionally summarized their reviews with "star" ratings or "thumbs up/thumbs down" indicators, the ability of websites to aggregate many reviews and reduce them to succinct ratings, on such sites as Rotten Tomatoes or MetaCritic, works against the diverse discussions the internet is otherwise seen to foster. Film and culture critic Alissa Wilkinson wrote about this phenomenon in 2018:

> Companies aren't going to hire more critics if aggregators like Rotten Tomatoes keep cutting the legs out from under the critics who craft reviews. Media companies, for better or worse, make their decisions based on traffic—and when audiences rely on a simple, flawed score instead of actual reviews, it cuts down on the number of critics who will likely be hired in the future.[57]

These aggregators also replicate existing inequities in who is writing and being recognized for their criticism. Also in 2018, film and culture critic Cate Young wrote:

> While Rotten Tomatoes and MetaCritic are the most popular and most trusted review aggregators, their list of participating publications skews towards legacy media that are also dealing [with] their own ingrained issues with a lack of diverse voices. This means that these services privilege the opinions and perspective of straight white men by default. After all, if the raw data is bad, the results can't be better.[58]

These predicaments suggest that critics of color need to be more circumspect about the benefits of new technologies as, most of the time, they were not developed with the needs of communities of color in mind. Scholar

Anna Everett discusses how Black critics in the early twentieth century were initially skeptical about what the advent of moving images meant for Black communities:

> No longer was the matter a simple question of whether scientific innovations such as photography and film could be deemed worthy of the appellation "Art." More pressing for them was the potential of these new media to craft and legitimate even more destructive renderings of black life and culture. It is precisely this point that troubled the African American intellectuals writing about art and culture in America during this era.[59]

Technology, from cave painting to AI, has conditioned access to criticism and discourse. And any technological development is bound to replicate the biases and prejudices of those who created it. In her 2018 book, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, Safiya Umoja Noble showed how search engines produce results that reflect racist and sexist views common on the internet. Other scholars such as Ruha Benjamin, Meredith Broussard, and Dr. Joy Buolamwini have also revealed bias in AIs, which were unable to recognize dark skin tones or consistently detect cancerous growths. An online world increasingly controlled by naive, or worse, malign AIs is no longer science fiction.

AS CRITICS OF COLOR RELY ON ONLINE PLATFORMS TO DISSEMINATE THEIR CRITICISM, OFTEN GIVING IT AWAY FOR FREE, THEY CONTRIBUTE TO SYSTEMS THAT WERE NOT BUILT TO SERVE OR

REPRESENT THEM, AND WHICH MAY, IN FACT DO THEM HARM BY REPURPOSING THE CONTENT THEY CREATE WITHOUT COMPENSATION, CREDIT, OR ACCOUNTABILITY.[60]

AIs are routinely trained on petabytes of information—including all manner of criticism—without compensating writers. In 2023, the Authors Guild issued an open letter signed by over 15,000 writers demanding AI companies obtain their consent and provide compensation and credit for using their books to train AIs.[61] The Authors Guild, as well as a series of prominent authors, and the *New York Times* have all separately sued these companies for infringing their copyright.[62] Then there is the threat that critics will simply be replaced. Artist Mario Klingemann has created a robotic dog that "poops" AI-authored art criticism when it is pointed at a work of art.[63] Critic A. O. Scott has written about how authors are increasingly using AI or "collaborating" with it to write new works.[64] There is also a growing number of guides on how to use AI to write reviews of books and movies.[65]

TAKEAWAYS

The rise of the internet has damaged journalism in general, criticism in particular, and critics of color specifically in a number of ways:

01. SHRINKING JOB MARKET

It has undercut traditional revenue models, resulting in fewer full-time jobs that continue to privilege older, white, male critics who have been in these positions for a long time.

02. STRUCTURES REMAIN THE SAME

Although it has provided additional, nontraditional avenues for publishing independent criticism, it has not brought about larger structural changes in who has access to certain content, products, or experiences.

03. THE CRISIS OF PAY

It has also not provided a viable funding structure for this activity, resulting in more people writing about more content without being compensated.

04. DANGER OF DATAFICATION

It has also brought about an oversimplification of critical discourse in the form of datafication, reducing these discussions to scores or ratings. Datafication, in turn, continues to privilege those who already have the biggest platforms, allowing their ideologies and agendas to dominate discussion. Historically, communities of color, in particular Black communities, have been wary of new technological developments with good reason, as they tend to replicate existing biases and inequities. The rise of AI creates additional avenues for the work of critics of color to be appropriated, devalued, or erased.

2. Economic Precarity

As noted in the last section, with the rise of digital culture and the subsequent contraction of the traditional publishing world over the last twenty years, criticism, in general, is in a difficult economic situation. There are fewer full-time critic positions, and fewer outlets that publish and pay for criticism. This precarity has made criticism a difficult profession for most to pursue and support themselves within. In her 2019 study of visual arts critics, Schumacher made the following observation:

> Consider that less than a third of the survey's respondents pursue their work on a full-time basis with a staff position. About two-thirds are freelancers, many of whom work for several outlets and the vast majority of whom are working without a contract. For those who do have staff jobs, fewer than one in 10 felt "very secure" in their positions. A third of all respondents report that their jobs are "not at all secure."[66]

Pop culture critic LaToya Ferguson concurred in 2020:

> It's chaos out there, especially since there are not enough staff jobs ... it's not getting easier to be a freelance writer, and it's not getting easier to be a critic in general. So many outlets are shutting down, and [at] those that still exist, criticism is being considered less important.[67]

Since 2005, more than 2,500 US newspapers—roughly a quarter—have gone out of business, and alternative weeklies, where many critics first learned and honed their craft, experienced such severe closures and consolidations that they haven't appeared as a category in the Pew Research Center's annual *State of the News Media* reports since 2016.[68] Arts coverage in particular has been shrinking for quite some time. A 2004 NAJP survey of arts coverage in fifteen newspapers found that only three had been able to maintain the same level of arts coverage they had five years before. It also found that arts stories had gotten shorter: about half of the sampled papers had cut the length of their arts stories by at least 20 percent.[69] In an industry where writers are often compensated based on word count, this reduction has direct financial consequences. These contractions have hit critics and journalists of color harder than their white peers. A 2015 Pew Research Center report on journalism in general found that "Nearly one-in-four minority employees at dailies (22%) left or lost their jobs in 2014, the largest level of minority job loss since ASNE [American Society of News Editors] began gathering data in 1984. Of white employees, 14% left their organizations in 2014." At the same time, emerging writers of color were less likely to be hired than their white peers: "Minorities who received undergraduate journalism or communications degrees and specialized in print journalism were 17 percentage points less likely than non-minorities to find a full-time position within a year of graduating; the same held true for graduates specializing in broadcasting."[70] Robert Hernandez, a professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for

Communication and Journalism,* said in 2021, "We are producing diverse students. The reality is they're not being hired, they're not being retained, they're not being promoted."[71]

Often, the only people who can afford to be freelance critics are those who are already wealthy or have other sources of income. In 2016, theater critic and editor Diep Tran wrote:

> This industry is only becoming more difficult and more of a passion project by the day (not unlike theatre!). Journalism as it exists right now is not welcoming to those who don't have inherited wealth. And not every young person of color coming up will have their parent's money to help pay rent on their apartment, while they intern for free or freelance for peanuts.[72]

Similarly, theater critic Karen D'Souza said in 2017, "I have a lot of friends who are dance critics, and the only ones who are still writing criticism are the ones who came from money."[73] In 2019, Schumacher's report revealed, "The majority of arts journalists—60%—make only half of their total earnings or less from their arts writing. More than half make $20,000 or less a year. This raises serious questions about who has access to our field and who can afford to work for such wages."[74]

Other writers noted how critics were exiting the profession. Music critic Greg Tate commented on the state of hip-hop criticism in 2021:

> What also happened around 2000 and in the arts was that the published pool of writers on hip-hop shifted more from Black to white. Why? Most of our colleagues by that time had just moved out of doing music journalism at all. People grew up, they had marriages, they had kids, kids needed to be fed and properly clothed and sent to the right school.[75]

Elizabeth Méndez Berry included a poignant story in her article "Why Cultural Critics of Color Matter" about a young writer at Critical Minded's 2017 inaugural in-person gathering, Max Durón, who asked for advice on "How to not give up."[76]

Another part of this phenomenon is that older, mostly white critics with full-time positions are staying in their jobs for a long time, and when they retire, they are not being replaced. "Some publications in Boston hire freelance writers to review shows or have one person, normally a white man, cover a multitude of art forms," said director and writer Pascale Florestal. "With so few other opportunities, most writers at these publications stay in their positions for years, making it almost impossible for any young writer to break into the world."[77]

Food writer Nina Oduro said of the few full-time critic positions in Washington, DC, "Openings don't come up very much. Looking at the history of critics in DC, people have held their jobs forever."[78] When these long-standing critics do retire, they aren't always replaced. In a 2001 report on

architecture critics, András Szántó found that "fewer than half believe their newspapers would make it a priority to replace them if they left their jobs. Nearly one in four critics believe their newspapers would not make it a priority to replace them."[79]

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated economic precarity for critics of color. Television and film critic Candice Frederick said, "I do think that critics of color are the most vulnerable. When we recover from this pandemic, the first people who will get rehired for staff positions will be white."[80] Florestal noted that in addition to a lack of positions, there is also a need for training,[81] and yet The Key, a mentoring program developed by Regina Victor for theater critics of color, was discontinued during the pandemic.[82] While the pandemic had an impact on opportunities for critics of color—this report's primary author lost a regular visual arts column at the *Los Angeles Times**—the long-term effects of the suspensions, closures, and other pressures that resulted are still unfolding.

Critics feel this economic contraction and their dwindling ranks constitute a threat to the diversity, depth, and rigor of intellectual discourse. D'Souza said, "We're in this dangerous anti-intellectual time in America. I think the arts will continue to flourish, but the discourse about them will get smaller and smaller."[83] Theater critic Wei-huan Chen noted its detrimental effect on professional development and community, "The way everyone is retiring and being laid off—you don't get to see anyone being the type of critic that you want to become. People say, 'Just find your own voice,' but you need that community of people who are lifting you up, and that really doesn't exist."[84]

TAKEAWAYS

01. FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

There are fewer full-time positions for critics, and freelancing has become increasingly precarious and competitive as publications continue to slash their budgets. Arts coverage and criticism are often the first things to go.

02. CRITICAL RANKS BECOMING MORE EXCLUSIVE

These contractions have hit critics of color more intensely than their white peers, as they are laid off at higher rates and have a harder time finding work. This situation results in a thinning of the critical corps, which becomes ever more exclusive as only people who have some other source of income are able to continue writing.

03. ESTABLISHED CRITICS STAYING PUT

Amid these contractions, established critics are staying in their positions longer, making it difficult for younger and less experienced writers to see a path forward in the field. Many of these established critics feel that if they left, they would not be replaced.

04. PANDEMIC EFFECTS

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these effects by creating further contraction and loss of opportunities. As the critical ranks become smaller and more exclusive, healthy and diverse discourse about our culture is endangered in a time that is already highly anti-intellectual.

3. Gatekeeping

In addition to the economic considerations, conscious and unconscious gatekeeping affects critics' access to the field. This is hardly a new concern: in 1977, journalist Barbara Lewis wrote about the totalizing effects of white supremacy:

> The established white press, dedicated as it is to the preservation of the right of whites to sit in authority over Blacks, will not accept a Black as their equal, at least not on a regular basis. The Black press will not pay a Black critic because they don't consider art valuable; and furthermore, will not recognize a critic as important until sanction by the white press has been fully bestowed.[85]

Over forty years later, writer and food justice advocate Shakirah Simley echoed a similar sentiment: "There's a real systematic oppression in place that limits black voices, black stories, and black experiences and that has filtered, I think, throughout the entire media and publishing world, but it's especially problematic in food media."[86] In film, Reginald Ponder enumerated multiple forms of gatekeeping that Black critics experience:

> Access to publications, publicists, studios, and festivals is also often restricted, as these entities control attendance at screenings, interviews, press junkets, premieres, and set visits. Joining industry organizations typically requires a significant following, numerous reviews, accreditation, or sponsorship, further hindering aspiring critics."[87]

Critics in disciplines where access to advance performances or screenings is limited and tightly controlled describe a two-tier system of public relations: the top, or "main" tier for the most prominent mainstream (white) media outlets, and a second tier for "POC [people of color] journalists, talent and movies," according to film critic Sharronda Williams. "When you're a Black journalist and you ask for a screener, they send you to the multicultural PR agency, which only deals with POC journalists, talent and movies," she said. "So because I'm Black, I have to be segued to a whole different department ... that's modernized segregation."[88]

These issues are exacerbated for critics who work for outlets that are independent or primarily serve audiences of color. "Indie Latino press hardly ever get a chance to interview the stars of films. (And on red carpets, they're placed near the end with black media.)" reported Tre'vell Anderson in an interview with film critic Nestor Bentancor in 2018. They added that the ethnic press "are not invited to initial press screenings. If they get an invite at all, it's to the screening just days before a film premieres—after embargoes have lifted and other outlets have already published their reviews."[89] Reviewers are left with compressed timelines for writing and filing their reviews or must resort to part-time or volunteer jobs to increase their access. "I would attend midnight showings of new releases on Thursdays just to write my reviews for

Friday," wrote Ponder, "I also volunteered as a critic's assistant to gain access to movies and industry professionals."[90] Speaking up or protesting this lack of access can result in critics being excluded entirely. In a 2018 interview, film critic Jaleesa Lashay Diaz said, "If I speak up about this, the publicist definitely isn't gonna invite me back."[91] The continual barriers eventually take their toll. A critic writing as DarkSkyLady said, "It's heartbreaking to hear fellow critics say they want to stop or have stopped because they are tired of begging for screeners and interviews."[92]

A subtle form of gatekeeping is when critics of color are expected to review only works by or about members of their own racial or ethnic group. "I often get upset by the idea that if you're not a white critic, your area of expertise is limited to art related to what is perceived by others as your identity, at least the visible one," said theater critic Jose Solís in a 2022 interview. He continued:

> For example, as a Latino, people (including colleagues and editors) tend to assume that I'm the perfect person to tackle art made by/or related to Latinos. Not only is this yet another form of profiling and forcing non-white critics to "stay in their lane," but it also reveals a failure of imagination and a true disservice to the arts.[93]

Art critic Seph Rodney expressed a similar concern in 2022:

> Despite working for a publication that consistently and conspicuously waves the banner of seeking to decolonize the art scene and publishes pieces that are feminist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, pro worker's rights, critical of capitalism, and supportive of non-canonical histories and forgotten or ignored artists, despite this, there is a way in which, at times, my writing as a Black man is expected to extol the qualities and particularities of my race, tell the story of how far we have come and how we have triumphed despite the seemingly ubiquitous prevalence of racial ideology, rather than offer a forthright evaluation according to the principles of my, more or less, own independent thinking.[94]

These kinds of assumptions of difference foreclose opportunities for critics of color to respond to works fully and authentically, a point raised by film critic Monica Castillo in 2018:

> Expecting that women and people of color will automatically have something different to say than their white male counterparts limits their ability to do their job to the best of their critical abilities. Sharing an identity doesn't mean sharing the same beliefs, and if we're forced to toe some identity line—all equally in agreement—then we can't write or think critically about what we're looking at.[95]

Also writing in 2018, film critic Justin Chang agreed, "If being a minority has informed my criticism in any way, it's that it liberated me from any need to appreciate film through the prison—sorry, prism—of relatability. Had I restricted myself to a slim diet of American cinema made for people who look like me, I doubt I could ever have fallen in love with the movies, let alone aspired to write about them for a living."[96]

Liberated from "relatability," critics of color often have greater range than their white counterparts precisely because they live with a "double consciousness,"[97] simultaneously seeing the world through the lens of their own experiences and that of the dominant culture. "The market has been saturated with a white narrative," said DarkSkyLady in a 2021 roundtable, "I was brought up in it. So I can write about the white experience because we've been taught that's the default. But white people can't do the reverse without missing important nuances that come from lived experience." Author David Mura noted this in a 2022 essay:

> Given the general state of education then, BIPOC writers must be familiar with the traditional white canon and literary practices and often must seek out the traditions of writers of color mainly on their own. But in an ironic reversal, this means that our literary development has equipped us to critique both white writers and BIPOC writers, and this reinforces the argument for more BIPOC critics.[98]

This flexibility, however, is seldom recognized or appreciated, as writer and editor Frankie Huang wrote in 2022:

> Being able to connect with and resonate with stories from cultural contexts beyond our own is a mental muscle that gets developed through vigorous exercise. This trait is something POCs who are used to consuming art made mostly for the white audience are adept at, and something white critics could learn a thing or two about from us.[99]

Despite these skills, critics of color are plagued by assumptions that they aren't qualified to be critics. In 2020, pop culture critic Candice Frederick called for greater attention to gatekeeping practices, while noting that such stereotyping conveys doubts about critics' abilities:

> Black journalists need to start speaking out publicly about being asked only to write about Black content. I write about a variety of content that's not always Black-specific, but getting access to non-Black content as a Black critic can be a struggle. The implication there is that we're not fully equipped to do our jobs.[100]

Theater critic Wei-huan Chen has also experienced this form of gatekeeping: "I once had an editor say that they were afraid that I would be too emotional to write about Asian-American issues," he said, "It implies that

a white person is more qualified."[101] This attitude also raises questions about objectivity and other values that have traditionally been associated with so-called "neutral, impartial" journalism. (Critics of color have more to say on this issue in "The Importance of Community and Contesting Objectivity" section of this report.)

Negative judgments about qualifications are particularly pernicious for women of color. "White men get judged on their promise and the possibilities of what they can do," said theater critic Karen D'Souza. "Women, especially women of color, are evaluated on what they have done. If it's not already on your resume, you're likely not going to be given the opportunity to do it."[102] In a 2019 dialogue with Clarkisha Kent, Angelica Jade Bastién said, "Being a woman critic automatically opens you up to a lot of vitriol. Being a Black woman on top of that opens you up to it even more. People don't think you belong there."[103]

These exclusionary practices and attitudes ultimately impact the kinds of works that get made. On the film festival circuit, they determine what films get talked about and ultimately bought and distributed. Quoted in a 2019 article, Sundance Institute's* executive director Keri Putnam admitted that the film festival was behind in providing access to critics of color: "We realized, frankly later than we should have, the implications of the fact that the diverse community of artists here were premiering their work to mostly white male critics. ... This lack of inclusion has real world implications to sales, distribution and opportunity."[104]

The conclusions of the "Critics' Choice 2" report on film criticism suggest that these barriers are systemic and not only anecdotal:

> While organizations may be cautious about the idea of setting target inclusion goals, these results speak to what we earlier referred to as an invisible quota system that clearly continues to operate. By engaging in the same or similar practices to recruit critics for every film in their slates and across years, the major entertainment companies are already acting to maintain an unbalanced ratio of white male reviewers to other groups.[105]

TAKEAWAYS

01. GATEKEEPING MAINTAINS A SYSTEM OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Features of white supremacy condition the access critics of color have, not only to opportunities to write but also to content itself. Gatekeeping prevents critics of color from critiquing stereotypical representations, which then continue to propagate. These forms of gatekeeping are systemic and serve as an invisible quota system that perpetuates white supremacy in cultural discourse.

02. DISADVANTAGED OR SEGREGATED ACCESS

Critics of color and those who write for the "ethnic press" are less likely to be granted access to advance screenings, previews, red carpets, and other forms of content and are sometimes required to interact with entirely different "ethnic" publicity firms that only handle content by and for marginalized audiences. This abbreviated or delayed access often puts them at a disadvantage in comparison to white writers and writers for more mainstream publications.

03. DOUBLE BIND

Critics of color are also often expected to only weigh in on content that comes from or is intended for their communities of origin, limiting the scope of assignments for which they are considered. Conversely, they may find themselves in the double bind of also not being seen as "objective" enough to evaluate this content. These assumptions persist despite the fact that critics of color often have a "double consciousness" that enables them to write comfortably and critically about both mainstream culture and their cultures of origin.

04. SEXISM IS A FACTOR

Women of color often experience more rigorous gatekeeping and vitriol than men, being required to prove themselves with prior experience instead of being given the benefit of the doubt.

4. The Burden of Representation

Despite aforementioned calls by artists of color to have a robust community of culturally competent critics to respond to their works, critics of color often find themselves caught between rigorously critiquing works by creators of color and being tasked with "representing" them to predominantly white audiences. In 2023, visual art writer Kemi Adeyemi expounded on the burden of writing about Black artists within a white supremacist system:

> We are often writing in the wake of white writers who misread, misinterpret, or altogether ignore black artists; writers who perpetuate false binaries between high and low art, art and popular culture, and art and activism; and writers who don't take basic steps to research the histories, techniques, and vocabularies with which black artists are working. Such art criticism often says more about the enduring ignorance and laziness of white supremacist discourse than it does about the formal and conceptual concerns of black artists. The stakes of writing about black artists can feel especially high in these conditions.[106]

As people with a public platform who are relatively few in number, critics of color are sometimes expected to "represent" for their race or ethnicity by writing positively about works created by people from the same background. In a 2021 interview, Rose Parra, cofounder of the Latinx Lens podcast, described the negative reaction she experienced when she criticized a film featuring a Latinx lead:

> You are in a way forced or expected, per se, to like films that are either about your culture or anything like that. And *The Tax Collector* wasn't necessarily my cup of tea. I got a lot of criticism for it because ... it's like going against my own people in a way.[107]

In 2021, television and film critic Kathleen Newman-Bremang wrote, "I understand not wanting to bash Black creators—I am constantly 'rooting for everybody Black'—but people need to stop viewing fair criticism as a public berating and see it as it is: an interrogation and extension of the work."[108] Adeyemi agrees: "Art criticism that refuses to critique contributes to a negative feedback loop in which artists and the discourse around them stagnates," she wrote in 2023.[109]

These tensions erupt in a landscape of what author and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen has termed "narrative scarcity," where works and stories by and about communities of color are often few and far between, thereby raising the proverbial stakes when creative works are met with negative criticism.[110] Novelist Kaitlyn Greenidge has noted, "The reason these discussions about Black art are so fraught is because of the very real economics of how its [sic] disseminated—the argument is always, [if] you criticize this movie/book/show/play, another one won't ever get made." In a 2018 roundtable, film critic Alison Willmore said, "I definitely felt relief when I liked *Crazy Rich Asians*. There

have been so few American movies with primarily Asian casts, it creates the added pressure that to critique a movie like that might somehow hurt the future of Asian-American studio film."[111] Newman-Bremang again: "The thirst for white acceptance or the fear that white gatekeepers will never greenlight a Black project again if we say anything bad about one seems to have overridden a basic tenet of art: the ability to consume, appreciate, and evaluate it as we please."[112]

In other cases, the negative response is a product of fan culture, in which fans swear undying loyalty to a work or franchise. In a 2018 discussion, pop culture critic Angelica Jade Bastién said:

> Fandom and stan culture has become one of the most myopic and often nastiest aspects of the modern pop-culture landscape. People are nearly religious zealots about what they love to the point where [writing] even a measured critical essay about something is taken as being a "hater" and can get a writer death threats.[113]

In a 2020 conversation for *IndieWire*, critic LaToya Ferguson spoke to this phenomenon:

> Even if you were as objective as humanly possible, there's still that fear that on social media, that you will get attacked by the filmmaker or the fans telling you, "You don't get it," or "You're the problem," because for some reason, people seem to think that a critic's job is to be publicity for a TV show or a film, even though that's not the case whatsoever.[114]

E. Alex Jung added that the threat of fan attacks makes him think twice before voicing an unpopular opinion: "What I end up doing is a calculus over whether something is worth it or not—both for whatever personal blowback I might get and whether it seems like a valuable conversation to have."[115]

Again, repercussions are often worse for Black women. Bastién: "I have critiqued beloved works by Black people and gotten intense backlash from all corners—both from Black fans and white critics. Sometimes I feel like the risk isn't worth it." Cultural critic Soraya Nadia McDonald said, "That expectation to express this unwavering loyalty to the race, and not show dirty laundry, is particularly directed at Black women."[116] Film critic Jasmine Sanders concurs that Black booster culture is particularly hard on women: "Black women are already so rarely called upon to critique films. I'm trying to gauge the likelihood of a 'critical take' being accepted, and I don't think it's very high."[117] By contrast, Robert Daniels, a Black male film critic, said, "I've never really felt much backlash. I've been fortunate in that respect. I always feel that sometimes Black female critics feel that far more than Black male critics."[118]

TAKEAWAYS

01. PRESSURE TO BE POSITIVE

In addition to gatekeeping and discrimination from the publishing and public relations world, critics of color are often subject to online attacks from their own communities, who may want to control what is said about a particular work or creator. They are often expected to "represent" their communities of origin in a positive way and to act as boosters for creators of color. Internet culture, with its "hot takes" and instant social media responses, has made this process more intense. Communities of color are often sensitive about critics of color "airing dirty laundry" or criticizing beloved figures who have achieved success.

02. NARRATIVE SCARCITY

Such attacks must be understood against a backdrop of "narrative scarcity" in which the relative lack of cultural products representing or created by a particular community increases the pressure on the few that do exist to be "perfect" or "positive."

03. VITRIOL FROM "STAN" CULTURES

Critics are concerned about the vitriol they receive online when they voice an unpopular opinion, up to and including death threats, and some make calculated decisions about whether to say anything at all. They complain about the stultifying effects of "stan" cultures that police discourse about particular franchises or types of content, while maintaining that a rich, diverse cultural discourse is actually good for art by and about communities of color.

04. UNDUE BURDEN ON BLACK WOMEN

The worst attacks are often directed at Black women, who are more often expected to express "loyalty to the race" than men.

THE IMPORTANCE AND SUPPORT OF CRITICS OF COLOR

While the previous sections looked at the challenges facing critics of color, this section looks at their importance and how they are situated in their communities—both their communities of origin and artistic and thought communities—as well as how they became critics and where they have found support. It is intended to help identify potential areas of support or intervention that could make a difference in fostering the careers and prominence of critics of color.

1. The Importance of Community and Contesting Universality

Traditional journalism training privileges distanced, purportedly "neutral" observation over personal entanglements with subjects and communities. Although many critics of color are trained as journalists, they often advance a vision of criticism that eschews this distance in favor of a stance that is engaged and responsive, both to themselves and the communities they write for and about. Theater critic Jose Solís wrote in 2020 about exploring the notion of objectivity with the critics in his BIPOC Critics' Lab:*

> Objectivity is one of the pillars of journalism, but have we really questioned what it means in practical terms? ... Along with the objective facts of the work and our research, we deal with our past experiences, our feelings and our thoughts ... objectivity is personal.[119]

In a 2019 interview, food critic Soleil Ho asserted that objectivity is actually the normalizing of a particular, dominant perspective: "Objectivity is a privileged white male old money perspective. I'm none of those things."[120] LatinaMedia.Co* cofounder Cristina Escobar took it a step further, saying in 2022: "I think 'objectivity' is a lie, there is no such thing, and it is much more important to own and discuss how your subjectivity affects—oftentimes in positive ways—how you go about telling the story and choosing the stories that you tell."[121] Culture critic Clarkisha Kent stated things plainly in a 2019 discussion: "Objectivity is a myth. It's a white supremacist word."[122]

With the idea that criticism is a place where one acknowledges one's specific, personal positioning rather than hiding behind so-called "objective" pronouncements, some critics of color advance an engaged model for accommodating and fostering a diversity of voices. While some critics of color engage with the traditional role of criticism as interrogating and extending the reach of a work, others see the act of criticism as an act of care rather than judgment. Visual arts writer Re'al Christian wrote in 2023 about criticism as a form of empathy:

> As a writer of color, I am often drawn to artists who have experienced diaspora in one way or another; I aim to find connections. In this way, I find criticism to be a form of empathy, and this empathy to be a powerful

> antidote, or a means of pushing against, a form of writing that prioritizes a supposedly "objective" opinion.[123]

In a 2021 panel discussion, art historian Nadia Jackinsky-Sethi (Alutiiq) described the importance of care in the criticism of Indigenous art:

> Indigenous art criticism is necessarily about working with care because it's going to be shared back out to our community members and we want to represent our communities in the brightest light possible. So it's about truth-telling but also being very gentle and I think it's also about making sure that the artists that we see know that we recognize them and we see what they're doing.[124]

This attitude reflects a recognition that critics are embedded in and part of communities; they shouldn't need to stand apart from them in order to be critical. Literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., spoke about this "special relationship" between Black critics and writers in a 1991 interview:

> I think this is particularly the case for African American literature criticism, because of the "advocacy" role that's historically been thrust upon it—we're also part of a conversation with our artists and writers. What we have to say matters to them, and more than you might think. ... Finally, there's no denying that black critics—and this is probably a case where ethnicity isn't irrelevant—have, willy-nilly, a special relationship with what the media call the "black community." We're in a position to heighten interest and awareness in black history, to raise literacy, to encourage people to read more.[125]

As if bearing this notion out in a 2019 article by Howard Rambsy II, filmmaker Lena Waithe wrote from the perspective of a creator whose work, *Queen & Slim*, became the subject of much debate over the role of the Black critic:

> "We haven't overcome until we can have honest opinions about each other's work in public," tweeted Waithe. "We don't mind being a part of that shift. I'm sending love 2 every black critic whether you loved it or hated it. You have the right to write your ass off about it. And y'all have."[126]

Predictably, critics are often penalized for this embeddedness and for acknowledging their own position in relationship to power. Editor and activist Randy Shaw wrote about how the *New York Times** *Book Review* excluded Black and Latinx critics in 2011 and how these critics' perceived lack of objectivity—having an "agenda"—was used against them:

> African-American and Latino critics have long noted the disconnection between the nation's values and constitutional principles and its actual policies and actions. Because these critics attack the hypocrisy of

> the elite, their views are often described as "ideological" and to lack "genuine understanding."[127]

In 2023, visual art writer Yves Jeffcoat wrote that surfacing and exploring suppressed stories from one's own background gives one's criticism a sense of purpose but can also take a personal toll:

> Those of us who are part of oppressed groups justifiably reiterate how necessary it is to preserve our histories, share our stories, and tell our truths. We endure because we believe our work has purpose. ... Beyond the fact that merely existing in a marginalized body puts one at risk, the reality is that repeatedly writing about our race and identities takes a toll on our mental and physical states.[128]

Despite the costs, theater critic and editor Diep Tran has embraced this so-called "ideological" stance, recognizing the need to move away from Eurocentric modes of evaluation and to be transparent about situating oneself in relation to the work being examined. For her, this involves clearly establishing where one is coming from. "If I'm going to be an honest arbiter of what is 'good' and what is 'not good,' I have to be clear about where I'm coming from and what I consider good," she said.[129]

Critics have found support for this work within their own ranks. In the post "The Problem with White Critics," blogger LKEKE35 had these encouraging words for would-be critics of color:

> Trust me, you will find an audience. Its [sic] slow going, at first, but I promise to signal boost you. I will give you a platform. If you are a person of color with a movie and TV review blog, let me know, and I'll reblog your stuff.[130]

This kind of solidarity and support from fellow writers and artists was instrumental for theater critic Regina Victor early in her career: "I was championed by the community, not the industry," she said in a 2022 interview on the site *3 Views*,* "I would say that there were precedents for it, just enough to get the idea to start writing."[131] Music critic Greg Tate, speaking on a 2021 roundtable organized by Daphne Brooks, was also inspired by a sense of community:

> Between I'd say 1977 and 2000, there was a community of Black writers in New York: [magazines] *The Voice* first, but then *The Source* and then *Vibe*. So all of us come into the game thinking of Black criticism is something we do as a gang. And because you had the near instant gratification of response from the community, you knew what you were writing was having impact.[132]

Community support is especially important in communities of color, where there may be a lack of role models and professional development opportunities, but it is also a two-way street. Journalist and author Drew Hayden Taylor describes how critics also give back to communities, especially those where cultural works are difficult to realize or have been censored or banned.

> Frequently, in our work, we have to answer to the larger Indigenous community. They're looking over our shoulder. On one level, we understand and know the audience whom we write about and for. We also want to promote and encourage artistic development in our communities, seeing as our art had been openly banned for so many years. (I'm talking about you, Potlatch Ban, as you made social, spiritual, and cultural practices illegal up until 1951.)[133]

In a 2021 keynote address for the "We Have Words for Art Symposium," curator heather ahtone (Choctaw Nation/Chickasaw) emphasized that these relationships can't be taken for granted but have to be nurtured over time:

> Start going in and creating relationships within the Indigenous communities from wherever you are. And also listening to the things that people have to say. Listening even when you don't understand what they're saying and not pushing to try and get them to make it clear for you, because some learning comes from an accumulation of exposure to that knowledge over time and so in order to become a good writer, to become a good speaker, one has to learn how to be a good listener.[134]

This embeddedness and responsiveness to community—whether it is a community of origin, a writers' community, or an artistic field or discipline—is markedly different from the stereotype of critics as standing apart from the works and people they evaluate and judge. It suggests a heightened awareness of the power imbalances in how culture is made, consumed, and remembered, and of criticism's role not just in recommending or panning certain works and experiences but also in documenting them for posterity. Perhaps theater scholar Barbara Lewis said it best in 1977: "It's the critic's responsibility to keep the people's memory alive and growing."[135]

TAKEAWAYS

01. EXPOSING MYTH OF OBJECTIVITY

Critics of color are positioned to expose the myth of objectivity, so prevalent in journalism, by revealing how it has cloaked a particular, dominant, Eurocentric perspective in the trappings of universality. By contrast, they often advance a mode of criticism that acknowledges one's personal position and the importance of care and embeddedness within one's community of origin or within the communities in which one is active. They acknowledge that they have a "special relationship" with creators of color and are uniquely positioned to appreciate and evaluate their work, which does not compromise their ability to be critical.

02. CRITICISM AS A SITUATED ACT OF CARE

Critics of color also acknowledge the need to situate themselves and be transparent about the criteria they use to make such evaluations. Their sense of community extends to other critics of color as well, who they often work to support, whether through exposure or mentorship. They see criticism as an act of care—for communities and for cultures—and feel their work is as much about relationship-building and listening as it is about interpreting and evaluating. They understand that criticism is more than just "hot takes" but is a way of ensuring that cultures and communities are documented for posterity.

2. The "Ethnic" Press

Communities of color often turn to the so-called "ethnic" press to find news and stories relevant to their lives that mainstream publications don't cover. These outlets often cater to bilingual audiences and are sometimes hyperlocal, focusing on a particular region, city, or neighborhood. Increasingly, these outlets are the go-to resources for immigrant communities and communities of color. In their 2004 report on arts journalism, Szántó et al., found that the news industry was not keeping up with the nation's changing demographics:

> The news industry is also late in adjusting to America's changing demographic landscape. In California, for example, more than half of Asian and Pacific Americans, blacks and Latinos identify ethnically specific media as their main source of news, entertainment and advertising.[136]

In a 2019 report on ethnic media in New Jersey, Sarah Stonbely and Anthony Advincula found that ethnic media were more engaged with immigrant communities than mainstream media:

> Ethnic outlets remain closer to immigrant communities than mainstream outlets both in physical proximity and because those communities serve as the sources of news and the audience. In the same way that local newspapers used to be deeply integrated with the towns they covered, local ethnic media have their fingers on the pulse of communities that were born of diaspora and/or are still welcoming newcomers to this country."[137]

An undated report from the Center for Cooperative Media assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian American and Pacific Islander [AAPI] media found that local ethnically and linguistically specific media were especially important for AAPI communities because of the wide range of languages and cultures that fall under that umbrella.

> [Community media] meet AAPI communities where they are, in print newspapers stacked by host podiums in community-owned restaurants, on websites and YouTube channels viewed in global diasporas, on chat messaging apps, and in low-frequency radio stations. They publish and broadcast in dozens of Asian languages, from Tagalog to Nepali Gorkha, from Vietnamese to Mandarin, from Punjabi to Bahasa, from Korean to Hmong. They use standardized scripts, reflecting language politics from countries of origin, and voice texts for dialects spoken by linguistic minority communities within wider Asian American communities.[138]

In a 2014 report on Black and Latinx news consumers, Media Insight Project found that ethnic media were especially relevant to Latinx audiences:

> Hispanics are far more likely to say they must turn to ethnic media to see regular coverage of their own community. While 42% of Hispanics say that ethnic media sources such as Univision, the Spanish-language television network, most regularly cover their community's people and issues, just 15% of African Americans cite an African American–centered media source—such as Black Entertainment Television or African American newspapers—as the media source that most regularly covers their community's people and issues.[139]

The Black press has been around since the late nineteenth century and has supported Black criticism to varying degrees, with some commenters finding it lacking and others finding it to be a supportive place for Black artists to find a sympathetic and knowledgeable audience. Writing in the *New York Amsterdam News* (a Black publication) in 1971, Mel Watkins found hope for ethnic-specific discourse on Black literature that was previously lacking:

> Fortunately, of late, a number of black publications and an increasing number of black writers have responded to this critical gap. Perhaps more important, black writers and students are now looking to their own for evaluations of contemporary black literature and for re-evaluations of past writings.[140]

The amount of debate dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century around the "role of the Black critic" suggests that, historically, the Black press has been more robust than that of any other group in terms of supporting critical discourse, a situation that certainly reflects the size of its audience and their interest in such debates.

However, we could not find any reports specifically on criticism in the ethnic press, and although some critics have started their own ethnic or racially specific online publications like ARTS.BLACK* or Latino Rebels, most still see writing for an ethnic-specific publication as a stepping stone to writing for mainstream outlets. Despite its growing audience, writing in the ethnic press is still devalued. Theater critic Clayton Riley identified this problem in 1971, when he wrote about how Black artists and audiences didn't pay much attention to his critiques in the Black publication *The Liberator*, but got upset if he criticized Black works in the *New York Times*.*

> Black criticism, particularly of film and theater, should appear in as many publications as possible. This is a time when much activity goes on in these two areas that is of specific interest to Black viewers. And that criticism should be read and assessed wherever it appears; for Black artists to respond only to reviews that appear in the *Times* or other establishment newspapers is a sad commentary on their concerns for reaching an audience.[141]

Film critic Manuel Betancourt noted similar, ongoing bias in 2016, when he lamented the cancellation of the American Latino Media Arts (ALMA) awards as a sign of the impetus to make Latinx arts more mainstream.

> What that leaves us with is an increasingly fractured Latino media environment, one which cannot consolidate the push towards championing exciting work from Latin America within and for Spanish-only outlets with an American Anglophone mainstream media, which only acknowledges Latino talent when filtered through Hollywood standards.[142]

Although understudied (and typically underfunded), the "ethnic" press may be a promising area to explore the role of criticism. Its audiences, particularly AAPI and Latinx ones, are continuing to grow and expand:

> As immigration from Asia increases, and as Asian Americans move into the second and third generations and beyond, Asian community media are growing and changing. The last decade has not only brought new readers to Asian-language community media, it has seen younger Asian Americans turn to English-language digital platforms and social media accounts that define cultural identity beyond language or that serve diverse communities under the Asian American umbrella.[143]

At the very least, it is more nimble, specialized, and may be less beholden to the profit motives that drive large, mainstream outlets. Cofounder of LatinaMedia.Co* Cristina Escobar said in a 2022 interview, "I really want to shout out the importance of independent media and our ability to be a little more free from additional push and pull and also be really dedicated."[144]

TAKEAWAYS

01. IMPORTANCE OF THE "ETHNIC PRESS"

Communities of color have traditionally turned to news outlets that cater to them, known as the "ethnic press," because mainstream outlets don't always cover the events and issues that are relevant to their lives. This is especially true for Asian American and Latinx populations who come from a wide variety of cultural traditions and speak many different languages. These populations are also growing, and mainstream news outlets are not adapting quickly enough to address their needs.

02. "ETHNIC PRESS" IS UNDERSTUDIED

Although the Black press has supported criticism in various forms since its inception, studies of criticism in the ethnic press in general are lacking. However, as younger critics of color have started their own, ethnic or racially specific independent, online publications, it is an area that deserves further study and support.

3. Formative Influences

In her essay on the lives of critics, Parul Sehgal describes an archetypal critic's beginnings:

> A family that's marginalized in some way. A child, inculcated early in holding herself apart, perhaps nurturing some deeply held feelings of difference, even freakishness, develops a taste for blissful alienation, confirmed by engulfment in art.[145]

Although Sehgal wasn't writing specifically about critics of color, her description seems perfectly suited to them. Indeed, for many critics, it was family members, usually mothers, who inspired a love for the arts that set them on the critical path. Theater critic Jose Solís's mother gave him his first journal, where he escaped into writing about the shows he saw.[146] Film critic Carla Renata recalls being inspired by her mother, who loved film:

> My brother and I would crawl up in the bed with her on Sunday mornings and watch films all day. She knew everything about movies, from the set design to the casting. Mommy was our Robert Osborne or Ben Mankiewicz, from TCM [television channel Turner Classic Movies].[147]

Theater critic Hilton Als, speaking with Karen Lawrence at "Why It Matters: Hilton Als in Conversation with Karen R. Lawrence," an event at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens on September 28, 2023, also credited his mother with inspiring his love of art and learning:

> My mother was a huge lover of art and artists and they used to have free drawing lessons at the Brooklyn Museum on Saturdays for kids ... it was also a way for us to have an education that you didn't have to pay for. ... A very important part of my education was understanding that the museum as an edifice was representative of free space, just like the library. I used to go to the library. I was one of those kids who cut school to go to the library or the museum.

It is notable that this early exposure came mainly from parents. A 2011 National Endowment for the Arts report found that arts education had declined overall in the US since 1982, but that the drop was "insignificant" for white children while "declines for African American and Hispanic children are quite substantial—49 percent for African American and 40 percent for Hispanic children."[148] The current generation of Black and Latinx critics are less likely to have had early arts education in school than their white peers.

Beyond these foundational moments, critics of color enter the profession from a wide range of backgrounds. Some have advanced degrees in journalism or in their chosen area of specialization; others have GEDs and learned their craft on the job. Criticism, and journalism more broadly—since it's a rare critic who only writes criticism these days—still seem to be relatively open fields to

break into. (For the reasons, see the sections "Impact of the internet" and "Economic Precarity.") In a 2022 interview, theater critic Regina Victor said of journalism: "It's one of the last disciplines you can practice into, rather than train into."[149]

Some critics were makers before they were writers. Seph Rodney received an MFA in visual art and a doctorate in museum studies before becoming an art critic.[150] Soleil Ho started out working in restaurant kitchens before joining the Racist Sandwich podcast and eventually becoming the food critic at the San Francisco Chronicle.[151] Eric Deggans started out as a gigging musician (a drummer) before becoming a music critic and then transitioning to TV criticism.[152] Film critic Renata still works in the industry as an actress and presenter but started out doing camera and sound for C-SPAN before moving in front of the lens and becoming a critic.[153]

TAKEAWAYS

01. IMPORTANCE OF EARLY ARTS EXPOSURE

Critics credited an early introduction to art and culture, usually by family members, with setting them on a path toward criticism.

02. CRITICS CAN COME FROM ANYWHERE

Critics enter the profession with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Some have advanced degrees in journalism, or in the discipline in which they work, while others have GEDs or come to criticism through making art or other pursuits. There is not a singular path to becoming a critic: while many enter the profession from journalism, others began or still practice as creatives.

4. Mentorship and Role Models

Many critics expressed the importance of mentorship, perhaps none more poignantly than Als, who recalled his formative years in the early 1980s studying at Columbia University with art historians Kenneth D. Silver and Molly Nesbit, who invited him to dinner parties:

> It's breathtaking actually to remember that there would be people like [art critic] Rosalind Krauss at the dinner and I was 20 years old. So they had such faith in me. And I think that if you have love or can feel love, from mentors or anyone, a parent or a museum director, it's fortifying, and you can actually do anything, once you have that kind of approval.[154]

However, many critics of color did not move in such circles and, for them, mentoring did not adhere to the traditional model in which an older, more established critic takes a younger one under their wing. In a 2021 roundtable, music critic Danyel Smith lamented that there is a generation of Black music writers who have never worked with Black editors.[155] In a 2020 interview, film critic Carlos Aguilar spoke about a dearth of role models who came from the same background as him:

> In my particular case, being an immigrant, being a DACA recipient, oftentimes people in my circumstances or from my background don't see themselves in careers like film criticism—which is so far-fetched, so unreachable to work in a field that is often seen to be reserved for a certain type of person with a certain type of education.[156]

Theater critic Regina Victor mentioned Diep Tran and Kelundra Smith as peers who provided mentorship: "I believe in lateral mentorship, and we've learned a lot from each other's experiences in the field over time," she said in a 2022 interview.[157]

Some critics found role models in successful critics who held unusual positions or views. On a 2018 podcast, art and architecture critic Carolina Miranda discussed how she got started as a critic, saying, "Roberta Smith at the *New York Times** was a very important critic to me as one of the rare female art critics with a very powerful perch in the field."[158] In a 2019 panel at the Sundance Film Festival,* film critic Kameron Austin Collins discussed his admiration for *New York Times** film critic Mahnola Dargis:

> The first critic that I ever fell in love with was Mahnola Dargis, someone whose writing still really, really pushes me ... one of my favorite reviews by her is actually of *Guardians of the Galaxy* because of the gender dynamics that she points out, the gender dynamics of the Chris Pratt character who's like this nice, happy-go-lucky guy, but whose first scene is of an anonymous woman coming out from his bed whose name he doesn't know ... she's the only daily critic that I think pointed this out.[159]

In a 2015 interview, art critic and editor Jessica Lynne cites her introduction to the work of critic bell hooks as a formative moment:

> Essentially, I had a kick-ass introduction to art criticism while in undergrad. ... Up until that point, criticism terrified me and I considered it a practice for white elites with fancy degrees in art history. Reading bell was fundamental to understanding that criticism should come from a variety of perspectives and, more importantly, is strengthened by multiple perspectives.[160]

Editor Jasmine Amussen, speaking on a 2023 panel at EXPO CHICAGO, said that her introduction to art criticism came through reading *Playboy* magazine: "My entire reading and writing life goes back to the pride of Chicago, *Playboy* magazine," she said, noting the number of illustrious contributors who wrote for the publication, from W. Somerset Maugham to James Baldwin, "It's incredible. If it's important in American history, it's in *Playboy*."[161] TV critic Eric Deggans, who started out as a music critic, also cited *Playboy* in a 2018 interview as a formative influence in a landscape with few role models:

> Now, the thing about criticism is that I'm not sure there were a lot of role models, period. I would read *Rolling Stone* and *Musician* magazine. And *Playboy*, believe it or not, had a lot of good music writing in it. I would read these things to get a sense of what's the language of music criticism, how are people handling ideas and talking about things and concepts and all that stuff. And then I was bringing what was unique about me to it. And part of that was talking about race."[162]

TAKEAWAYS

01. TRADITIONAL MENTORSHIP IS UNEVEN

While some critics had access to older critics who served as mentors in the traditional sense of introducing and guiding one into a career, many critics did not have access to such people and relied instead on peer mentors.

02. IMPORTANCE OF ROLE MODELS

Others found role models in powerful or prominent critics who also came from marginalized backgrounds or represented unusual points of view.

03. INFLUENCED BY READING

They were also inspired by reading promiscuously and modeling their work after how critics and other influential writers discussed culture.

5. Professional Associations and Credentials

Some critics have found it helpful to start or join professional associations. Gil L. Robertson IV and Shawn Edwards started the African American Film Critics Association (AAFCA) in 2003 to advocate for greater representation of Black critics in film criticism. It pursues partnerships and runs outreach programs to encourage young people to become critics, as Edwards described in a 2018 article:

> We've got to open the door and make it easier and provide more access and more understanding that they can create some platforms where there is some sort of job creation and there are a lot more opportunities. ... Where the idea of being a black film critic is not looked at as an oddity, but something that you can actually do as a profession and feed your family and take it to the next level.[163]

Film critic Reginald Ponder also found it helpful to join professional organizations, although he admitted that it can be a lot of work to make sure one's membership is useful:

> Becoming a member of the African American Film Critics Association (AAFCA) brought new opportunities and connections with studios and representatives who had previously overlooked me. Joining the Critics Choice Association (CCA) further increased my industry interactions. However, joining these organizations requires leveraging your network and finding sponsors or recommenders. Once you become a member, active participation is crucial to making the most of your membership.[164]

Critics have also found entryways into the profession via the so-called "ethnic" press, or outlets who cater to or whose primary audience are communities of color. Theater critic Jan Simpson, who started out as a journalist, was inspired by writers in the Black press: "The few people that I ran across who were writing about arts or culture were at Black publications, like *ESSENCE* magazine, or at the online publication, *TheGrio*," she said in a 2022 interview.[165] Ponder secured his first work as a film critic in a publication that caters to Black audiences:

> I faced rejections from prestigious publications like the *Chicago Sun-Times*, but I refused to give up. Undeterred, I approached Hermene Hartman, the publisher of [African American lifestyle pub] *N'DIGO*, expressing my interest in writing movie reviews for her publication. ... While Hartman didn't hire me directly, she referred me to her editor, Kai EL' Zabar, who eventually gave me an assignment. I had broken through the barrier![166]

TAKEAWAYS

01. PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Some critics found creating or joining professional associations to be helpful, putting them in touch with other critics and providing networks and contacts.

02. IMPORTANCE OF THE "ETHNIC PRESS"

The "ethnic press" has been a source of inspiration and opportunities, particularly as it provides examples of criticism grounded in the worldviews of communities of color.

6. Support for Critics of Color

Although there are a number of philanthropic initiatives to support criticism and journalism in general, there are only a few—many of which are supported by Critical Minded—that focus specifically on support for critics of color. Funders are beginning to move into this area, and art critic Jessica Lynne identifies the need as an inevitability, saying that she is "more invested in figuring out how we support the field when it does expand because I understand evolution and experimentation to be inevitable."[167]

We found philanthropic and similar support for critics of color falling into five main categories:

01. Direct financial support
02. Independent publications
03. Training programs
04. Professional associations
05. Reforms to hiring and access practices

DIRECT SUPPORT TO CRITICS OF COLOR IN THE FORM OF STIPENDS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND GRANTS

These are relatively rare, though the need is clear and evident. Theater critic and editor Diep Tran noted this back in 2016:

> We need to find a way to ensure that newer critics are being trained and encouraged to write, and we need to find a way to pay them. My boss [at *American Theatre* magazine], Rob Weinert-Kendt, has been talking about creating a fellowship for theater critics of color. I don't see why ATCA [American Theatre Critics Association]* can't do the same, or partner with *American Theatre* to help fund theatre criticism as the traditional outlets are shutting them down. If we want diversity, we need to be intentional about it.[168]

Although the Theatre Communications Group, which publishes *American Theatre*, dedicates its Rising Leaders of Color training program to theater journalists of color every other year, we were unable to find a program dedicated specifically to funding or hiring theater critics of color.

In 2020, Critical Minded created a Relief Fund for Cultural Critics that provided one-time, need-based grants of $500 to cultural critics of color in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also currently funds or partially funds three programs supporting critics of color directly: the American Theatre Critics Association's* Edward Medina prize, which awards $1,000 to a writer from an under-represented background who writes about theater; museum aggregation website Curationist's* Critics of Color program, which annually awards $3,000 each to three critics of color to write a feature about cultural heritage items on the Curationist* website, and the Irene Yamamoto Arts Writers Fellowship at the Daniel K. Inouye National Center for the

Preservation of Democracy of the Japanese American National Museum,* which annually provides two unrestricted $5,000 awards to emerging arts writers of color.[169] Compared to fellowships and grants available to arts writers generally, these are extremely modest awards. For example, the Andy Warhol Foundation's Arts Writers Grant provides annual awards between $15,000 and $50,000 to individual writers. In 2023 alone, it awarded $935,000 to twenty-seven writers.[170] The Dorothea and Leo Rabkin Foundation's* Rabkin Prize provides $50,000 to each awardee; in 2023, prizes were awarded to nine arts writers.[171]

INDEPENDENT PUBLICATIONS, INCLUDING ETHNIC PRESS

As discussed in a previous section, critics of color, in particular Black critics, have long been supported by the so-called "ethnic" press. Recognizing that this sector of the media and publishing world plays a vital role in a diverse and democratic society and is in need of buttressing, the Ford Foundation* established the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund in 2019 to support "independent, BIPOC-owned, -led, and -serving media."[172] As of this writing, it has distributed $10 million dollars to more than forty organizations.[173]

With the rise of the internet, critics and writers of color have also supported each other by creating a range of independent publications to nurture and feature their work. In 2016, art critic and curator M. Charlene Stevens created Arcade Project, a "digital zine" and "nomadic gallery" often at great expense to herself.[174] Brienne Walsh wrote of the project in 2020, "In order to pay the diverse and talented group of writers who contributed to the publication, Stevens worked temp jobs—including as an executive assistant and a receptionist. 'I ran the business on a MetroCard and a prayer,' she laughed."[175] Of the founding of ARTS.BLACK,* an online "journal of art criticism from Black perspectives," cofounder Taylor Renee Aldridge said in a 2017 interview:

> It wasn't that Black critics did not exist, we found that more so, there were not many incentives for writers, in general, to have a practice that is central to criticism. So, Jess [Jessica Lynne] and I began to ruminate on ways to create an infrastructure where critical content by Black writers can exist, thrive, and be preserved.[176]

LatinaMedia.Co* was founded by Cristina Escobar and Nicola Schulze in 2017 as "a place where Latinas and femme Latinxs can speak up about what is important to them in media, what's working, what's not working, and where we can advocate for more representation."[177] The blog Rescripted was founded by Regina Victor and Katherine O'Keefe as an "artist-led interactive commentary on the state of the arts" based in the Chicago theater community.[178] Victor wrote of the site in 2018:

> Rescripted has South Asian, African-American, White, Latinx and genderqueer writers on its staff. We have trained and employed a young

> person who writes regularly for us through our youth critics training program The Key. That program is returning this Fall. We will not wait for tolerance, we will instead write our way into the world in which we want to live.[179]

TRAINING PROGRAMS

Theater critics have established multiple training programs specifically to mentor and support critics of color. These programs are fixed-length engagements wherein critics learn from more experienced writers, have their work reviewed and workshopped, and learn to build their experience and networks in the field. Regina Victor mentioned The Key above, which, before it was shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided mentorship to young critics, regardless of race. Black-led theater company Front Porch Arts Collective partnered with NPR affiliate WBUR to launch its Young Critics Program in 2019. Education director Pascale Florestal reflected on the impetus for the project:

> The purpose of the program was to provide young people of color opportunities to see more theatre, understand the importance of criticism, and learn to write a review of a show. On top of this, we wanted publications and organizations to see value in employing young writers and writers of color.[180]

In 2020, theater critic Jose Solís started the BIPOC Critic's Lab, a virtual program intended to train the next generation of theater critics of color. In a 2022 interview, he said:

> I went on Twitter, as I often do, and told people about what I was doing. I offered people interested in mentorship a spot in what by then was the BIPOC Critics Lab* and received over a hundred applications. Starting in August and over the next three months or so, I met with a group of budding critics from all across the US, who put their trust in me and what I was trying to do."[181]

What started out as an individual mission evolved into a partnership with the Kennedy Center and was later based at the Public Theater in New York. The multi-week program, which includes guest lectures and comp tickets to shows, culminates in a published work on the Public's website.[182] As awareness of the importance of a diverse critical corps has grown, for the first time, Theatre Communications Group's 2023 Rising Leaders of Color program—which usually supports creatives—focused on theater journalists, naming three early career writers of color to participate in a program that "will combine practical skills building with professional connections and opportunities to develop empowering relationships, as well as tools and resources to navigate a career in the theatre field as a BIPOC theatre journalist/critic."[183] In 2024, Pittsburgh Public Theater and *American Theatre* magazine partnered on Critical Insight,

a "new generative writing fellowship" for emerging critics, although it is not specific to critics of color.[184]

Strikingly, theater was the only discipline in which we found formal training programs specifically for critics of color. There are other less-intensive mentorship opportunities—Critical Minded has supported one-off mentorship sessions at the annual Pop Conference* for pop music writers, for example. However, we did not come across well-established, long-term training programs in other disciplines that were dedicated specifically to fostering critics or journalists of color, although in 2024, Critical Minded is supporting a fellowship program for early career art writers at Momus* that will prioritize "applicants writing from a de-centered or historically marginalized position."

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

If theater was the only discipline where we found training programs for critics of color, film, television, and entertainment were the only disciplines in which we found professional associations specifically for critics of color.

The African-American Film Critics Association (AAFCA) was created in 2003 by Gil L. Robertson IV and Shawn Edwards to advocate for more Black representation in film criticism. A 2018 article by Andrew Barker noted that the association had sixty members.[185]

In the "Formative Influences" section of this report, film critic Reginald Ponder describes how joining and being active in AAFCA helped him connect with studios and publishing opportunities. The association also helps to raise the profile of Black critics by giving its own annual awards in talent categories. "You don't have to be black to win an AAFCA award," said Robertson in the same 2018 article, "Black people see all kinds of movies, not just movies that black people are in."[186]

The Association of Latin Entertainment Critics (ACE) has a much longer history but is perhaps less interested in mainstream acceptance. Manuel Betancourt noted in a 2016 article:

> While the Association of Latin Entertainment Critics (ACE) has a distinguished history dating back to its inception in 1967, it has always functioned as a collective of Hispanic journalists who write for and about the Latin American scene for a mostly Spanish-speaking audience.[187]

He adds that ACE "exemplifies a diasporic understanding of Latino immigrants in the US, one which may not reflect the newer generations of bilingual US-born Latinos."[188] Still, according to its website, ACE does occasionally offer "lectures, round-table discussions and training workshops," although its primary activity seems to be its annual awards.[189]

There are also a number of journalist associations, such as the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, but we found that they do not appear in the literature about critics of color, possibly because critics largely do not think of themselves as journalists (and vice versa).

INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO WRITING OPPORTUNITIES

Another area where critics of color may find support is with initiatives that seek to improve their access, both to the works they seek to write about and to publishing opportunities. For theater critics, some of this access comes with the training programs, which provide comp tickets to performances. But most critics agree that increasing their access to publishing opportunities has to come from the top. Theater critic and editor Diep Tran suggested this support could come from theater producers shifting their focus from reviews in larger publications to those from smaller outlets as well:

> I also encourage people to amplify voices that they find compelling, even if those voices aren't writing for mainstream, gigantic publications, because young voices and voices of color are writing for smaller publications. My big problem with producers is they still think of the *New York Times* review as the money review, and it doesn't have to be.[190]

In a 2017 roundtable, theater critic Rohan Preston placed the responsibility firmly on editors and managers:

> Often, for young critics of color or female critics, the opportunities are not as readily available. Some people have to prove themselves with evidence of stuff they've done, and others are given an opportunity. Having opportunities for young people is important, and that has to come from editors, managers, and others who are hiring and making decisions.[191]

Film critic and editor Cristina Escobar agreed that diversity needed to come from decision-makers in Hollywood as well:

> We need [hiring] in all aspects of the industry. Executives, editors, writers, directors, in front of the camera, behind the camera ... we really need to push for that broad representation. I think the same is true for journalism. That means writers and editors, and also executives pushing for more diversity.[192]

In 2019, Critical Minded funded a Press Inclusion Initiative at the Sundance Film Festival* that provided press passes and funding for critics from underrepresented groups to attend the festival, resulting in 63 percent of press passes going to these critics.[193] And in 2022, Critical Minded funded a one-year initiative with the *New York Times** to recruit, coach, and publish cultural criticism by freelance critics of color.[194]

TAKEAWAYS

01. MORE SUPPORT AND RESEARCH NEEDED

Support for critics of color currently takes several forms, including direct financial support, publishing in independent publications focused on writers and audiences of color, training programs, professional associations, and initiatives to increase their access to content and works. Most of these initiatives are already supported or sponsored by Critical Minded, which means that many of them are quite recent. It remains to be seen whether these interventions will make a substantial difference in the opportunities and conditions for critics of color.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

In a 1971 essay, theater critic Clayton Riley wrote:

> I would like to see a time come when very sincere, very concerned Blacks wrote essays intended to shape opinion instead of controlling it where art and artists were concerned. A time when people would not allow themselves to be herded into theaters to witness Black events that made money for non-Black people. ... A time when Black critical opinion would not be maligned just because it existed but because it sometimes failed, was wrong or misguided. A time when artists, critics and audiences of Black people respected and trusted one another enough to be allies in an effort to have creativity blossoming and growing in all of our communities in this nation.[195]

Although that time has not yet come, critics of color are envisioning and actively building the future they want to see, opening up space to imagine criticism and journalism according to different values and models.

"I'm sick of simply complaining about the diversity problem in film criticism, and though it's going to take years of work to possibly be part of the solution, I'm ready to at least try," wrote film critic Ashley Lee in 2018.[196] Theater critic Jose Solís founded the BIPOC Critics Lab* because he had a vision:

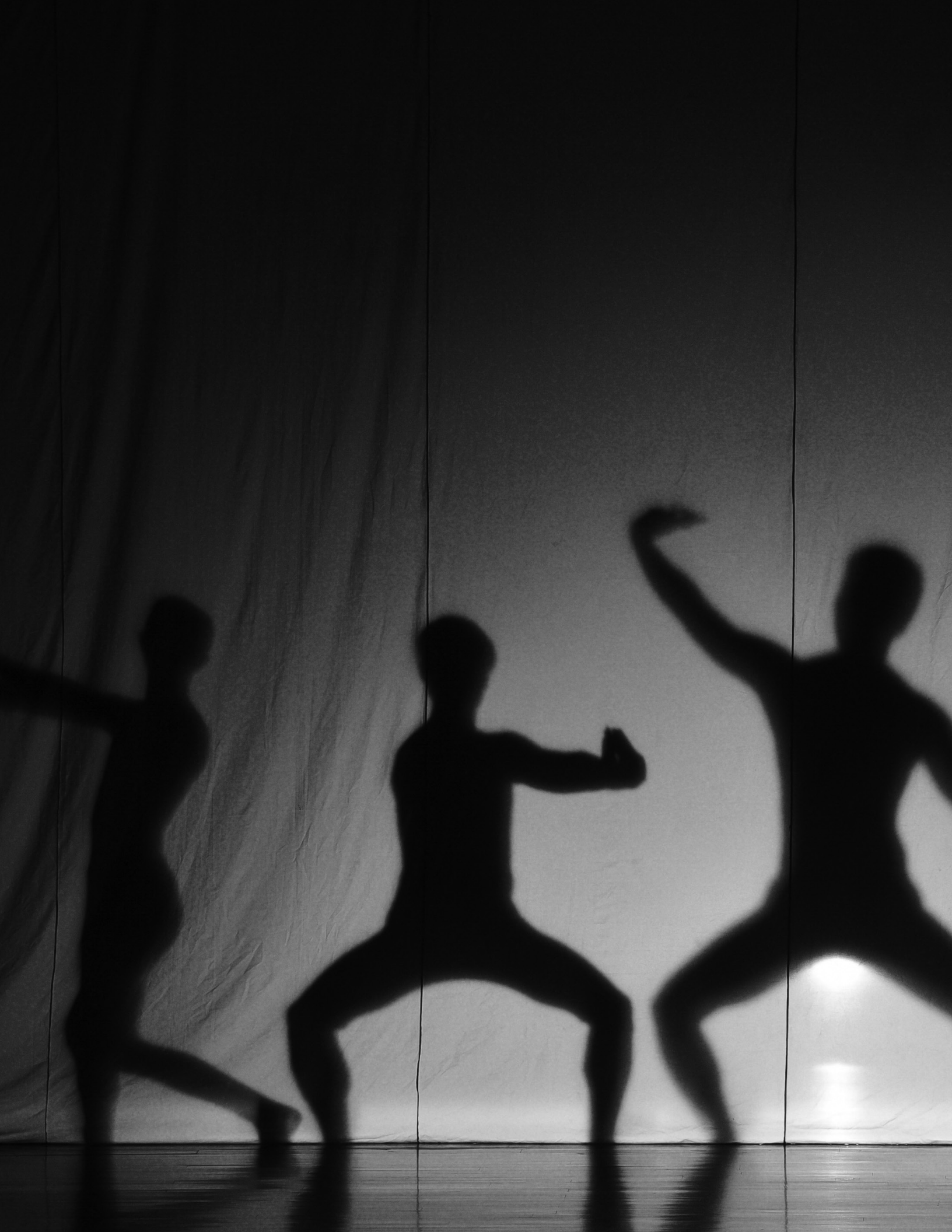
> I could see that elusive critic in my mind's eye. They did not have the same academic preparation or socio-economic background as the staff critics in newspapers and magazines. They were not white, because they didn't know BIPOC could pursue criticism. And they wanted to step outside the box, challenge norms and change what for so long we have taken as the universal point of view.[197]

They are also creating their own outlets to encourage and foster emerging voices, such as ARTS.BLACK,* Black Girl Nerds,* LatinaMedia.Co,* POC Culture, Remezcla,* Rescripted, Token Theatre Friends,* and many others.[198]

Critics of color are also championing innovative forms of criticism that appeal to new and broader audiences. "I think social media has been fantastic in allowing people to amplify voices that they may not have encountered otherwise," said theater critic and editor Diep Tran in a 2019 interview.[199] "Written criticism can't be the default," wrote theater critic Solís in 2020, "Whether it's a TikTok, a podcast or a video essay, critics must use technology and create a dialogue where the people are gathering."[200]

Mary Louise Schumacher highlighted a project by photography critic Teju Cole as an example of criticism that has taken many forms, crossing over to become art itself. She included "his 'Blind Spot' project, which started on Instagram but evolved into a book, exhibition, and performances," in an article about how online outlets are at the vanguard of visual arts writing.[201]

In these ways, critics of color are helping to transform criticism—and perhaps mold it into something that is at once more equitable, representative, and startlingly new.



PART TWO

THEATER AND CRITICISM—INTERVIEW SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

An established theater critic we interviewed offered a beautiful summation of why they write criticism:

> Criticism, I think, saves lives. And I know this is a grandiose thing to say, but the reason why I say it is because criticism made me feel less alone. ... I think that by making the idea of culture something so unattainable, and so luxurious, and so only reserved for specific kinds of people, the system makes you feel like you're alone. ... And criticism, I think, is the opposite of that. Criticism is a way to say, you're not alone. We're here, and we're here for you.

Critical Minded's leaders and this report's co-authors agreed that beyond the Systematic Review, it was important to also collect information from current writers working in the industry. In particular, we agreed that focusing on a single discipline would provide some depth of discussion while also providing a model for how to conduct similar interview-based studies in other disciplines in the future.

Our focus on theater critics of color was partly influenced by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the theater industry. In 2020, theater productions abruptly shut down, leading to economic losses that forced some companies to shutter entirely. Since the end of the lockdowns, audiences have been slow to return, resulting in anxieties about the collapse of the subscription ticket model and the viability of live performance as a whole.[202] In 2023, the *New York Times* cited a National Endowment for the Arts and Census Bureau survey that showed attendance of musicals declined from 16.5 percent of American adults in 2017 to 10.3 percent in 2022, while audiences for plays were down by half.[203] There are also fewer shows being produced. Theatre Communications Group found there were 40 percent fewer shows presented in 2022–23 than in 2019–20.[204] Theaters also experienced record lows in earned income in 2022, down 68 percent from 2019 levels.[205] This situation, in turn, has led to large layoffs and budget cuts that have left many theater creatives out of work.[206] In light of this dire situation, we thought it was an important moment to listen to theater critics and record their experiences in a sector that is currently going through significant change and adaptation.

Our choice was also informed by the specific nature of theatrical performances themselves. Unless they are recorded in some way, most theater is time-bound and ephemeral. A review might be the only form of documentation that reflects the experience of seeing a show. This fact makes it even more important that critics of color participate in the discourse to ensure that a diversity of opinions and experiences becomes part of the historical record. One of our interviewees touched on the importance of criticism as documentation:

> A show, unless it's on Broadway and gets professionally shot and whatever and gets released, most shows will exist and then will not. ... There's so much that we won't even know happened if somebody's not documenting it. ... I would like for us to talk about things that matter, for us to document what happened, for us to say how a play changed somebody or how it affected a community.

Another talked about how theater critics have to write skillfully about so many different aspects of a production in order to fully convey an experience that is complex, fleeting, and highly subjective:

> Something about theater just feels so much more quick, and also personal. There are so many vulnerabilities in what we're showcasing in theater that are so many modes. A theater critic has to be able to write across so many different technical elements, relationships within the space, the trajectory of the story, where it's come from—I mean, if they're ideally doing like the most for their review.

Criticism is perhaps more important in theater and other live performance genres than in other disciplines, not only because it may influence ticket sales and the length of a show's run but also because it often serves as the only documentation of an ephemeral performance, a record of a unique experience shared between the performers and the audience. It is crucial for critics of color to participate in this dialogue in order to ensure the fullness and diversity of the historical record.

With these considerations in mind, in the fall and winter of 2023–24, we interviewed sixteen theater critics of color active in the United States about their career experiences and the challenges they face. The critics range in experience from one to sixteen years in writing about theater, although some have been writers or critics in other disciplines for twenty years or more. They are or were active in over half a dozen states throughout the US, and come from Asian, Black, Latinx, and West Asian or North African racial backgrounds. Eight use he/him pronouns, seven use she/her, and one uses they/them. Two are staff critics and, the remaining fourteen are freelancers, reflecting broader trends in the criticism profession that suggests a primarily freelance—and thus, economically precarious—workforce.

Interviewees have contributed to a wide range of publications, from student newspapers and online start-ups to major dailies and glossy national magazines. Publication names have been redacted in this report to preserve interviewees' anonymity.

What follows are the primary themes and topics that interviewees shared with us. They are based primarily on a standard set of interview questions (see "Methodologies"), but in many cases, also include other remarks that arose over the course of the interviews.

Note: Interviews took place concurrent with the research and work done on the Systematic Analysis in Part One; not surprisingly, many of the same

issues discussed in Part One were also present in the comments and testimonials of our interviewees. Despite those overlaps, it was important to treat the interviews as a distinct body of data to analyze and discuss.

“Quick Facts” About the Interviewees

NUMBER OF CRITICS CRITICAL MINDED INTERVIEWED: **16**

NUMBER OF CRITICS THAT HAVE FULL-TIME JOBS: **2**

RANGE OF FEES PAID FOR A PIECE BY THE CRITICS WE INTERVIEWED: **$10—$1,000**

NUMBER OF CRITICS WHO SAID THEY’VE WRITTEN FOR FREE: **4**

NUMBER OF US STATES REPRESENTED BY CRITICS WE INTERVIEWED: **9 (CA, DC, FL, IL, MN, NC, NY, OR, TX)**

RACE/ETHNICITY OF INTERVIEWEES: **ASIAN (4), BLACK (7), LATINX (4), MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN (1)**

COVID-19 IMPACTS

We asked critics how the COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent racial reckonings and economic impacts affected them. While the pandemic was economically devastating to much of the theater industry due to the widespread closure of live performance venues, the impact on theater critics was more complicated. Ironically, this may be partly because—as we note in the "Economic Precarity" section below—few working critics depend on theater reviews as their sole source of income and, therefore, were already used to pivoting to other work amid the theater shutdowns. A mid-career critic in New York explored new angles:

> I'm really good at figuring out how to write about things. ... Granted, when the pandemic happened and there was no theater to write about, I did different investigations. ... I understand that the business is more than just press releases, cast announcements, interviews, profiles and reviews. There is a way to write about this from a financial perspective, which I tend to enjoy and excel at.

Another critic, who has since left the profession, used the pause to reevaluate their writing career and pivoted from criticism to reporting instead:

> The pandemic was a blessing in disguise for me because that's when I reevaluated what I really wanted to do. I did not lose work, which is crazy. Obviously, there were no shows, but I did get a lot of freelance work just to talk about theater and its possible comeback. It made me switch to theater reporting. It did have an impact on my thought process and whether I wanted to pursue this full-time.

For another, who also works as a creative in the theater world, criticism was much less important than documenting what was happening to the industry:

> When I saw that our institution, or the thing that we love, you know, came into this huge crisis, theater criticism was way down on the bottom of the totem pole of worries about how we're going to get it going again. ... Once everything came crashing down, I didn't feel like that was the thing. It was more about journalism, right? When I was writing during that time, it was like, "Okay, let's talk about this theater that's protesting this way," or, "Let's talk about the way that we've pivoted, and how we're sharing work virtually."

Even for those critics who didn't pivot toward journalism, the shutdown period created unforeseen opportunities. For our interviewees, some of this shift had less to do with the pandemic and more to do with the national calls for racial justice in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. This instigated publications and other media companies to explore

implementing various DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) efforts though, as we discuss in the "Gatekeeping" section below around *tokenism*, these changes could prove to be short-term and superficial rather than transformative of company policies, structures, or cultures. Nonetheless, several of our interviewees, all located in different parts of the country, saw new opportunities during this time.

For example, a critic in New York City experienced an uptick in work and offers to write for new publications:

> I benefited from the sense that there needs to be more diverse voices. And maybe for those years before then, when I was not getting assignments, that was discrimination by inattention or whatever. ... But in my mind, I frame it as ... getting more opportunities as there has been a call for more diverse voices.

A critic in Texas noticed that the pandemic had brought conversations about DEI more into the open in the theater world:

> DEI over here has been very—it just swelled. The pandemic was having people talk about these things now. ... Some people are having some difficult conversations with each other. ... I'm really thankful that the companies here have been very open in their dialogue.

An early career critic in the South said that the racial reckonings that accompanied the pandemic "highlighted the need for authentic points of view," both in criticism and in theater production:

> The critical thing is that people understand better, especially post–George Floyd for some reason; they've understood the need for an authentic point of view, rather than an outsider's point of view. That's actually started to trickle down into the theater culture itself, where dramaturgs, directors, and casting directors ... will get the more authentic voice into the room during rehearsal so that it is reflected in the story. It started happening with the critics first, and now it's happening more, I think because we've raised the critical voice, it's happening more with the theater companies, too.

Along with voices that may have previously been excluded from productions and criticism, an early career critic in the Midwest talked about how the online shows occasioned by the pandemic also expanded access:

> I was doing reviews of digital shows. And really, we were in a moment of figuring out, "How do we write on a digital show?" knowing that it's not maybe the ideal version of what a theater company wanted to produce. But I was really excited by the innovation and the accessibility we were seeing in the early days of the pandemic, especially with festivals that

> were still trying to produce content, but now it's going to be only via Zoom or other kinds of digital platforms. And so I'm really grateful that I had the opportunity to write on those shows.

New writing opportunities were not the only difference that our interviewees saw occur during the pandemic era. An early career critic in New York shared that there now seems to be a higher turnover of shows, with shows closing more quickly than before. "I'm pouring so much critical analysis into a show and the next week, I've read that it's closed," they said, "In one way, it's good because criticism extends the life of the show, right? Like it's an archive of what existed. But I think just [the] turn around makes my head spin a little bit."

As theaters reopened, a critic in Texas discussed how, post-pandemic, the theaters saw criticism more as publicity:

> It was this up-ramp where they were getting back into the groove of things and using us as media to get the word out that, "Hey, we're in the seats now." There were a couple of companies that didn't come back entirely. That's a shame. It's hard to say it was a challenge. It was almost like we were doing their publicity, which was fine. I mean, they needed all the help they could get.

In the wake of the theater industry trying to ramp back up, an early career critic in the DC area shared that it made them feel bad about writing negative reviews, knowing that the theater companies were struggling:

> I feel like it's really hard to be entirely honest. I know that everyone was suffering. ... One of the most recent reviews that I wrote, I wanted to really like it and I wanted to be able to give that theater something that would help them, and then it turned out to be ... this isn't good material. I feel bad. I feel really bad. But I have to say what I have to say.

TAKEAWAYS

01. FREELANCING MADE THEM MORE RESILIENT

Most critics were able to pivot to other types of writing, such as journalism, relatively easily, in part because they had already diversified their income streams in order to make a living.

02. IMPACT OF RACIAL RECKONINGS

Some critics experienced increased opportunities as a result of the DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives that followed the murder of George Floyd and attendant calls for racial reckonings.

03. NEW PRODUCTIONS ONLINE

The theater industry's move to online shows and events also created new experiences and opportunities for some critics.

04. SHORTER SHELF LIFE OF REVIEWS AND SHOWS

However, with audience interest failing to return to pre-pandemic levels, shows are now running for shorter periods of time. In this environment, criticism may have a shorter shelf life in terms of influencing the box office, but potentially extends the life of the show by entering it into the historical record.

05. CONTRACTING THEATER SCENE

As critics note in the "The Burden of Representation" section below, some theater companies are now more sensitive to negative reviews and tend to think of criticism as a type of publicity. Still, despite their sympathies for the economic hardships that theaters have experienced, critics maintain their independence to respond in ways that are true to themselves.

CHALLENGES FACING THEATER CRITICS OF COLOR

1. Economic Precarity

Not surprisingly, our interviewees reported serious concerns around the financial viability of writing theater criticism. Many of these issues preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, but as discussed in Part One, the pandemic created even more dire circumstances for working critics to navigate. The majority of our interviewees stated that theater criticism is not an economically sustainable career. Only two of the sixteen interviewees have full-time staff positions as critics. The rest make their living through a combination of freelance criticism and/or part- or full-time work in other roles or fields such as marketing and publicity, education, editing, or as theater-related creatives. Two interviewees currently are not writing criticism at all, while others described continuing to write criticism "for the love," meaning that their labor was done for free or for as little as $10 a review. As one critic, who is also an academic, said, "Criticism in the arts is not a career for most people. It's mostly a hobby that they do out of the love of their hearts in my world. All the critics have other jobs. They don't depend on this. I think theater criticism is sort of viewed as irrelevant, sometimes."

The contraction in the publishing industry mentioned in Part One has similarly impacted theater criticism. A freelance critic who used to be a reporter and now works in education said that the advent of the internet, with its quantifiable page views, led to the steady decline of theater criticism in their region:

> Once we started getting into metrics, and once we could see like, hey, five zillion people are reading sports, and two hundred are reading criticism, that's when the decision was made. [Publishers and editors thought] "We got to scale back on the criticism of theater because it's niche." We all know that it's niche. So once the [publication] realized they can cover theater with three people and no full-time staff ... that's the move they made. So getting a full-time critic's position at a newspaper, I won't say it's impossible, but it's pretty darn close to it.

Even the two interviewees who have staff positions were pessimistic. One shared the following:

> There are still very little staff positions and that's always been the case. You're stuck either having to freelance on the side, or you are the lucky one, like myself, who has a staff position and can go in and out. ... Theater criticism is not as much a priority for a lot of publications anymore. That also means it narrows the scope of what we're able to cover, which is unfortunate.

Another noted that despite the wealth of productions in their local area, the rollback on hiring theater critics meant that, as one of the sole staff critics for their region, they didn't have the ability to see every show, which left many shows unreviewed as a result:

> One of the other challenges is being the sole person who does this for my paper. There are a ton of theaters in [my region], and I really want to be inclusive. I really try to go to every single one. It is impossible, though … I don't want to say there's too much, but on my end, there's just too little of me to go around and we just don't have the staff.

A New York City freelance critic echoed the perception that there is a declining demand for theater criticism, resulting in shrinking opportunities: "Not a lot of outlets want theater criticism because not a lot of people are reading about theater because not a lot of people are going to the theater," they said. They also described a bind they find themselves in between the importance of theater criticism and the lack of support for it: "All of the problems are feeding into each other," they said, noting that theaters "need the coverage to keep the health of the industry and we want to do the coverage, but who's paying for it?" They went on to say that even though they write for a large, national publication, "It's a great byline, but it's not real money."

Along those lines, economic precarity not only manifests in shrinking opportunities to write but also low wages. We specifically asked critics how much they were paid, and the responses were sobering. Although a mid-career critic in New York City said in some years, they made as much as $115,000 from a combination of different kinds of work, the most seasoned critic we interviewed said they never made more than $30,000 a year in New York City; they eventually left the city in search of a better quality of life. Other critics in New York City said freelance rates range from $150 to $1,000 per review or feature, although the highest rates were paid for long-form articles at large national publications, which are relatively rare. Outside of New York, rates are much more variable, ranging from $10 to $1,000 per review or feature, with many more critics reporting payments in the $30 to $100 range. One critic in Florida reported being offered $25 to review a show, which didn't cover the gas and parking required to see it.

Writing without compensation has become the norm for some. A critic who works as an educator described how they joined a group of writers who started a nonprofit online publication when a publication they had all worked for shut down. "We work for the love, because we want to keep this alive," they said, adding that their local newspapers no longer include theater criticism. "So we took up the banner as a nonprofit, so we will all work for nothing. It's pro bono," they said.

Some have decided that writing without compensation might create future opportunities. "Writing for free isn't beneath me," said an established critic who also works in education, "If it wasn't me writing for free, nobody would have found me." But they also noted that it took them a while to arrive

at a sustainable balance between their criticism and their day job: "Six or seven years ago, I was doing a huge day job and squeezing in criticism and coming home and writing. And at some point, you're just like, 'I can't sustain this.'"

Another critic who started writing later in life lamented that they hadn't started when they were younger, suggesting, "You can work for peanuts, intern places and get your foot in the door; you can do that kind of stuff when you're younger, because you don't have a mortgage, you don't have kids ... I don't have that luxury." However, other interviewees found such early sacrifices have not paid off. One described how they started writing for an online publication for free because it was a new venture, but three years later are still not being paid. "I feel like I'm in that, 'I'm in a start-up, how do I ask for money?' situation right now," they said. They now work full-time in a marketing position and described the journalism industry contracting all around them:

> The timing of my coming into these industries is really hard. I worked with people at [a large broadcaster] for a year and there was just absolutely no expectation that I would stay on. Because if you stay on, you would just temp and they already had too many temps. And then earlier this year, they cut 10% of their staff, including people who I worked with who managed me. ... So I get a foothold into these organizations, but there's no structure to keep me in there.

Another critic, who also works in publicity, found support as an emerging critic in the form of fellowships or limited-term training programs, but then found it difficult to build momentum and sustain their writing practice beyond those.

> There's a lot of entry-level things that you can do, but once you get them, being able to sustain it ... because there are so many new journalism programs, like the BIPOC Critics Lab. I applied for that but I didn't get into it, I think, because I've had experience already. It also means trusting the contacts that I already have too, I think, but sometimes your editors aren't also your mentors.

Finally, there is an emotional toll that comes with being a freelancer in an unstable environment with shrinking opportunities. An early career critic described burnout related to the cycle of pitching and high turnover among editors:

> When I first started, so much more of my time was going to pitches. I did have my eyes on larger national magazines, but I got burned out from those pitches, especially when there's a lot of turnover in some of those senior editor roles. I had only one piece ever go into [a national publication]. ... But after that editor left, I didn't have that relationship

anymore. So I think it's both like the weariness, the exhaustion of getting yourself out there, and then maintaining relationships as folks move from different publication to publication.

TAKEAWAYS

01. CRITICAL CORPS BECOMING MORE EXCLUSIVE

What we heard from the interviewees overall reinforces our findings in the Systematic Review: in a landscape of contracting opportunities, only those who have other sources of income—and a certain amount of privilege—can afford to write theater criticism.

02. IMPACT OF DATAFICATION

The advent of more specific metrics for readership has given publications an excuse to turn away from "niche" content like theater reviews, and publication staffs have shrunk accordingly.

03. SHRINKING COVERAGE

Those who have full-time staff positions are also seeing the breadth of what they can cover diminish, either because of a perceived lack of interest, or because there aren't enough people to write about everything happening in their region.

04. CRITICISM INCREASINGLY A LABOR OF LOVE

Writing for little or no compensation used to be a way to gain the attention of publications and editors but is now largely a labor of love without much expectation of future opportunities.

05. FELLOWSHIPS AND INTERNSHIPS ARE NOT ENOUGH

Although there are fellowships and internships that might provide initial experience in the field, it is difficult to move beyond those as a critic without external financial support. Increasingly, theater criticism is a sideline or one of many different income streams.

06. CONSTANTLY AT RISK OF BURNOUT

Being a permanent freelancer can result in burnout from the constant cycle of pitching. This is exacerbated by high editor turnover, which makes it hard for critics to build long-term relationships.

2. Gatekeeping

Compared to other forms of artistic practice—film or music, for example—the live nature of theater, the limited number and size of performance venues, and the practice of inviting critics to previews make concerns around gatekeeping especially relevant for our interviewees. It is especially prevalent in New York City, where access to some Broadway shows and to the Tony Awards is limited to writers on the American Theatre Wing press list, and it is not clear what the requirements are for getting on the list. While theater critics, in general, face these challenges, they are even more stark for writers of color. Our interviewees were very forthcoming about the various kinds of discrimination they perceived in the theater ecosystem. A mid-career critic in New York City shared the following:

> There are so few devoted outlets or available spaces to global majority people and there are so few outlets ... that will employ us. That's what it is. If one of them was like, "Oh, there's a revival of 'Raisin in the Sun.' We don't want to [be] that publication that has an old white guy covering it. Will you come do it?" They don't do that. They're not interested in it.

This interviewee went on to describe something of a quota system among the "twenty-six outlets" that publish about theater in New York City. They identified five or six critics of color who have regular bylines, saying that if all of them write about a show on a given night, then no other critics of color would be given the opportunity to do so. "It's not that the opportunities are actually scarce," they said. "It's the willingness to expand those opportunities to non-white people. That's what's scarce."

An established Latinx critic relayed that assumptions regarding their ethnicity often came with racist conclusions about their language skills and ability to review shows in English:

> People thinking that I was not knowledgeable enough; that I didn't belong in the same spaces that they did. People even going as far as questioning whether I spoke English properly. ... I'm bilingual. I have spoken perfect English and Spanish since I was three years old. I was raised in both languages. And then in the US, in New York City, people would question my English and people would question whether I was translating, whether my brain was in Spanish, and I was translating when I wrote.

This critic also described gatekeeping by publicists, who control access to complimentary press tickets. They said early in their career, it was easy to get comps for "Off-Off-Broadway stuff," but the people who repped Broadway productions "were impossible to crack." They lamented the fact that these reps tended to favor writers with whom they already had personal relationships:

> Theater press reps and publicists are very old-fashioned. You have to have cocktails with them and go out to dinner with them and network with them and know them at a personal level in a way that makes me uncomfortable. My motto with work is you don't mix the professional with the personal ... I shouldn't have had to.

In a system governed by these personal relationships, critics of color are less likely to have the family and educational ties on which such relationships are often based. Another critic described attending the National Critics Institute,* which opened up a whole new world to them but also made them sad, because it made them aware of existing networks they hadn't had access to, many of which relied on generational wealth and attending prestigious schools:

> I felt like, especially in a space like the Eugene O'Neill, all of those people know each other. They were talking and they had this community that they had built in those spaces [where] I wouldn't have been able to go.

One particularly pernicious form of gatekeeping mentioned in many interviews was *pigeonholing*, i.e., the perception that critics of color were only pitched or assigned productions by or about people of color. Several critics described being courted or encouraged, mainly by publicists, but sometimes by editors, to review shows that reflect or were created by someone with the same ethnic or racial background as them. An established Latinx critic said, "Publicists would come to me and say, 'This show is just made for you to cover.' And it was basically because they had a Spanish word in the title or something." Such reductive and limiting assumptions have plagued this same critic throughout their career:

> This narrow-mindedness, for instance, that I could only write about ... things related to my "identity" was something that felt totally like an obstacle. I cannot tell you how many times I pitched, for instance, or I spoke to editors at very prominent publications, about me wanting to write stories that they would tell me were not for me, but then they would grab the story that I wanted to write and assign it to a white journalist.

An early career critic said they got their start because an editor asked them to write about a production that reflected their ethnic background but then realized later that they were being pigeonholed into only being asked to review similar shows:

> I was approached by the editor of one of the local publications who went, "I think you would be a great person to review this show." That's how I got started. ... But over the course of my career, editors have gently nudged me towards productions that have been more focused on people of color and the experiences of people of color.

A critic in the South described a similar experience, stating, "I only got assignments that were Latino, or African American, because nobody was doing African American works either in [my city]. I eventually felt like I got stuck there, because I wasn't assigned any of the big shows."

A mid-career critic in New York City expressed a similar concern around constantly being asked to write about works involving people of color, regardless of which community:

> I don't want it to be one-to-one [where] I'm only assigned to stories by artists of color ... I don't like saying "of color" in my writing or in general because it's very generalizing. Being assigned to write about a play by Black artists, I think I get more of those assignments because I'm not white, but I'm also not Black.

As discussed in Part One, critics often feel an obligation to review works by/about people of color, which makes pigeonholing a complicated topic. Some of our interviewees stated that they didn't mind being recruited for productions that focus on communities of color, although notably, these tended to be early career writers, who may be more eager for any opportunities, haven't yet experienced the negative effects of pigeonholing, or may have come up in environments that were more appreciative of multiple axes of difference. An early career critic wanted to be considered to review productions that reflect the communities they are a part of, saying, "I try to make myself available to get community coverage that feels empathetic, and does justice to the artists that have worked on that show." An early career Black critic said they also wanted to be sought out to write about Black productions:

> Some editors, I've noticed, will send me on the Black assignments or want me to particularly review a Black show. A lot of press representatives, I find, will follow up in their invitations to me if it's especially a Black female playwright, all of which ... I don't hate, to be frank. I do want to be sought after for Black work.

While some welcomed these opportunities, others were more circumspect. An early career Latinx critic said of one editor they worked with:

> When he approached me to write for him, it was very much like, "It would be great to have an extra person on to maybe go cover some of [the] more like Latinx plays and stuff like that from somebody that really understands." And I was like, "Okay," I mean, that's great. It's ... what I would like to do; it's not the only thing that I want to do.

Part of the concern being expressed here is another common theme among our interviewees: *tokenism*, i.e., being treated as the "only" critic of color allowed into a particular circle. An early career critic described gaining entry to a particular publication as an example of this phenomenon:

> They were in a bind to find someone who was Asian to write about [a production with Asian characters and setting] at [a theater] and ... they knew that I was in the ... area. And they were like, "Hey, do you want to write it?" And I was like, "Sure, I will." But it could have been any Asian theater journalist.

A mid-career critic related how they are often the only person of color invited into certain spaces because people see them as "the right type of Black," and how unspoken tokenism maintains the whiteness of elite spaces.

> I speak English better than fucking anyone else. And so people are like, "Oh, yes. [They are] palatable. [They make] me feel comfortable. [They are] the right type of Black." ... But they're not going to say, "Oh, that person who speaks a little bit hood, but who was actually really cool and really interesting," or "That person who went to community college and started their own blog, but it has something really cool to say. I'm not gonna hire them because they didn't go to NYU or Harvard or Yale." It's the credentialism as well as the impossibility of allowing people to actually find a way through unless they are the right hue.

An established critic told a similar tale of finally being admitted to a critics' organization as the only person of color and then being asked to be the "public face" of the organization. "Having me among their ranks instantly meant really good PR for them," they said. They discussed how they felt like they had to leverage their marginalized identities to shame people into accepting them into such organizations:

> I had to start using my identity cards, as I call them, in a way that pleased the white people who were letting me into the spaces ... it forced me to shape myself and my work almost like a charity case for them to see my worth. And to see not me because of what I could do and my skills, but because I was the [person with multiple marginalized identities] who they didn't have among the ranks.

They went on to discuss the mental health toll this process exacted, but also how they were able to move beyond it:

> I knew what I needed from them to position myself in a way that I wouldn't need them after a while ... being put through the situations that they were putting me through was not only hurting my mental health, but also doing them more good than doing me any good. I don't think I've ever said this out loud ... but I don't think they helped me. I think I helped them.

These forms of tokenism in the theater world are found throughout many other industries as corporatized DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) efforts have proliferated in the wake of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter

and other anti-racist efforts. We discussed several specific examples of this earlier under “COVID-19 Impacts.”

TAKEAWAYS

01. MULTIPLE FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

Interviewees have perceived gatekeeping as a lack of interest in hiring critics of color, even to review productions that reflect their racial and ethnic communities. They have also experienced discrimination in the form of doubts about their English-language abilities and in lack of access to complimentary tickets needed to do their work.

02. PIGEONHOLING

Interviewees were often pigeonholed by publicists and editors into writing only about productions that reflect their marginalized identities. Some critics, especially early career ones, want to be sought out to review these productions, but don't want that to be the only thing they write about.

03. TOKENISM

Interviewees also discussed tokenism, in which they were the only critic of color invited into particular spaces because they were seen as "the right type" or because their presence was used to prove the diversity of a publication or organization. They also discussed how they sometimes had to instrumentalize their marginalized identities to gain access and the resulting emotional toll.

3. The Burden of Representation

At its core, pigeonholing is tied to essentialist ideas about race, identity, and community. However, our circle of interviewees reported that they didn't just deal with these assumptions coming from editors and publicists but also from members of the theater community who were unhappy with their reviews, even "positive" ones. We discussed the burden of representation related to a critic's racial or ethnic community in Part One. For theater critics, this burden was felt more in relation to the theater community and audiences, which are often small and geographically specific. Because of the stresses brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, producers, directors, actors, and other theater workers often perceived anything but glowing reviews as a lack of support for theater *as an industry* and did not hesitate to voice their dissatisfaction. Vitriol directed at critics of color often had a racist dimension.

Our interviewees described being accused of not doing their job when they voiced negative opinions but were also charged with bias when they reviewed works related to their own identities positively. While most feel a responsibility to respond to works from their communities of origin with care and authenticity, they also maintain a fierce independence, refusing to give a production a good review simply because it reflects their communities.

A critic in New York City related how their critical bona fides were attacked over a negative review:

> The day that the review was published, I received DMs from everyone, from producers of the show who were planning to bring it to Broadway to older critics who worked for other platforms, who said, "This is a gross example of criticism." That was a turning point for me, where this industry is so dead set on having one generic opinion, and I can't deal.

Another described how some people's definition of criticism seems to preclude negative reviews altogether:

> People think that theater critics are looking for a reason to damn something … and if someone dislikes it, it's like, "It's not fair. You're not doing a fair review." What is fair? Is it only fair if I love it? I think that there's this perception that theater critics are out of touch and purposely want to poo-poo on something that everyone loves. And that is true, sometimes. … But most of the time, no. It's really hard. It doesn't pay enough.

A third critic based in the South noted that such attacks have increased in recent years, especially from the smaller theaters in their community that see criticism as "a disservice to community theater":

> That backlash happened almost immediately post-pandemic … and in one case, it was particularly visceral against a critic of color, not me, but sort of a fellow critic. … I think that the more we hold the community of

interest to standards, the more anger there has been. But that hasn't made us back down as critics.

Several critics working in the South also experienced a lack of access to complimentary tickets tied to what they perceived as bias on the part of theater companies seeking to dissuade writers from publications that highlight perspectives from critics of color or queer critics. One critic said:

> There are a couple of companies who point blank refuse to provide [the publication] with comps because of what they consider to be hot takes on those very issues, on issues of color and identity in general. I don't feel comfortable naming the companies, but that has actually been an issue here.

Another, who writes for a publication with an LGBTQ+ audience, described a similar experience:

> I can get the vibe that they didn't really want an LGBTQ paper reviewing their shows. It wasn't that they said anything. It's that they don't say anything; they just don't respond. ... They're smaller suburban theaters. And not to minimize that, but I mean, I don't think that I'm missing the bigger picture of coverage here with that.

People also accuse critics of bias if they give positive reviews to productions that reflect their racial background. One critic, who was one of a few to give a good review to a Broadway production that highlighted a Black experience, was accused of only doing so because they are Black:

> When I was the only critic that gave it a good review ... there were comments that said, "You literally only gave this show a good review because it's a Black show." I was so disappointed, because I understood the content, and I connected with the content, and I knew exactly who it was speaking to.

Another Black critic conveyed their disdain for assumptions that seek to constrain what they might say about a given production:

I DON'T GIVE THINGS POSITIVE REVIEWS BECAUSE OF THE REPRESENTATION OF IT OR JUST BECAUSE IT'S REPRESENTATIONAL. IT NEEDS TO MEAN SOMETHING TO ME. ... IF WE THINK THAT

I'M GOING TO LIKE SOMETHING JUST BECAUSE IT HAS A BLACK CAST OR A BLACK CREATIVE, THAT'S RACISM.

Critics are aware of how negative reviews might impact the few productions that portray communities of color, but they ultimately feel it is a disservice to those productions if they aren't honest. An established critic in California acknowledged the pressure:

> Maybe there's a certain pressure to make sure this play gets the right kind of review, because ... you know how hard it is for our people to get productions anyway, and I don't want to do anything to harm that. With that being said, I don't think you can compromise your truth. If anything, it's even more disrespectful and condescending to give someone a favorable review just because they look like you.

A critic in New York agreed: "I don't want to be the one who's pulling it down when there are so few stories about those characters, but then also, I want the art to be better." They went on to say they experienced this pressure from artists who share their racial background, to which they said, "I can't really engage with that. That's not really my job." Similarly, a Latinx critic described how they had to assert their independence when a Latinx theater company with whom they were friendly asked them to make changes to a review:

> I said, "I'm sorry, but this is my review. This is how I saw it. And I appreciate your feedback, but nothing's going to change." I've had to sort of put my foot down on that, because the familiarity issue feels like, "Oh, you're one of us, and you're [Latinx], support Latino theater."

An established critic described how they panned a show about their community of origin by a well-meaning theater company, which led to some difficult but productive conversations:

> If equality means we can pander with sub-sitcom-level writing, okay, if that's the quality you want, fine, but it's not for me. And so that was the gist of what I wrote about it. And the company was really offended. Some months later, I had a very long, good conversation with the AD [Artistic Director]. That's one of the challenges that I was talking about: racial vantage point and the ethical compass and journalistic independence, and how you meld those things and navigate those.

As noted in Part One, anger directed at critics of color especially impacts Black women. A mid-career critic said that online hate is much worse for Black women than it is for other critics of color:

> That is so much worse for Black women. And that, I will say, is one reason why [a woman critic] left criticism. Because she was targeted by many, many people unfairly for no reason. I know you didn't ask me about it, but I think it's important to say that. I don't go through anything. Black women do.

Black women are also subject to other forms of disrespectful behavior that other critics seldom deal with. Kelundra Smith, one of the researchers of this report, has had producers text her directly asking her to change a review. One interviewee, who is a Black woman, said the negative comments she received were enough to spur her to leave the profession:

> I was doing all this hard work only to be rewarded with ignorant comments ... there was a community of people who were like, "Did you write about this show? We want to hear your opinion." But then there were also voices in my DMs that were disgusting and hard to read. What do you do for your mental health? You're in an industry that you love so much, but this is not helping you to get to the end goal. That's when I said it's time to go.

Some critics experienced emotional stress when writing about productions that feature people from the same marginalized backgrounds as them. An early career critic described the toll of writing about content related to their own identities:

> Sometimes even when I want to pitch those stories, they're extremely taxing to tell. ... The last really, really big story was one for [publication] about [a production that deals with disability] and it was something that I personally believed in as [someone] who has a disability, but it also was a lot.

Another early career critic acknowledged they needed to draw better boundaries between their work and their personal life, especially when pitching stories related to their marginalized identities: "I try to be like, 'Oh, I can bring some personal experience to it because I can relate to it,' but sometimes I need to have some more boundaries with where my personal life comes into my journalism."

TAKEAWAYS

01. HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT FOR CRITICISM

Theater critics operate in an increasingly divisive online environment in which criticism is seen by the theater industry as boosterism or as an extension of publicity. Their traditional function of questioning and critiquing the ideas and norms promulgated by theatrical works is rarely appreciated in this environment, and critics themselves become the target of attacks that not only flatten discussion but can also cause mental and emotional harm. They may also be denied access to complimentary tickets by theater companies that don't support diverse perspectives.

02. PRESSURE TO BE POSITIVE

Theater critics understand the financial and cultural stakes for productions that focus on communities of color and other marginalized groups and want to apply their expertise and lived experience to evaluating them accurately and responsibly. They experience pressure, primarily from the theater community, to review shows about their communities of origin or affiliation positively, but fiercely maintain their independence.

4. The Elitism of Theater

Unlike books, music, television, or film, theater is a relatively local art form that cannot rely on mass replication and distribution to be experienced. Most theatrical productions are tied to a specific geographic location—often urban centers where the cost of living is high—which means that a theater consumer may have to travel to see a production, making it inaccessible to many. Theater tickets can also be expensive, up to hundreds of dollars per seat at a Broadway production. Due to all of these factors, theatergoers tend to be higher income and white. An established critic in New York City said that critical perspectives are important precisely because tickets are so expensive, which conditions audiences to be less critical:

> That's not to say that I think that an audience member doesn't have a place in delivering criticism, but most people who [have] paid to see a show stand and give something a standing ovation even when they don't think [it] deserves a standing ovation. But they spent $500 on the ticket so they have to. Psychologically, they're like, "Well, I spent all this money, I'd better ovate. I better applaud and stand and whatnot to make it worth my while."

In offering perspectives tied to real-life experiences that differ from those of the typical theatergoer, critics of color may invite new audiences into the theater. An established critic suggested that criticism could be part of the move to broaden access to theater, and that "access" is about more than being able to afford a ticket:

> You can't have the conversation of criticism until you have the conversation about access. We need to provide access. We need to put our money where our mouth is and say, "You never go to shows, but you should." And then, there's this whole falsehood about well, it's too expensive and Black people can't afford it. Brown people can't afford it. That's kind of racist on its face. Black people can afford plenty of stuff. Mexicans can afford plenty of stuff. People of color can afford things. But, are you welcoming them? Are you saying to them, "We want you here"? Are you saying, "Well, you gotta be quiet, you can't talk. You can't cheer too loud. You can't do this"? If we're not welcoming people into our spaces, we're not going to get them to come back.

A mid-career critic agreed that criticism could be a way of extending access and engaging audiences even if they can't see a show:

> I wish that there was more of an understanding of theater ... through theater criticism as a form that doesn't have to be so stiff and stuffy. There can be humor to it, it can be accessible to people, even if they're not able to see it, whether because of the ticket prices or because they're just not in an area where they can get it.

Our interviewees were also aware that their appearance at the theater as a critic did not always match people's expectations of how a critic should look or behave. This sometimes resulted in surprised reactions or microaggressions from theater staff or other audience members. One critic described how box office workers sometimes expected someone who looked very different: "They expect a white [person] who went to read English at Eton. They don't expect me, even though I'm just as posh." Another critic, who is Latinx, said they were sometimes mistaken for a server at premiere events where people would try to give them their empty plates: "Yeah, it was weird. And then they try to pass it off like, 'I thought you were one of the staff.' And I was like, 'Well, I'm not dressed in a red shirt and black pants,' ... I was just brown." They also reported that people were sometimes surprised they had such good tickets or questioned why they were there.

A critic of South West Asian and North African (SWANA) descent said they were also met with disbelief that they were a critic, as well as difficulties in spelling their name:

> I've had so many issues across the years of folks just not believing that I am the theater critic. Or my name is not on the list, or my name is spelled wrong on the list, and it doesn't match my license. There's just so much shame and embarrassment sometimes of showing up to the theater. ... If this is how you're treating a critic, I don't want to know how you're treating audiences. So that's something that just weighs on my heart sometimes.

These issues get compounded by ageism as well. The same critic added:

> The main discrimination I'm facing is that ... I am young, and I look even younger, according to other people. And so moving in those spaces, and just being assumed as like a college kid that was writing during a show, like, "Why are you doing that? You're disruptive," kind of thing, like the looks I get sometimes are ridiculous.

Another early career critic described a similar experience:

> It's all intersectional. ... Even the people leading me to my seat, like ushers, I don't think they ever believe I'm there to do the job that I am there to do. I'm writing notes in the show and I've had people ask me, "Oh, are you a student?" ... I've had an usher tell me once—she was dumbfounded—she was like, "Oh my God, you have such a great seat." And I could tell that it probably wasn't malicious, but more just like, "How did you afford it? How are you there?" And it's like, "Well, I'm in the critic's seat because I'm a critic." And nobody ever thinks that's what I'm doing.

A critic who *is* actually a student said they also sometimes feel out of place: "I feel like a lot of the shows I do review, I'm seeing a lot of older white people. So I definitely feel like I stand out in that regard."

TAKEAWAYS

01. EXPANDING ACCESS TO THEATER

While critics of color find it challenging that theater is expensive and is seen by many as a niche interest, they continue to have confidence in the ability of criticism to expand theater's audience and engage people who have traditionally been left out of its narratives and/or its actual spaces. Although they may not be able to address the larger structural issues that make theatergoing so expensive, by providing points of view and voices that differ from dominant ones, critics of color see their role as expanding access and consideration to different audiences.

02. INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Critics of color are sometimes faced with reductive assumptions about what a theater critic looks like or how old they should be, which result in discriminatory treatment when they arrive at the theater. Sometimes this treatment is related to their race, but more commonly is an intersectional judgment also based on perceptions of other facets of their identities. It is notable that the critics who talked about facing ageism are both younger and identify as women or nonbinary. One of these critics saw this intersectional bias as an exclusionary tactic in a creative space and medium that is supposed to be about coming together: "I deserve to be there. And how dare you act this way to any kind of person to make them feel unwanted or othered in a space of ideation, of creation, where we're actually supposed to breathe and be together?"

THE IMPORTANCE AND SUPPORT OF CRITICS OF COLOR

Like the critics quoted in the Systematic Review, theater critics of color are very aware of the value they bring to the critical discourse as people who often write from multiple marginalized backgrounds. They discussed how they are able to highlight social contexts and histories that white critics may not be familiar with and how they bring personal experiences that make theater relatable to different audiences. They are used to writing from an "outsider" position, which makes them more aware of different cultural frameworks, and they also talked about how their work helps to decenter criticism that has traditionally been dominated by only a few voices that were seen as "objective" and "universal." Some of them also reflected on the fact that theater is essentially ephemeral and that criticism serves to document it and extend its life. If the voices of critics of color are not included in that process, the richness of dialogue around a particular show or moment in time will be lost.

An early career critic talked about how they saw the importance of their role as a critic of color emerge:

> I saw a show in [my city], and I thought it was kind of offensive. I really did not like it. But every single other review that was written by a white person really loved it. ... But it wasn't just me. When the show was in New York, all the Black critics who reviewed it also thought it was bad. So I was like, "Okay, clearly there's a pattern here. It's not just me, or whatever." ... I feel like I do have something to contribute to the dialogue.

Another critic reflected on the impact of their work:

> I do the day job to fund the writing because of how much I enjoy being not just a critic but yes, a critic of color. I do have a perspective. I've shown others how valuable it is and I've been told how valuable it is. I want other young writers to feel the same thing and to know that their words are valuable and valid and that they need to scream them from the rooftops.

A critic in New York described how they were able to bring a different perspective to what would have otherwise looked like colorblind casting:

> You put a Black man in that role, and now it switches up the story. ... I'm watching it on stage, and my reaction is: "Now this story changes." When I wrote about that, and it was a different perspective that I don't think anybody at the time was writing about, people were like, "Wow, we didn't think of that." ... I thought, "Wow, this is something that I can really be a part of, changing the way people think about how theater criticism is presented to them."

Critics see highlighting these perspectives as a regular part of their jobs. A critic who writes for an LGBTQ+ publication said that they "always try to instill some perspective that is relevant to people of color or queer culture or whatever, even if the show has nothing to do with any of that—maybe it's the director or the actress." A Latinx critic with ties to a regional Latinx theater scene said, "The companies prefer that I write about them because I give context. The people that give me feedback on my writing say that they like my writing because I give them context to understand what's going on."

Sometimes providing social context involves calling out when a production may be harmful to the people it seeks to represent. A Black critic related how they were one of very few critics to give a bad review to a play by a Black artist: "It's upsetting to me because it's very clear that [the other reviewers] are seeing this play through their white lens without any consideration for how it affects Black people and very specifically Black women."

As our interviewees emphasized, they felt that their lived experiences as people of color factored into how they could represent audiences that differ from the traditional, older, white theatergoers who theater companies have historically courted. As one mid-career critic suggested, this isn't just healthy for the theater community in regards to diversifying its ranks, it also brings in new audiences to support productions.

> It has come to a point of writing publications and pointing that out that, "You're missing a voice, you're missing my voice, you're missing my community, and that hurts your bottom line." Because if the audiences are shrinking, and it's shrinking because it's all white people who are not going to the theaters much, who are you going to replace them with? Me, my community, people who are not white, who are very rarely included in the conversation.

TAKEAWAY

01. IMPORTANCE OF CRITICS OF COLOR

Interviewees deeply understand their importance as critics of color. They are able to raise awareness about stereotypical and offensive theatrical content, provide nuanced perspectives on how colorblind casting affects meaning, and make theater more relevant and relatable to marginalized audiences.

1. Formative Influences

While much of our interviews centered on current working conditions for these theater critics of color, we also wanted to understand their paths into criticism, as this may yield insights into how to broaden and sustain similar paths for emerging or aspiring critics. Obviously, each individual story is unique, but there were several similarities.

For example, many critics discussed how their introduction to theater came from those within close social circles, such as family and friends. One critic remembered attending plays with their grandfather and how theater became a "safe space" for them where they could tap into a larger creative world. Another critic got involved in theater in high school due to the influence of a friend:

> I didn't grow up with theater. I saw some plays, maybe here and there in high school, but it was all sports growing up. ... And then I auditioned. Second semester that year, I got a lead role in the musical ... and then from then on, I just kind of stayed with theater. But you know, in high school, I was also heavy into journalism, the school newspaper, so I was a sports reporter junior year and senior year. ... At some point, both of those worlds kind of came together.

Exposure to both theater (or other creative pursuits) and writing was an important foundation for these critics that encouraged them to pursue their own work. As noted earlier, access to major theatrical productions is often conditioned by both financial and geographic conditions, but local productions can be found in many schools and communities around the country, and aspiring theater critics may look to local school or community publications as an entry point into pitching and writing reviews.

One factor that encouraged early writing was receiving timely, positive feedback. Though social media has its share of shortcomings, several of our interviewees explained how the instantaneous and open nature of these platforms influenced their desire to continue writing criticism. One recalled the reaction after sharing an early review on Twitter:

> People kind of said, "Okay, you have to keep doing this, because this is kind of what we've been looking for." You know, my criticism wasn't academic. I was a theater fan, who was going to see a show, and here's my reaction as a theater fan about that show. I took that perspective and kind of ran with it.

Another critic initially wrote a blog post in response to another piece of criticism that people found problematic and was surprised to see the post go viral. They thought, "Wow, there's some power here, there is some desire here for people to be critiquing how criticism is happening." That piece got them talking to editors and eventually led them to consider doing "the drama critic thing."

Before that, they had never thought of criticism, or anything related to theater, as a career because "people kind of laugh at you when you want to pursue them." Several interviewees described being brought up or educated in settings where they weren't even aware that they could be a critic. An early career critic said a lot of their learning about how to be a critic was self-motivated because they didn't go to journalism school, and they emphasized the need for earlier awareness of criticism as a profession: "It can be a challenge for a job that's already quite gatekept. People already don't really know that this is a job." A mid-career critic who started writing criticism after pursuing a career as a theater creative and in education said their path might have been different if they had known criticism was an option earlier on:

I THINK IT GOES BACK TO THAT WHOLE IDEA THAT IF YOU'RE NOT INVITED TO THE TABLE, YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW THERE'S A DINNER PARTY. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO EXPECT FOR

MINORITIES AND PEOPLE THAT SOCIETY HASN'T GIVEN THOSE SAME OPPORTUNITIES TO KNOW THAT THIS IS EVEN SOMETHING THAT THEY COULD DREAM ABOUT?

For some, it was spending time working in other aspects of theater, in agencies or marketing, or as a theater educator that brought them to criticism. In these cases, the critics were already doing other forms of writing, either as freelance journalists or in their role as an educator, and these interests converged with their interest in theater. The critic who was working in marketing said their exposure to the publicity side of their work helped them understand what critics do and how they interact with theaters. The critic who worked at a theatrical agency got their first theater criticism job from "a friend of a friend" in their network. The educator saw that a publication was looking for editors in their region and simply said, "Why not? I'm already at all the shows, anyways. In theater education, I'm constantly editing, reflecting, looking at work. I talk about it with my students all the time. We break apart every single scene. It just seemed like such a natural connection for me."

Another critic, who also works as an educator, was basically asked to become a critic by members of their local ethnic theater community. They described a workshop that was convened to identify critical issues in this community:

> There was no theater critic that was culturally informed about their work. They were getting reviewed by people that were basically not culturally competent, so they were not pleased. Everybody looked around and they looked at [another person] and they looked at me, and [the other person] said, "No way," and I said, "Okay, I'll give it a shot."

These critics' experiences working in or being engaged with other aspects of the theater world made the transition to writing criticism seem more doable and/or important as a critical part of an ecosystem.

Only four critics cited early academic experiences as formative influences in their careers, albeit none expanded on those experiences in depth. These critics discovered theater criticism in classes or internships in high school or college. One participated in a high school program sponsored by a local newspaper and then went on to write for their college paper. Another began by reviewing student shows in their college newspaper. And a third participated in an arts writing program at an arts organization while they were in college. The fourth had a college internship at a magazine. Student publications and programs seem to be a supportive space for critics to learn their craft and get some hands-on experience, although interviewees did not discuss these experiences at length. For a discussion of professional educational opportunities, please see the "Recommendations" section below.

TAKEAWAY

01. SOURCES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Interviewees shared the formative influences that brought them to theater criticism. Many of them were exposed to theater or criticism at an early age by people in their close familial and social circles, although some lamented not having this exposure earlier. Some of them were encouraged by networks they found on social media, which provided near instantaneous feedback for their writing. Others came to theater as creatives, through working in theater publicity or marketing or as educators. Some also cited high school and college programs and public-ations as places where they gained experience.

2. Support for Critics of Color

Beyond opportunities for work, the theater critics we interviewed have found support for their writing in various places. The most prominent and common of these were training programs and fellowships, but critics also found support by joining together with mentors or other critics, writing for certain publications, and joining professional associations. While not unique to theater, institutional forms of support/mentorship are not universal across all artistic/cultural disciplines—they're not present to the same degree in music criticism, for example—and therefore, it may be that other disciplines could benefit from the forms of organized training and mentorship that exist in theater.

TRAINING PROGRAMS & FELLOWSHIPS

For example, the training program most often cited by our interviewees is the National Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center.* Almost half of the critics we interviewed had attended, saying variously that it was "instrumental," "career-changing," "affirming," and "mind-blowing." Although the Institute is not specifically for critics of color, in the last decade, it has seemed to recruit and support a diverse group of critics. Critics said that it opened them up to new possibilities for their writing and, in some cases, was the first time they had received constructive, helpful, independent feedback on their writing. They found the environment encouraging, and some said that it helped them expand their criticism to different areas and disciplines. They also said it was a useful way to meet other critics and to build their networks and relationships with other writers and editors.

Critics have also participated in the BIPOC Critics Lab,* Theater Communication Group's Rising Leaders of Color program, Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, Day Eight, and three programs that are now defunct: Rescripted's The Key, University of Southern California's Annenberg Arts Journalism Program, and the Pew Charitable Trust's National Arts Journalism Program (NAJP). All of these, except for the NAJP, which was a year-long program, are (or were) short-term programs that help develop writing and critical thinking skills, but were mostly valued by interviewees for the sense of community and networks they fostered. For many, being accepted to these programs was also an affirmation of their talent and potential, as well as a vote of confidence to continue with their work. The programs were also often an opportunity to be exposed to different cultural forms and scenes, which broadened critics' knowledge and sense of what they could write about.

MENTORS AND COMMUNITY

Critics identified important mentors who helped them over the years, as well as communities that have sustained and supported them.

In some cases, mentors are editors who gave critics opportunities to write or stood up for them in an adverse situation. One critic recalled an editor who stood by them when they were blacklisted by a performance group, recalling that the editor refused to review the group at all unless they reversed

course. "There are very few gatekeepers who actually do that, who will step up and say, 'If you're going after my writer, you're going after my publication and I won't stand for it,'" they said. Other mentors are college professors or more established writers who introduced critics to the profession, provided feedback and guidance on the work, or just provided camaraderie. A mid-career critic in New York found peer mentors to be helpful, saying, "Because it's such a niche thing, there's a lot of generosity towards our peers because there's not many people who do this. I think there's a spirit of supporting each other and camaraderie, and I have been very fortunate."

A critic in the South has also been intentional about creating a community of critics. They have been organizing a "community of solidarity" as a way of supporting each other in an environment in which criticism has been under attack from the theater community. They also felt supported by the university communities in their area, whose prominence helped "spotlight" the work that they do, as well as providing a gathering point for "up-and-coming talent in the area."

A critic in Texas said that they also drew support from their local theater community:

> I think my grounding is my relationship with the artistic directors in the various companies, and then I've subsequently branched out. But really, it was their requests for my services that kept me going, because they liked the way I wrote. And that was really fundamental.

Although social media plays an increasingly important role in the dissemination and reception of criticism, only one critic said that they found support there, explaining that they see themselves as a theater fan connecting with other fans: "The theater Twitter community was one of the groups that continued to look out for my reviews, and that's why I kept writing them. ... I'm coming from a place that I'm a fan. So these are fans who just want the real deal."

PUBLICATIONS

Critics discussed how certain publications have been important to them, in particular those started or run by other critics of color or women writers. They also praised publications that have more "horizontal" or feminist organizational structures, which they find more welcoming and have allowed them to write more freely (although sometimes for free) about what they please. These publications included *3Views*,* *Did They Like It?*, and *Onstage NTX*.

A critic in New York City reflected on the impact of one journal in particular:

> *Did They Like It?* pushed me to write about the need for criticism and the need for Black people in criticism. Those editors opened the door for me to put out a piece that I'm proud of that impacted the industry and their hiring practices.

Another critic talked about how *3Views*,* which provides three different points of view on every show it reviews, was conceived:

> They really wanted a new model of criticism that they felt would, again, be led and championed by women, led and championed by artists, and led and championed by heart—not snarkiness. A new, bold, female-oriented voice in the criticism landscape.

A critic in Texas said that writing for *Onstage NTX* allowed them to expand and weigh in on productions they hadn't been allowed to review at a previous publication. They also praised its women-led, nonhierarchical organizational structure:

> The breakthrough is with this new organization that we have that's very woman-centered, and we're very horizontal. I've gotten to expand and I review musicals now, which I never did before. ... I feel more open so that I can see works from different companies at different levels of sophistication. I feel a lot better now. I feel more fulfilled.

For these critics, publications that break in some way from conventional coverage or from the traditional, for-profit model and that are less hierarchically organized provide a much-needed space in which to explore and extend their criticism. However, they are not all self-sustaining: *3Views** is a Critical Minded grant recipient, and *Onstage NTX* is all volunteer-run and does not pay its contributors.

TAKEAWAYS

01. TRAINING PROGRAMS AND FELLOWSHIPS

More than in other disciplines of criticism, theater critics rely on training programs and fellowships to support their work. These programs were most valued for the validation they provided and the opportunities to network with other critics and editors.

02. IMPORTANCE OF MENTORSHIP AND COMMUNITY

Critics found it valuable to have the support of mentors—editors or peers—who have stood up for them in challenging situations and have provided feedback, camaraderie, and moral support. Some of them have also made efforts to build community with other critics, academics, and theater creatives to garner support for their work.

03. IMPORTANCE OF LESS HIERARCHICAL PUBLICATIONS

Critics cited women- and critic-led publications with a more "horizontal" organizational structure as places where they've found support and were encouraged to explore new modes or areas of criticism.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

Given the overall state of criticism discussed in Part One, it's little surprise that the theater critics we interviewed shared mixed feelings about the future of their craft. Many expressed both bleak fears and cautious hopes, sometimes in the same conversation. They spoke of the decline of the critic in favor of the social media influencer, the rise of video and multimedia formats, and a need for less hierarchy and more community and collaboration in writing and publishing.

1. Critics and Influencers

Some critics expressed apprehension over the demise of familiar modes of criticism in favor of less considered forms of commentary by social media influencers. The content influencers produce bears a superficial resemblance to criticism—influencers "review" things as well—but even more so than traditional critics, influencers are enmeshed in the marketing apparatus funded by creative industries, especially "sponsored content" that influencers produce at the behest of brands and other companies.

However, as one New York critic, who now works in marketing, discussed, critics and influencers are both involved in how shows are promoted, regardless of content:

> I work in influencer marketing, so I know that for a fact you can tell them what to say and you're paying them, as opposed to the critic, [where] you don't know what you're gonna get. We're gonna have both, and producers are going to continue to feed into the influencer, while press agents are going to really use the critic because they need those quotes to help sell their show.

The same interviewee added that, from their perspective, audiences are turning away from criticism as a way to decide what shows to attend, suggesting that the power of reviews to help or harm attendance may be waning in a social media era. Regardless, this critic did feel there was still value in reviews for audiences who come to them *after* viewing a production:

> One of the least impactful things for them to come to a show is reading a review, and years ago, that wasn't the case. I really think that people are starting to read reviews post seeing a show, maybe to understand it more, or to get a different perspective, but it's not impacting a ticket sale.

An emerging critic in the DC area expressed concern about the lack of accountability among influencers, who aren't held to the same standards for accuracy and fact-checking as critics who work with editors.

> It's just this difficult thing of if you work for a publication with a bunch of editors, you're held to a standard and you're held accountable to other people. If you're just posting stuff on YouTube, then you're not really held accountable to anyone. And I think that's what makes me a little scared.

Beyond the role of influencers, critics also have mixed feelings about the impact of criticism within the social media sphere. "Sometimes tweets are more influential to me than an entire review," said a freelance critic in New York, "But I think anything on social media is very anti-nuance." However, a critic in Chicago experienced just the opposite: "I found way more nuance on Twitter, and that just blew my mind. I was able to build my own kind of following by being a part of that conversation."

One staff critic sees social media posts as a way to get more coverage out there, to acknowledge that they've seen a production even if they can't write a full review:

> Can I just write something on my Instagram really quick? Because I post about every show I go to anyway, but I just don't say anything about it. I feel like there's gonna have to be something that happens where it's quicker, it's a little shorter, maybe punchier, but also, of course, very comprehensive ... like, "I saw the show, I'm gonna write this up real quick and post it," and that's the review.

An established freelance critic in New York added that the migration of criticism to social media was a way to engage younger audiences by meeting them where they are:

> We need to reach new young audiences. I think any evolution of the criticism into where those audiences are—however they're consuming news, opinions, getting exposed to art or what's out there—that is where we need to be. ... We need to figure out how to bring criticism further into social media so that we're getting those people's attention and getting them into the theater, getting them excited about it however we can.

That said, because theater is a local phenomenon, the extent of this migration depends on one's geographic location. An established freelance critic in California said there aren't many theater influencers in their market:

> We don't have theater influencers here so much. We don't have people arguing about plays in chat rooms, the way Broadway has influencers or communities and all those kinds of things. I know for me and my generation it's like, "I don't got time to fight about *Wicked* in a chat room," but people are and those are the kids that are buying tickets. And those are the kids that are getting people anxious. ... So the future of theater criticism, it's hard. I don't think it's great. I think it probably needs some reinvention. There needs to be different ways.

TAKEAWAY

01. NEED TO ADAPT TO NEW REALITIES

While critics expressed serious reservations about the impact of social media influencers on the critical scene, and on cultural discourse in general, they acknowledge the need to adapt to the ways in which audiences are consuming content. Many of these critics are looking for ways to bring critical independence, nuance, and their enthusiasm for the institution of theater to new and broader audiences, wherever they may be.

2. Video Formats

One area in which our critics had provocative and nuanced insights to share was the role that video platforms, especially YouTube and TikTok, may play within the theater criticism ecosystem of the future. A critic in the DC area said the publication they write for has a TikTok correspondent who "goes to literally everything, which is really nice. So I would love to see more of that," they said, "It's basically like, 'Come along with me to the show.' And it's both a review and what the experience of literally walking to the theater is."

A critic in New York saw the growth in video content as liberatory:

> Insisting that the written word is the only viable form of criticism is white supremacy. I think that the idea of people doing micro reviews on TikTok, Instagram, or even YouTube is marvelous. And it's something that I've thought about myself because I like it as a medium. And we know that quite a lot of young people engage with media this way. ... For the future, in terms of what's viable and what can make money, I think that video reviews online and video reviews on different platforms are going to open the doors.

This same critic did temper their comments by acknowledging that sponsored content also accompanies this model, which included productions paying audience members to create laudatory content. "I think that there is a move to push critics out and to pay for them, replace them with paid reviews from audience members, and that scares me. But I also think that there are a number of people who will not stop putting their voices forward, even if they're not paid by a platform to do so," they said.

Another established critic sees this movement as a "parallel road" for criticism that is more inclusive:

> The road that has worked for the establishment and the system will keep going. ... However, we're building a parallel road next to it. And that road has a vision that's way more inclusive. ... It's a road where criticism is happening on TikTok, for instance ... everyone's welcome to join, criticism happens where people want to meet it. It happens in your communities; it happens in a newsletter that you send out to your best friends, for instance. It happens on YouTube; it happens on podcasts; it happens while you're, I don't know, on a Substack; it happens on Medium. It doesn't happen in the places that the elites have decided it needs to happen.

Two critics—one established, one early career—talked about the possibility of including filmed clips of productions in video reviews, each with very different feelings. The more senior critic cited Actor's Equity rules against filming theatrical performances and was quite clear about how they felt about video clips: "Godammit, give me something to read. I don't want this shit. I want to read something. I want your thoughts. I want ideas

connected to one another." By contrast, the early career critic welcomed having "something to go off of other than just the writing," saying, "I do hope with technologies, specifically, that there can be more of a multimedia aspect to it."

TAKEAWAY

01. CRITICISM IN NEW FORMATS

Critics generally agree that the future of criticism involves online video formats that meet audiences where they are, although some of them are wary of how these formats can be monetized and instrumentalized by commercial interests and the theater companies themselves. However, for the most part, they see the expansion of criticism beyond the written word as a good thing for its dissemination to a broader audience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has five primary recommendations:

01. SUPPORT EFFORTS AROUND HIRING AND LONG-TERM RETENTION OF CRITICS OF COLOR

02. FACILITATE CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH EMERGENT CONTENT TECHNOLOGIES

03. BUILD COMMUNITY IN THE CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM

04. SUPPORT CRITICISM IN YOUR COMMUNITIES

05. ENCOURAGE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH INTO THE CRITICAL LANDSCAPE FOR WRITERS OF COLOR

SUPPORT EFFORTS AROUND HIRING AND LONG-TERM RETENTION OF CRITICS OF COLOR

This recommendation is by far the most important and most impactful. Aspiring critics of color can find seemingly countless opportunities to create and share criticism on any number of cultural forms. However, what is conspicuously missing is the ability to pursue criticism that provides a living wage, let alone a full-time salary and/or benefits capable of sustaining a *career* in criticism.

Without sustainable forms of income, our public, cultural dialogues will not reflect the broadest possible range of opinions and ideas. Instead, criticism will increasingly become the domain of the financially privileged, an outcome that would only serve to further long-standing class and racial inequalities in the spheres of cultural discourse.

Our report—especially what we learned from the interviewees in Part Two—highlights the urgency of this issue. As one mid-career critic stated, "What we need are just outlets that will hire critics of color from different backgrounds and perspectives, full-time." One possible option takes the form of collaborating with publications to create greater opportunities for critics of color to be hired, retained, and promoted.

Several models in other spheres can be studied as potential templates. This includes the University of California's President's Postdoctoral Fellowship, which incentivizes the hiring of Fellows by guaranteeing their salary lines should they be hired by a UC department. Another example is the Getty Marrow Emerging Professionals Pilot Program, which funds entry-level, full-time positions at Los Angeles arts organizations for up to three years. These positions are only open to graduates of the Getty's Marrow Undergraduate Internship program, which focuses on students from backgrounds underrepresented in the art world. While the Pilot Program is short-term, even a three-year window can prove pivotal to someone's long-term career goals and opportunities.

In regards to publications that Critical Minded could collaborate with, one established critic we interviewed suggested that it should spend less time "trying to change the establishment" and more time investing in a "parallel road" that is more inclusive and forward-looking:

> Instead of devoting so much time to changing those structures ... that are falling apart ... I think it's time to invest in the alternative. Try to build that parallel road and try to build that future that we cannot see right now. ... It's time to invest in that TikTokker, who is maybe talking about theater in a way that "traditional" theater critics would deem uncouth and not right and not theater criticism, but who have maybe thousands and thousands and thousands of followers who listen to what they have to say about theater. It's there where we should be investing. It's not in these structures that don't want us.

We also recommend Critical Minded consider investing more in so-called "ethnic press" outlets. While efforts to diversify the ranks of writers and editors at "mainstream" publications are important, ethnic press publications have long been vital sources of news and engagement in marginalized communities, exemplifying the idea of "meeting people where they are at." Conventional hierarchies of publishing have historically ignored the ethnic press but there is no justifiable reason to overlook them as part of a larger, vibrant, and more democratic ecosystem for criticism.

Meanwhile, some online publications have emerged with a local or specialized focus that takes novel approaches to reader engagement and organizational structure. Courier is a pro-democracy network of local newsrooms that targets casual news consumers—those who don't subscribe to publications or go out of their way to read news. Courier news is created and packaged for social media, video, and easy skimming, meeting audiences where they already are with fact-based, relevant reporting. Other publications, such as *Hell Gate*,* *Defector*, *Discourse Blog*, *Racket*, and the *Colorado Sun*, present new models for funding and management. They are all worker-owned and subscription-funded, although some of them also rely on philanthropic funding.

In this vein, Critical Minded, in partnership with other funders, could explore the viability of launching a new publication that pursues the ideals of engaged criticism-as-care across multiple media. This outlet could be structured as a collective, with a nonhierarchical governance and leadership model in which critics of color would be employee–owners or partners. More research into the viability of such an outlet needs to be conducted, but an early career interviewee had an idea for how such a publication might be structured:

> One of the ideas we had locally was starting an online forum ... where anyone who wants to publish can publish, and three people will peer review the article, and then publish it, much in the same kind of way that academic journals function with a form of peer review. Having a system of peer review for critics of color will help critics of color gain confidence in their words. I think that really helps because when you're a person of color in a very white space, regardless of the stage that the other people are at, you're constantly turning to your white peers for approval. That can be damaging to your self-esteem, because they might not be able to give their approval because they're just as lost. ... It can be a little heartbreaking to just feel that isolated. Helping us not feel isolated, helping us feel that we're in a room with peers, who appreciate us, who will come from the same place as us, or similar places to us will help us speak out more, be heard more, and make us more ready to listen.

FACILITATE CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH EMERGENT CONTENT TECHNOLOGIES

As much of this report has established, technology has already transformed the landscape for criticism. The proliferation of the internet defined the past twenty-five years, but AI-generated content seems poised to be the next major disruption. Therefore, it is essential that critics of color be involved on the proverbial front lines of technological development as it continues to reshape content industries.[207] Writers can and should be at the forefront of helping audiences and consumers think critically about the ways in which technology is reshaping our cultural landscape, from NFTs to AI-authored artworks and criticism to deep-fake virtual actors, singers, and beyond.

Critical Minded and its peers have an opportunity to fund fellowships for critics to engage or embed with companies developing AI software to provide critical perspectives in the development of those technologies. They can also host symposiums or support articles that discuss counters to racist technologies in the cultural sphere. Overall, the goal is to ensure critics of color are involved in the active exploration and development of technologies in order to advance responsible, ethical, and equitable forms of technological innovation that serve and support vigorous, critical, public discourse.

BUILD COMMUNITY IN THE CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM

Interviewees said they would like more ways to connect with each other, with editors, and with mentors. They also said it was important for early and emerging critics to receive more useful training and mentorship

Several critics said providing a space or network to build community with other critics of color, critics in general, and/or editors would be helpful, as they often feel isolated in their work or in their region. A mid-career critic in New York City said they would welcome more opportunities to connect with other critics: "I don't know if that means conferences or whatever, but it would be great if critics could get a sense of what other critics are doing, how they got there, all of that." A critic in the DC area, who started during the COVID-19 pandemic, said they would just like the opportunity to meet editors in person in order to grow and expand their practice: "I haven't really met a lot of the editors I write for in person a lot, so hosting places where people can meet each other I think would be really important."

Critics outside of New York City were more vocal about the need or desire to connect with others. One critic in the South said that developing local chapters of the American Theatre Critics Association (ATCA)* would help:

> Our own local community of critics who feel that they are supported, who have a safe, nurturing space, where someone else can be critical

> towards them without it looking like it's vindictive or hatred, but seen as nurturing. I think that building communities of critics who want to support each other locally will strengthen us. I think that criticism is valued, even though we've had some backlash in this area. I think that the prospects for criticism are strong. But I think that we do need space and funding, dare I say it, for safe spaces for building community.

They also suggested dedicated online spaces specifically for critics of color. An established critic in Texas said even though they didn't need to network, they would still be interested in knowing what other critics thought:

> I would love to see what other reviewers think about some of the touring shows that have come through, or even just reach out to some other reviewers. ... I just want to talk about it with someone that might know. And no one in my work does. But I love the idea of a network of reviewers out there.

Another Texas critic would like to learn from others how to better disseminate and raise awareness of their work, because their local editors and publishers haven't been able to do so: "To be in a network of informed theater critics about the dissemination of our work would be really wonderful. We could share resources and amplify the playing field. So yes, let's create a network."

Most of the interviewees agreed that more education and mentorship are also needed in the field, in particular to inspire and train the next generation of critics of color. An early career critic in New York City advocated for "introducing people to the arts and arts criticism a lot earlier in life so that ... more kids of color even know that this is a viable option for them," they said. This desire is ironic in light of how economically precarious a career in criticism has been for most of our respondents. It speaks to the passion and commitment these critics have for their craft and profession, and their wish that it continue into future generations.

A few critics suggested continued support for the National Critics Institute,* or organizing workshops or roundtable discussions in colleges, journalism schools, or League of Resident Theatres (LORT) to expose people to theater critics and criticism. A mid-career critic in New York City suggested partnering with academic institutions to do workshops or create fellowships for critics of color. And an established critic in the Pacific Northwest suggested working with "small community papers or radio stations" to host workshops "to help you cover your community in a way that you think it deserves."

However, they admitted that while these one-time or limited-term programs are helpful, sustained support is needed in order to help people continue to learn and advance beyond the early stages. An early career critic participated in one such program funded by Critical Minded at a large publication, only to encounter a lack of support:

> I was kind of shocked to be roped into a system of such influence and power in the theater world and not get a ton of training, so to speak … no one holds your hand and tells you … this is how to conduct yourself, these are the kind of questions you can ask, this is what to look out for. So it's a very learn-on-your-own kind of job.

One critic suggested training for editors, especially those at larger, traditional publications, in how to recruit and support critics of color.

> It's also important for the editors to be trained to be able to usher these young critics in because … if they're actually getting into the publications, they have to be fostered. They have to be shown what is and isn't working with their reviews, they can't just be dropped in, and then forgotten about. So more career development would be great for that … making sure that they feel comfortable and that they're not the token, especially if they're a person of color, if they're of a demographic that isn't represented in theater criticism very often, because it can feel isolating too.

Although many interviewees stressed the importance of more and earlier education and mentorship for both critics and their editors, this kind of support is not meaningful if there are no staff positions or sustainable freelance careers to move into. If Critical Minded decides to invest in training or mentorship programs, it should 1) make sure the programs provide more than access and funding, including skills, knowledge, and connections to sustain a career once the program is over, and 2) help ensure there are pathways for the critics who emerge from these programs to go on to make a living as critics.

Critical Minded might take steps to foster a greater sense of community among critics by creating an infrastructure for critics to meet and interact with each other and with editors. It could establish a national network of critics of color through an online platform, social media presence, or listserv. It might also sponsor meetups in different cities that would bring critics of color together with each other and with editors to strengthen networks and relationships. It might also support or expand existing training and mentoring programs or fund its own. Although sustainable funding of critics is the top priority, providing professional and emotional support is also an important way to sustain critics and encourage them to continue.

SUPPORT CRITICISM IN YOUR COMMUNITIES

Beyond funding, there are impactful ways to support critics of color in your communities. Follow and engage with critics of color on social media, and subscribe to publications that feature their work. Host panels, talks, classes, or other events in your communities that highlight the importance and impact

of criticism and provide space for discussions about the meaning and resonance of art and culture. Invite critics of color to your events or to visit your studio, theater, gallery, or rehearsal space. Start a mentorship program for emerging writers, or create an internship for students interested in criticism. Host a field trip or classroom activity and involve critics of color.

ENCOURAGE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH INTO THE CRITICAL LANDSCAPE FOR WRITERS OF COLOR

Our report has made it abundantly clear that critics of color, and criticism in general, are understudied topics, especially in the past ten to fifteen years. We recommend that additional research be conducted and suggest several questions and topics that our study touches upon but, due to its limited scope, was unable to answer.

POP MUSIC CRITICS

One of the most conspicuously overlooked disciplines is also one of the most popular: pop music criticism. Despite the many notable music critics of color over the decades, there has been no meaningful research that has explored issues of representation within this large community, let alone the lived experiences of pop music critics of color. Given Critical Minded's support of both the annual Pop Conference* and recent Word: Life symposium, it seems both timely and convenient to draw upon these existing networks of music writers to conduct a focused study/survey that draws upon and expands on the lessons learned from conducting this report focused on theater critics.

CAREER SPAN AND OTHER PROFESSIONS

Another area for future research is looking at the career spans or the length of time in which critics of color were or are active. It would be interesting to compare the career spans of full-time critics in previous generations with the length of careers now. Also, as some critics are leaving the profession, it would be illuminating to know what careers and industries—content creation, publicity, etc.—they are turning toward.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICS AND CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

More research is needed into the relationship between critics and creative communities. In an online environment where feedback is nearly instantaneous, how has the relationship between critics and the artists they write about changed? What are critics' responsibilities to creative communities to which they may or may not belong?

Future studies could also be done to assess theater companies run by and serving people of color and the reviews they receive. It would be illuminating to see who is reviewing these productions and with what frequency.

CRITICISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIDEO FORMATS

The upswell of critical activity on social media and in online video formats is also another area that requires study. Studies could be conducted into the line between critics and influencers, as well as the reach of social media compared to that of traditional publications. It would also be instructive to better understand the relative impact of traditional criticism versus influencer content.

PIPELINE FOR NEW CRITICS

More research needs to be conducted on the educational backgrounds of critics and the role of journalism schools, humanities doctoral programs, and MFA creative writing departments in the education and formation of critics. Are they providing adequate training to become a critic? Are they providing training in criticism (beyond writing books)? In what other spaces is this training provided? How can we create more spaces in which to nurture critics?

What is the role of editors of color in nurturing and training critics of color? Do they, in fact, create more opportunities for writers of color? How can we better nurture them and increase their ranks and the sustainability of their positions?

AFTERWORD

TOWARD A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR ARTS WRITING

BY RASHID SHABAZZ AND MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER

"Think of cultural criticism as a public utility, civic infrastructure that needs to be valued ... to expand the collective conversation at a time when it is dangerously contracting."

—Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi–hui Yang

"The Dominance of the White Male Critic," *New York Times*, July 5, 2019

We are confronted by any number of existential threats today, from our divided politics to the imperiled natural world to the ways technology is reshaping how we arrive at knowledge and understanding. It is a moment of book bans, mistrust, disinformation, doom scrolling, economic disillusionment, war, and attacks on democratic institutions and freedom of expression.

In this era of anxiety, artists are there to awaken us, to help us see who we are and where we are headed. They are a "practical vector from the soul," as poet Amiri Baraka put it, and a "touchstone of our judgment," as John F. Kennedy said in a 1963 speech.

Yet, the critical work of artists is in danger of becoming trivialized and obscured today, thanks to our overwhelmed and fractured media and cultural landscapes. And this, in turn, makes the pathfinding role of the critic as essential as it's ever been.

Critics help us discover what's worthy of our collective attention and offer loving, passionate, and truthful reflections about what we look at, hear, taste, and put our minds to. They help us think together in public and are at the heart of our most important conversations.

"We are living through incredibly chaotic times, and arts writers are really positioned well to help us make sense of the chaos," says Robin Givhan, critic-at-large at the *Washington Post*, who describes her work as helping readers suss out emotions they can't make sense of, and the things they look at that make them uncomfortable.

The central role of the critic, though, is seldom understood or acknowledged, even by the editors and publishers who hire them, and the profession has become unsustainable to the point of near collapse.

Opportunities to write are drying up like a raisin in the sun. Full-time staff positions have been largely eliminated or replaced with underpaid freelancers. In some cases, entire arts sections or features departments are dissolved, with *The Baltimore Sun* being a recent casualty. This leaves critics more isolated, less empowered, and less protected. Many juggle multiple assignments and take on part-time work to make ends meet.

What's worse, some writers wonder if their words reach an audience or are felt at all.

"It's very difficult to write in a vacuum when you write criticism or about art ... when you are trying to have conversations with real people in real time," says writer and curator TK Smith.

"I'm always surprised when I find out that anyone's read anything that I've written," says art and photography critic Danielle Jackson.

"There's this constant struggle ... is this worth anything to do?"

says Greg Allen, who has been blogging almost daily for more than twenty years at his greg.org blog. "Is anybody going to read this? Does it even matter?"

These collective pressures impact critics of color disproportionately. Writers of color often carry the added personal and professional burdens of representation, of being both "a symbol and a self," as Margo Jefferson once described it.

Consider the case of Maya Phillips reviewing the 2024 revival of *The Wiz* for the *New York Times*.* In her review, Phillips, a critic-at-large for the paper, had a lot to balance: her own mixed reactions, including a love for the material but critiques of a main performance, and the burden of putting her words in the context of problematic reviews by the white, male critics who came before her. In earlier *Times** reviews, Frank Rich dismissed the musical as "tacky," calling it "hardly great" and "a once-fervent expression of Black self-respect and talent," while Clive Barnes suggested the 1975 original had "vitality" and "style," but was, nonetheless, "tiresome," asking whether fairy tales are only appealing when they're grounded in one's own experience. Phillips set her own mixed review in contrast to Rich and Barnes, signaling to her readers that she was correcting the record. She also effectively answered Barnes, making the case for voices who are indeed grounded in different experiences.

For the very first time, those experiences of critics of color in the United States have actually been researched and centered in a new study, detailing with great nuance the added layers of challenge that writers of color face.

In *Topdogs and Underdogs: Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape*, authors Sharon Mizota and Oliver Wang capture the evolving state of arts writers and critics of color against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Turning a keen eye to the specific challenges and opportunities facing theater critics of color, Mizota and Wang offer a microcosm of the state of cultural criticism:

> Criticism is perhaps more important in theater and other live performance genres than in other disciplines, not only because it may influence ticket sales and the length of a show's run, but also because it often serves as the only documentation of an ephemeral performance, a record of a unique experience shared between the performers and the audience. It is crucial for critics of color to participate in this dialogue in order to ensure the fullness and diversity of the historical record.
>
> We believe this need for a full record exists across arts journalism.

As leaders of organizations focused on the support of cultural journalism, one question animates what we do: How can we sustain and inspire arts writers like TK Smith, Danielle Jackson, Greg Allen, or Maya Phillips? We recognize that much of our work offers short-term fixes for structural problems without obvious solutions.

We are left wondering what has changed since the cofounders of Critical Minded, Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang, penned their seminal op-ed for the *New York Times* five years ago, describing the dominance of

the white male critic and calling upon old-school critics and media organizations to invest in a wider range of perspectives on the arts.

One thing has changed. There has been a significant turn toward the philanthropic support of journalism in recent years, with newsrooms hiring grant writers and development officers, and heartening developments such as PressForward, which will inject at least $500 million into local news and laudably prioritizes BIPOC-led journalism.

Still, until media leaders set aside antiquated ideas about what arts writing can be—optional coverage of leisure activities, for instance—those philanthropic dollars aren't likely to find their way to the chronically deprioritized arts writer.

In an atmosphere of closures and consolidations, of a dismantling of newsrooms by hedge funds and private equity firms, media leaders understandably attempt to protect their core operations, but too few have the vision to see that critics are as core as it gets. Writers who shape our cultural conversations are as fundamental as the beat writer covering local schools, the city hall reporter, or the investigative team covering climate.

Méndez Berry and Yang invited us all to nurture "kaleidoscopic ecosystems of ideas and taste," and we remain watchful for those visionaries who are modeling a more liberated approach to critical writing. What we are discovering is an unlikely period of inventiveness, despite all of the precarity. We are witnessing a generation of writers and editors who stake a claim to the widest of purviews, who can, as *Village Voice* dance critic Jill Johnston once put it, lay on the Earth and critique the stars above, if that's what they wish to do.

That sense of possibility is exemplified by a publication such as *Jupiter Magazine*,* a rigorous, soulful space for brave voices such as Akwaeke Emezi, J Wortham, and Imani Perry, and founded by critic-editors Camille Bacon and Daria Simone Harper.

Here's how Bacon and Harper describe their ethos via their poetic, artful "about" page: "*Jupiter Magazine** magazine embodies the fact that art is a functional tool that assists us in asking and answering the existential questions about the nature and stakes of being alive today. ... *Jupiter Magazine** acknowledges that art is a medicinal force, an antidote to apathy, a remedy for interpersonal separation and an offering against amnesia."

Some of this pioneering work is happening within legacy media, too, though it is the exception rather than the rule. Jeneė Osterheldt founded *A Beautiful Resistance* at the Boston Globe not long after the murder of George Floyd. *A Beautiful Resistance* is a multi-platform project that celebrates Black joy and Black life and explores social justice through the lens of the arts. In addition to Osterheldt's incisive writing, *A Beautiful Resistance* includes short films, playlists, and live events. It sets a new standard for how journalists can lead and collaborate with communities.

We are also inspired by the way some journalists are stepping away from the compromised financial pressures of today's media companies and attempting to protect the integrity of journalism by owning it, literally. A case in point

is *Hell Gate*,* an independent, gutsy publication that covers New York and its culture and is home to journalists who once worked for outlets such as *NPR*, the *New York Times*, *The New Republic*, and *The New Yorker*. *Hell Gate** accepts anonymous financial support only under rigorously vetted circumstances and otherwise publishes the names of donors and organizations that give $5,000 or more a year.

Here's how *Hell Gate** describes its mission: "To be trenchant, playful, outraged, irreverent, and useful to our readers; deeply skeptical of power but stubbornly idealistic. And never a chore to read."

Initiatives like *Jupiter Magazine*,* *A Beautiful Resistance*, and *Hell Gate** are demonstration projects and de facto critiques of media companies that have disinvested in cultural journalism. They make clear how dynamic, dimensional, relevant, and human this work can be, and also how different from what's come before. These examples and ideas should be insurgent in old-school newsrooms and industry dialogues about the future of journalism.

Too often, though, the weighty task of shifting industry standards, especially when it comes to compensation and long-term sustainability, is left on the shoulders of these pioneers, individual journalists or independent publications, which also include Courier, *Burnaway*,* and *Boston Art Review*.

With that in mind, and in the spirit of solidarity, we are inviting other funders of arts journalism to build a coalition with us. Let's create a cabal of thought partners. Let's build a community around these writers. Let's be watchful together and gather our voices to make a case for this work and amplify our calls to action. Let's pool our knowledge, our influence—and resources—to develop a more sustainable future for arts writing.

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10 In order to elicit forthcoming answers, we assured our interviewees of anonymity, but we also wanted to preserve and present their voices in this report. To that end, quotations from interviewees are not attributed, but where relevant, we have identified the communities with which they are affiliated, their geographic location, or their career stage to provide context for their statements. As the world of theater criticism is relatively small, we decided against identifying individual interviewees by code names or numbers, as this might make it easier to deduce or piece together which individuals said particular things. In some cases, parts of quotations have been redacted or replaced to preserve anonymity, to provide needed context, or for concision. These redactions or replacements are indicated by ellipses (...) or text enclosed in square brackets ([ ]).

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Topdogs and Underdogs:
Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape

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Today, there is growing backlash to the institutional commitments and cultural gains made in response to the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Suddenly, corporate diversity initiatives are disappearing, book bans are rising, and demands to exclude topics like slavery from school curricula throughout the country keep gaining traction. All are signs of a potential cultural backslide—one that we need critics, especially critics of color, to anticipate, call attention to, and grapple with for us...

So, it is within this challenging context that Critical Minded's *Topdogs and Underdogs: Critics of Color and the Theatrical Landscape*, the first report of its kind, emerges. Authored by critics Sharon Mizota and Oliver Wang, this is an incisive evaluation of the structural challenges critics of color face and a clarion call for change.

It is divided into two parts—a detailed examination of earlier research, including 162 studies, books, and articles from the past twenty-five years, and sixteen in-depth interviews conducted by and with working theater writers and critics. This approach enables *Topdogs and Underdogs* to provide a bird's-eye view and an intimate understanding of the essential relationship between criticism and cultural production while also making the urgent case for why their voices matter so much today.

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