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The Federal Theatre Project: A Model for Contemporary Lessons in Theatrical Accessibility

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Introduction:

The American theatre industry currently finds itself at a standstill in more ways than one. Visibly, the Coronavirus pandemic has halted nearly all theatre work in America. Systemically, however, the theatre industry is failing to progress in accessibility and representation. As society has shifted to an increasing priority on social justice movements, particularly Black Lives Matter, the theatre is failing to meet these standards of focusing on the under marginalized populations for both audience members and theatre workers. As the industry begins a process of rebuilding, it needs to look to the past at one of the greatest theatrical redesigns in its history – the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) under the New Deal's Work Progress Administration. There has been no other theatrical initiative to reach the FTP's success in increasing theatrical accessibility through its programs to expand the national audience, especially in its reach of working class and Black communities. The FTP was born out of a need to reemploy theatre workers amid the Great Depression. In a significant parallel, our contemporary theatre industry will be rebuilding after its current economic downturn, and it opens up a similar opportunity to extend its value to a greater and more diverse population.

In this thesis and the context of the Federal Theatre Project, the term accessibility refers to the availability of theatre, for both viewing and participation, to its underserved populations. At the time of the FTP, the theatre was considered a luxury and was not equally available to all populations. In the same way, today's theatrical landscape has failed to equally serve all the country's diverse populations in terms of inclusion and representation. In the latest annual report from the Asian American Performers Action Collection (AAPAC) entitled *The Visibility Report: Racial Representation on New York Stages,* employment statistics by race are drawn from Broadway companies and the 18 largest nonprofit theatre companies in New York City during

the 2017-2018 season. Statistics show that while New York City has a 67.9% Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) population, only 38.5% of actors on stage are representative of this population. This is in comparison with the city's white population of 32%, which is most visible on its stages with 61.5% of its actors. The report demonstrates that "white actors continue to be the only race to over-represent by almost double their respective population size."[1] Another significant concern is the stories that are being told. 79.1% of writers in these theatres were white, while 20.8% were comprised of BIPOC. Furthermore, the stages saw 85.5% of directors to be white and 14.4% to be BIPOC. Even when BIPOC writers were represented on stages, 64.7% of these productions were led by a White director.[2]

The FTP proved the major barriers to accessibility to be price points, physical location or distance to a theatre, and understanding of or relevance to subject material. In many ways, these barriers still exist today. According to the Broadway League's research on the demographics of audiences for touring Broadway productions in 2017-2018, 55% of these theatregoers reported an annual household income of more than $100,000, whose economic group only includes 25% of Americans overall.[3] An average ticket price of $145.60 for these productions is also reported.[4] However, that is not the end for increasing prices. As productions become more popular on Broadway, they also become more expensive and thus more difficult to access. For example, the average ticket price of *Hamilton*, has risen to $370 with a premium ticket price of $849 during its top-selling periods.[5] The theatre is not serving audiences of all socioeconomic groups

[1] The Asian American Performers Actor Coalition, *The Visibility Report 2017-2018: Racial Representations on New York City Stages* (New York City: AAPAC, 2018), aapacnyc.org.
[2] Ibid.
[3] The Broadway League, *The Audience for Touring Broadway 2017-2018* (New York City: The Broadway League, 2018), https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/research-reports.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Charles Passy, "A 'Hamilton' Ticket for $849? Experts Call That a Bargain," *Wall Street Journal,* June 6, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-hamilton-ticket-for-849-experts-call-that-a-bargain-11559860459.

proportionally. Touring productions, most often from Broadway, are brought entirely to urban cities, with established regional theatres or universities. As discussed in *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences,* the increase of regional theatres since the 1960s has succeeded in expanding the American theatre's geographic base but has not changed the primary audience. Still today, "the same social strata that support and attend the theatre in New York do so in the cities served by the regional theatres."[6] As for relevance to the subject material, regional theatres reflect the precedent set by Broadway in their content selections. As discussed before, there is a large gap in stories being told by writers of different populations. If the theatre is to be truly accessible, this needs to change.

This is where FTP steps in as a model for the contemporary theatrical landscape. Ultimately, through its programs, the FTP worked to make culturally relevant theatre, increase the representation of people and experiences on stage, and bring the theatre directly to the people through lower or no tickets costs and accessible locations. The FTP proved what is possible when it comes to creating an open and accessible theatre. Through utilizing similar methods, today's theatres across the nation can make progress in increasing accessibility for more audiences in America. This is of utmost importance as more and more theatres are establishing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives, which work towards similar values as accessibility. These EDI initiatives, which generally include actions to increase diversity in all roles of the theatre industry, have been established by the Theatre Communications Group, Dramatists Guild, League of Resident Theatres (LORT), and multiple colleges and universities, all of which cover a significant amount of theatres in America.

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[6] Daniel Friedman, "Contemporary Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States," in *Theatre For Working Class Audiences 1830-1980,* ed. Bruce McConachie and Daniel Friedman (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 197.

This thesis takes a different research approach to the FTP from the many other sources within this subject by looking primarily at its actions to make changes in the theatre's audience rather than its focus as a government-funded program. This thesis explores the methods of the Federal Theatre Project to define and develop accessibility in the theatre and how the contemporary theatre landscape can take these efforts to serve as a lesson and develop a new approach for progressing representation and accessibility. There are many instances of theatres utilizing certain practices from the FTP; however, this thesis demonstrates the need for an all-encompassing adoption of FTP methods by the American theatre community at large. It will serve as a suggestion for the redefining process of the American theatre industry to expand its audience to equally serve the country's diverse populations.

Historical Background:

The initial purpose of the establishment of the Federal Theatre Project was to provide jobs for theatre professionals when unemployment was at a high rate during the Great Depression, for "counted under among the fifteen million unemployed and the six million persons on relief rolls, were 40,000 show business workers who could not even find temporary jobs."[7] The project was a part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) established by Congress in April 1935, under President Franklin Roosevelt, to begin to restore the economy. Overall, the WPA was a series of infrastructure and employment programs that aimed to create jobs for the unemployed within their previously held professions. According to Harry Hopkins, the supervisor of the WPA, the program's purpose was "to provide public employment to those

[7] George Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre* (New York: Lang Publishing, 1989), 9.

in need of work and, through that work, provide needed public services and improvements."[8] Hopkins is referring to the employment of citizens to complete public works projects to improve communities. These included the construction of bridges, roads, schools, and parks. The WPA also established four individual projects centered around the arts, including visual arts, music, writing, and theatre. These divisions were known as Federal One and represented about 2 percent of the WPA budget. In a previous study on the FTP, Karen Gellen states "Number One's primary priority was job creation, but the architects of the New Deal also aimed to spur education and hope, while providing Americans with some aesthetic respite from soul-crushing hardship."[9] It was this idea of hope and the important distinction of art as a public service that carried forward into the FTP's developing mission as Hallie Flanagan was named its director.

Hallie Flanagan arrived as the director for FTP with a background in non-commercial theatre, previously as the head of the Vassar College theatre. At Vassar, Flanagan was known for leading in innovation, and she created the Vassar Experimental Theatre. Hopkins was confident in his choice of Flanagan, with her Iowan roots and university theatre experience, for he believed the program had "to be run by a person who sees from the start that the profits won't be money profits. It's got to be run by a person who isn't interested in just the commercial type of show…I want someone who cares about other parts of the country."[10] There are several important aspects of Flanagan's background that can be seen as influences in the later development of the FTP.

In 1926, Flanagan traveled to Europe for a comparative study of their private and state-sponsored theatres. Ultimately, it was the innovation of the theatres in Europe that influenced her

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[8] M.A. Gardner, "Dramatizing Democracy: The Living Newspaper Plays of the WPA Federal Theatre Project" (Master's Thesis, University of Minnesota, 2012), 13.
[9] Karen Gellen, "'Propaganda for Democracy:' The Vexed History of the Federal Theatre Project" (Master's Thesis, City University of New York, 2017), 3.
[10] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 10.

later work rather than the European standard for national theatres. This is because the only thing that the FTP would have in common with these European national theatres was the government subsidy for their state-supported theatres were groups of theatre artists chosen to represent the state.[11] In Europe, Flanagan discovered the place of theatre to be "not as a luxury, patronized mainly by the leisure classes, but as an educational force, a necessity like public schools, libraries, parks, and museums."[12] This is in comparison to the American theatre that Flanagan described as a luxury.[13] This idea of an educational role was strengthened through the observation of the agitprop theatre, theatre that includes a persuasive political or social message with a call to action, in Germany and Russia.[14] Flanagan found in the Soviet Union a theatre dedicated to discussions and responses to universal and timely problems. It was an experimental theatre, and she defined it as the "people's theatre," which became a frequent description for the mission of the FTP.[15] There were also examples of how theatres were making their work more accessible in terms of relevance to the working-class, which included techniques of intimate theatre and breaking down audience-actor barriers. Flanagan's ultimate takeaway was "a truly creative theatre was one which responded socially and artistically to a changing world."[16]

In another example that demonstrates Flanagan's mindset, she turned down the job of directing the theatre at Dartington Hall in England, because she decided she was not the best person to accurately represent the English countryside through theatre. The job was focused on the study of the problems surrounding the English countryside, its history, and its present life and

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[11] Tony Buttita and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 33.
[12] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 21.
[13] Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1969), 12.
[14] Christopher Caggiano, "Dramaturgy for *The Cradle Will Rock."* Last modified April 16, 2018, https://www.everythingmusicals.com/cradle/2018/04/theater-a-brief-history-of-agitprop.html.
[15] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 19.
[16] Ibid, 19.

to display this through indigenous drama. Her decision was partly based on theatre in Greece and their consideration for "the necessity for any living theatre to be of its own time and country."[17] Her decision-making followed this idea she could not authentically represent what she did not know, and it is this idea that is clear in the mission of the FTP to deliver culturally relevant theatre to its different communities.

Once Flanagan accepted the position to lead the Federal Theatre Project, she was joined by various other leaders of American theatre who were influential in developing the eventual structure of the FTP. Most significant of these were E.C. Mabie of Iowa and Elmer Rice, who was leading the "then-forming Theatre Alliance."[18] Both of these contributors believe strongly in a decentralized theatre focused on the organization of regional theatres. Rice, who had already been developing a regionally based theatre when the FTP came along, centered his plan around community centers, where the theatrical projects were based on local community needs. All community theatres were meant to be run by local talent with "every effort made to encourage local playwrights to draw upon the life around them and the rich folk material of America."[19] Similarly, Mabie in *A plan for the Organization of Regional Theatres in the United States* simply intended to "stimulate" the genuinely creative work that already existed in these regions, particularly the West.[20] In *Footlights Across America*, published in 1928, MacGowan had also explored this regional theatre. He believed that "American drama" as a prominent genre would emerge from the college and community theatres around the country by allowing the creative work to be developed from life in these regions.[21]

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[17] Flanagan, *Arena,* 6.
[18] Flanagan, *Arena,* 7
[19] Elmer Rice, *The Living Theatre* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 150-153.
[20] Flanagan, *Arena,* 23.
[21] Ibid., 22

This focus on regional theatres was vital because at the time the professional theatre was largely centered in New York City within the Broadway commercial theatre. There were exceptions in regional areas with existing educational and local theatres, but the FTP's focus on decentralization was the first push for regional professional theatres in the national theatre landscape. After the FTP, it was not until the 1960s that the idea of regional professional theatres would come back into focus.[22] These ideas came together in the plan for the FTP to be "national in scope, regional in emphasis, and democratic in allowing each local unit freedom under these general principles."[23]

At the start of the FTP in 1936, 10,700 theatre workers were employed by the project. These employees worked in roles that spanned the theatre industry, including "actors, singers, dancers, clowns, directors, choreographers, designers, technicians, readers and researchers, typists, clerks, timekeepers, box office and administration."[24] In its planning period, Flanagan asserted that there must be a broad plan that covered the whole country which defined the universal policies for productions and delineated the expected relationship of each company to its community. Thus, five regional centers, New York City, Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, were established with a production center for a professional company, as well as a research and playwriting center for each. The regional projects were either joined with an existing non-profit theatre in the area or as independent theatre companies under the FTP.[25] Projects were set up in cities and towns in a majority of the states based on where the largest number of employable theatre workers were located The regional centers were located in New

[22] Jim O'Quinn, "Going National: How America's Regional Theatre Movement Changed the Game," *Theatre Communications Group,* June 16, 2015, https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/06/16/going-national-how-americas-regional-theatre-movement-changed-the-game/.
[23] Flanagan, *Arena,* 45.
[24] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 25.
[25] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 11.

York City, Boston (Northeast), New Orleans (South), Chicago (Midwest), and Los Angeles (West). These centers oversaw the operations of the surrounding theatre units in their regions. Within these regional centers were various units that focused on specific audiences or theatre genres. For example, units in New York included one-act plays, classical repertory, poetic drama, children's theatre, Black youth, Yiddish vaudeville, German (presenting classics in the German language), and Anglo-Jewish (presenting translations of Jewish classics) units. [26] While the development of these units was intended to increase employment opportunities for theatre workers coming from all specialties, it also increased experimentation in many genres which ended up attracting different kinds of audiences. Although each program was to be run individually, it was Flanagan's view that the units would all work together under the federal plan to "improve standards by pooling experiences, and…decide mutually upon the lines of activity to be stressed."[27] It was to be ultimately considered a federation of theatres, with collaboration among commercial, educational, and community theatres across the nation that had a shared mission of expanding national audiences through culturally relevant theatre, education, and community involvement.

Culturally Relevant Theatre – 'Regional and Democratic':

While the Federal Theatre Project's top priority was employing theatre workers, the methods used to accomplish this also worked to expand the national audience, especially with working-class and Black populations. In order to create new audiences, the leaders of the FTP recognized they did not need to mimic or compete with the commercial theatre. These audiences across the county had already turned away from the commercial theatre, for reasons that include

[26] Flanagan, *Arena,* 60.
[27] Ibid, 16.

high prices and not understanding or relating to the material. Therefore, the FTP needed to provide something different to attract this broader audience and make them feel welcomed to the theatre.

Making the theatre of value to more people included making culturally relevant theatre. This included using a variety of theatrical forms and drawing topics and subjects important to a specific audience. Early performances of the FTP even were presented as ballads, recitations, folk songs, or dances, as were significant to certain communities.[28] Flanagan stated, "the object was not to put on plays but to get plays out of the people themselves." The regional center's organization plan served this idea by allowing each region to research and make theatre for their community. The FTP made this highly individualized theatre possible by constructing the creative process around the importance of research.

Creating accessibility to the production needs of regional centers was the first step in expanding the reach of the FTP. To facilitate the regional centers' productions, the FTP created the National Service Bureau, which remained in existence throughout the entire project. The National Service Bureau's operating mission was: "to recommend and test plays for the use of the Federal Theatre Project, inaugurate rental agreements for the use of plays and radio broadcasts, arrange for the loan of actor and directional personnel, provide advice and suggestions on various technical matters, and clear music; edit, and publish bulletins, play scripts, etc. which are intended for national distribution, initiate research into important theatrical problems and to make the findings available to our Federal Theatre organizations and to community groups, schools, etc. throughout the country."[29]

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[28] Flanagan, *Arena,* 91

[29] "Resume and Policies and Objectives of the National Service Bureau," n.d., n.p., at George Mason University

This idea of providing widespread support to local theatres to stimulate overall production is vital to developing valuable theatre work for more communities. If smaller theatres have this larger organization to refer to for assistance and recommendations of solutions, it can contribute to a greater number of surviving and successful local theatres. This idea does exist through various organizations, including the League of Resident Theatre (LORT), which has 75 member theatres across 29 states. LORT provides the exchange of information on issues as "development, marketing, public relations, education, and technology."[30] It does not handle any creative needs of the theaters, but it promotes their theatres to the public. This is a successful reinterpretation of the National Service Bureau; however, it is only focused on the largest regional theatres in the country, including the American Repertory Theatre of Cambridge, Massachusetts and the Lincoln Center Theatre in New York City. There is also the American Association of Community Theatre (AACT), which is significant to this issue because it represents over 7,000 local theaters. This organization's benefits mirror the National Service Bureau's mission with a resource library with suggestions for plays and musicals, discounts on production necessities, insurance programs, licensing assistance, and networking with other professionals. The AACT names itself as a training center and encourages new works through an annual festival. It is the AACT that operates in the spirit of the FTP. To improve this network of resources, the American theatre landscape can develop a new organizational system that allows for all levels of theatres, including community, educational, and professional, to collaborate and share ideas. There are examples of professional theatres co-producing a play with educational theatres, but the FTP demonstrated that a federation of theatres, including all of these subsets, is possible, perhaps one in which the LORT and the AACT join forces.

[30] "Who We Are," League of Resident Theatres, accessed August 30, 2020, http://lort.org/who-we-are.

At its core, locally relevant theatre was considered indigenous drama "reflecting its own landscape and regional materials, producing plays of its past and present, in its own rhythm of speech and its native design."[31] To produce this genre authentically, the FTP formed research centers under the National Service Bureau. This department was also separated into regional centers. The Bureau of Research and Publication, later the National Play Bureau, operated under the following purposes: "to record and collect data pertaining to Federal Theatre presentations throughout the United States and to make sure material is available to other divisions of Federal Theatre, to maintain a library of general dramatic material for the use of Federal Theatre units, and to prepare and disseminate recommended dramatic material essential to community groups."[32] This purpose focused on the redistribution of a broad array of theatrical knowledge. The department compiled bibliographies based on 25 interests or categories, including "Rural Plays," "Labor Plays, "Anti-War Plays," "Catholic Plays," and more, that comprised of details needed to put on these plays.[33] Within each category was relevant plays and historical information, intended audience, technical requirements, and reviews from previous productions. Instructions for puppetry, writing, and make-up, lighting, and costume design were provided for community theatres with a lack of training. Translations and reworked scripts of classic and foreign shows were also sent to the field of regional theatres. This compilation of information was meant for use by FTP units to produce popular shows that would attract their local audiences and encourage the exposure of foreign theatre. The research efforts were "to stimulate and revitalize popular entertainments."[34] Expanding a local audience was considered a continuous

[31] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 12.
[32] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 29.
[33] Ibid, 30.
[34] Ibid, 31.

process of piquing interest with popular and familiar entertainment and maintaining that new enthusiasm with the introduction to new and experimental works.

Because of this overarching mission, the National Service Bureau was also vital in encouraging the process of writing and producing new works in communities. Along with the bibliographies noted above, the department also provided full research of historical events and catalogs of folklore material to serve as the subjects for new plays. By providing suggestions on topics for dramatization, the department allowed different regions to choose relevant material to develop with local voices. It was a beneficial process for the local units because they were provided with the tools to produce new works and they had the ultimate decision in what was presented. It was not a system in which the National Service Bureau told the regional units what to produce. Fitting with the initial plan for setting up the FTP, the National Service Bureau was national in scope through providing the general recommendations while the program remained regional in emphasis.

The prominent element of establishing the FTP as a channel for new plays was the reorganization of the Play Bureau in September 1936. This department was responsible for seeking new material to recommend to FTP units. Katharine Clugston, director of the Play Bureau, established guidelines for the scripts the Bureau would choose to develop. Clugston insisted on choosing scripts that exhibited an "experiment of ideas, forms, and technical expression" and with "something to say" while working with the preferences of the communities. In an overview of the reorganized Bureau, Clugston summarized, "Our greatest hope is to get plays which represent a wide variety of subject matter, seen with a fresh point of view and told in a new and exciting manner. We should like our plays to portray every class of society and probe

every problem of contemporary life."[35] As the Bureau evolved to split into a play reading and a playwriting department, there was an extensive amount of new work being developed. The Playreading Department took on the focus of accepting new scripts from emerging local writers and reworking classic and foreign plays to circulate to the units. The Playwriting Department was based around the work of researching local communities to provide specific and relevant theatre. As noted, the Bureau was also divided into the respective regional units. Therefore, the work of this department was producing a repertoire of dramatic literature for each region from its local playwrights.

The Oklahoma FTP unit was one of the most successful in producing unique native dramas that united the stories from regions "which have common interests as a result of geography, language origins, history, traditions, customs, and occupations of the people."[36] The unit utilized radio announcements to request regional source material and original works. Material on the history and culture of the Southwest region was sent to the Oklahoma unit's research division in partnership with the University of Oklahoma. The material primarily centered around the folklore of early days in the Southwest with stories of pioneers, cowboys, and Native Americans. Most distinctively, the Southwest unit emphasized research on native American history and legends. To keep this subject material authentic, the FTP hired experts, members of the Native American population who lived within the community, to provide guidance for the dramatization of their stories. Playwrights also employed by the FTP in specific units then developed this research into plays, radio scripts, and other performance material. This native material proved to be sought out by the entire Southwest region because the Oklahoma office found itself busy providing these original scripts to over two hundred dramatic clubs and

[35] Ibid, 35.
[36] Flanagan, *Arena,* 23.

educational institutions, as well as supervising multiple community centers across the region who wanted to use the research data to write and produce their own plays.[37] The unit's mission was to reach the entire Southwest region, extending to the most rural areas, as part of the FTP's overall mission to decentralize theatre. John Dunne, the director of the Oklahoma unit, divided his unit's workers into smaller units across the state. The original material was formatted into various theatrical styles such as puppetry and one-act performances to fit the rural population's interests. These productions toured through a plethora of schools, recreation centers, and Civilian Conservations Corps Camp with consistent requests for more through the end of the FTP.

A similar structure served the Midwest from the regional center of Chicago. Flanagan described the city as the "supply center for the entire Midwest."[38] The Chicago unit focused on collecting fully drafted manuscripts and plays written by Midwestern authors or concerning themes of the region. Companies would rehearse productions from these accepted scripts in Chicago before touring small towns across the Midwest. The Chicago system was more centralized because the Oklahoma unit dispersed material to be developed by local theatres in their own productions. The Chicago unit did have the additional development of an experimental theatre to develop the plays written by locals. Arnold Sungaard, an employee of the Midwest's Playreading Bureau acknowledged the range in quality of play submissions, for "some of them were handwritten sent from farmers."[39] However, the Bureau wanted to encourage these writers and build up this local repertoire, so the experimental theatre was established to refine these shows for eventual production.

[37] Ibid, 98.
[38] Ibid, 225.
[39] Ibid., 233.

These examples of success in producing new works based on the native culture demonstrate the importance of collaboration and research in this creation process for contemporary community theatres. Contribution from different populations ensures more accurate representation. It also becomes clear that the integration of research centers for regional and community theatres is a significant idea to expand relevance and representation for audiences. While many of these theatres may already search for completed scripts from local writers, the Oklahoma unit exhibits the power of gathering material collectively. These stories can then be dramatized by playwrights at the theatre. The addition of researchers intended for this process of discovering local material should be considered in modern theatre's staffing.

The priority of locally relevant theatre is responding to the needs of your audience. If theatres are listening to their communities, they should be able to do this. The FTP took a direct approach to study their audience by passing out audience survey cards after productions "which asked about occupation, previous attendance at FTP and other plays, types of plays preferred, reactions to the play, attitude toward charging admission, and opinion about a permanent Federal Theatre."[40] This was an unprecedented practice at the time. Many theatres utilize surveys today, but contemporary theatre companies should take a qualitative approach to their audience studies. When trying to cater to the culture of a community, it is important to focus more on personalized reactions or thoughts than demographics.

A particular play from the FTP that exhibits the importance of regional subject matter is *Feet on the Ground*, which was produced in the Reading, Pennsylvania FTP unit and written by a local FTP employee. The play centers around the everyday lives of the Dunkards, a community with roots in Protestantism and significant populations across Pennsylvania with over five

[40] O'Conner, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," 173.

congregations. The plot follows a city girl who marries a Dunkard farmer and struggles to adjust to the customs described in the script as "plain."[41] It is this description of the Dunkard's lifestyle that made most theatre workers assume it would not be exciting material for dramatization. Contrary to this belief, the play was a hit. Audiences and local critics praised the "complete simplicity" and called it "warm with a certain-type of American folk-life."[42] Critics from outside the region criticized the poor structure and other weaknesses of the writing. However, the production stands as an example of how cultural relevance can be determined as more important depending on the goals of the theatre. In the case of the FTP with its mission to expand audiences, interest in the subject matter did prove to be the dominant consideration. In a commercial theatre, dependent on reviews and broad appeal and entertainment, this would likely not be the top consideration in play selection. The majority of the show's audience comprised of the rural populations who found it to be an authentic depiction of a familiar or their native population. The success of *Feet on the Ground* was two-fold. First, it extended the FTP's audience into rural communities, for the show toured the show across the state playing three times a day.[43] Additionally, it converted a population into theatregoers. Kazacoff in his analysis states the show "acted as a catalyst in helping a regional population overcome its prejudices about theatre and playgoing to then actively support a play written by one of its own."[44] The interest of this region was piqued by portraying authenticity and familiarity on stage.

Chalk Dust by Harold Clarke and Maxwell Nurnberg is a significant example of the FTP units utilizing a process of developing a play from and for a specific community. This show produced by the Experimental Unit in the New York unit generated the script about teachers and

[41] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 184.
[42] Ibid, 185.
[43] Ibid, 184.
[44] Ibid, 186.

students in a public school system by using opinions and advice from local teachers and students. They were involved in all aspects of the production, including design, to ensure the dramatization would be real for their specific audiences of teachers and students. Considerations from these discussions informed every scene, and the final product was successful with its perceived realistic setting and sympathetic protagonist in this social drama.[45]

This method of a writer immersing themselves in a community to write more authentic theatre is seen in prominent authors and companies today. *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage, the second-most produced play from 531 Theatre Communications Group members in the 2018-2019 season, was written after Nottage and the production's director Kate Whorisket lived in the town of Reading, Pennsylvania and observed the impacts of the Great Recession.[46] Nottage based characters on specific people and stories she encountered and portrayed distinct points of view. Taking a widespread dilemma affecting the working class of America and placing authentic characterizations through real stories, Nottage delivered a play with attractive commonality from shared identities. This immersive research was beneficial in the case of writing one show; however, the FTP demonstrated that it can and should be a continuous process to benefit a community. Rather than just researching a community and leaving, there needs to be an ongoing relationship between a theatre maker and their environment. For this reason, including a research department within community and regional theatres would be beneficial in both developing authentic works and continuing this relationship with a community.

Researching a specific community extensively can also lead to the idea of healing these studied communities through the theatre. The FTP eventually used this process of research to

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[45] Ibid, 87-91.

[46] Holly Derr, "Lynn Nottage Talks Research, Collaboration, and the Fracturing of America," *Howlround Theatre Commons,* January 28, 2016, https://howlround.com/lynn-nottage-talks-research-collaboration-and-fracturing-america.

develop social dramas intended to reform "problem neighborhoods."[47] The New York City region had a unit for this specific region called the Community Drama Unit. The first production centered on the Gravesend neighborhood of Brooklyn. Playwrights studied the social characteristics of Gravesend before deciding on the problems involving the school system as their main theme. The playwrights wrote a play that served as instructions to Gravesend residents on improving their neighborhood and schools with problems including high delinquency, pollution, high home relief percentages, and lack of city resources. The play was performed in four elementary schools using the children and faculty of each school as actors. Following each production audiences shared their reactions to the production launching an open dialogue on how to begin making changes.[48] The Gravesend community described a feeling of unity and progress from the show as a result of this dialogue and the use of their community members in the productions. This genre of social dramas was eventually brought to other New York communities.

A nearly identical process to that of the Gravesend social drama is utilized by the modern group Ping Chong and Company Theatre Group in their *Undesirable Elements* series. Each production in the series takes place in a different city and is made with the collaboration of members of the company, local participants, and a local host organization. Over forty shows have been produced in locations including Rotterdam, New Jersey, New Mexico, Seattle, Ohio, Japan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and more. The shows are "community-specific interview-based theater works examining issues of culture and identity of individuals who are outsiders within their mainstream community."[49] The production always begins with an open framework to be

[47] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 164.
[48] Ibid, 165.
[49] "Undesirable Elements," *Ping Chong and Company,* accessed September 6, 2020, https://www.pingchong.org/undesirable-elements/.

tailored to the needs and issues of a community. The series directly gives a voice to the underrepresented populations of an area, because each show is performed by local participants. This method of participation is another way to reach wider audiences. Following each production, there is an open audience discussion. Members of the community are also encouraged to continue sharing personal narratives on an online forum. Similar to the impact of the Gravesend community drama, the *Undesirable Elements* shows manage to create a deeper sense of community among the populations who have previously felt unseen or unrepresented. It brings a community together in a dialogue about diversity.

Addressing specific communities in writing from research and experience needs to be the status quo of writers if theatre is going to progress. Audiences are built by giving them something they cannot obtain anywhere else. Authenticity and shared experiences through entertainment are what local theatres can provide to a community. Theatre needs to actively involve the community by putting their interests on the stage. It is another reason why research is the key to obtaining wider audiences.

Culturally Relevant Theatre – 'National in Scope':

The previous examples have demonstrated how the FTP operated as "regional in emphasis and democratic in allowing each local unit freedom."[50] The other characteristic outlined by Flanagan in the organization of the project was "national in scope," and this is exhibited through the shared material across the country. Plays and other dramatic material with universal appeal were flexibly shared among regions. Each local unit adapted these scripts and their production designs to match the needs of each community. Again, it was vital to make each

[50] Flanagan, *Arena,* 45.

production locally relevant even if it had been produced in a certain way in a different location. The national aspect occurred through this exchange of plays and ideas.

The simultaneous opening of *It Can't Happen Here* in 21 theatres in seventeen states exhibited this national dramatic exchange. The show, adapted from the novel of the same name by Sinclair Lewis, employed the growing national awareness of the rise of fascism from Hitler and Mussolini in a plot about a similar situation occurring in America. The plot centers around charismatic political figure Windrop elected President after pledging serious reforms and a return to traditional American values. Lewis communicated how American radical reformers, conservative politicians, and superpatriots, all present in the time of the FTP, could result in this less obvious form of fascism.[51] The play affected all citizens as it used realism to bring about a serious look at examples of dictatorship in America. With this shared interest, it was deemed an ideal production to produce in multiple locations. *It Can't Happen Here* was presented in a variety of approaches. First, it was largely accessible to different populations as productions in English, Yiddish, and Spanish were staged. Specific community changes were widespread. The Seattle production was staged by the Negro unit in order the explore the dangers of dictatorship to a minority group. The Yiddish production of the play also specialized the performance to the intended community by including scenes of concentration camps that were not included in other unit's productions. The Birmingham, Alabama unit chose to perform the show in a way that made audience members feel like they were attending a political rally. There were a brass band and loud broadcastings of Windrop's speeches. This effort was effective in drawing comparisons between this fictional setting and the real-life politics of America. Some communities chose not to put on the show. Most prominently, the New Orleans unit canceled the production after

[51] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, 80-91

deciding the audience would draw close parallels between Windrop and recent governor Huey Long.[52] *It Can't Happen Here* created a sense of unity among units and their communities while allowing flexibility for the continued focus on local audience interests. These methods succeeded in reaching audiences, for the performances from all the units together totaled a run of five years.[53]

Part of the conversation with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives is how to make the theatre a welcoming place for all members of society instead of the upper-middle class who has served as the primary audience for regional and commercial theatre. As discussed earlier, providing understood and relevant subject material is an important aspect of this process. It can also go further through the details of the script and staging. This can include writing the script in colloquial language with the use of slang or keeping an audience attentive by using the entire theatre, such as actors entering and exiting through aisles or actors planted in the audience.[54] Perhaps the greatest example of this push towards working-class audiences during the Federal Theatre Project is the innovation of the Living Newspaper shows, a combination of a documentary and theatre show. They were dramatizations of the current news. As analyzed by Karen Gellen, the Living Newspaper plays accomplished this effort to include working-class audiences unaccustomed to live theater by utilizing "brief, fast-moving, accessible scenes addressing current events."[55] The genre also maintained the standard of delivering locally relevant theatre by adjusting the script to adapt to local conditions, similarly to *It Can't Happen Here.*

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[52] Flanagan, *Arena,* 115-121.
[53] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 91.
[54] John O'Conner, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," in *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980, ed. Bruce McConachie and Daniel Friedman* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 178.
[55] Gellen, "Propaganda for Democracy," 7.

One Third of a Nation, a Living Newspaper production, explored the history of American tenement housing and its relationship to the causes of slum housing. The play is titled after a line from Franklin D. Roosevelt's second inaugural speech in which he says, "I see one-third of a nation ill-houses, ill-clad, ill-nourished…"[56] Since every large city struggled with slum housing, the play had widespread appeal for productions in many of these locations. It was also a show easily adaptable to local conditions. Typically, cities set the show to their locale and included details of their city's slum housing. For example, the New York production opening scene included a tenement on fire because of the city's identical historical event. In another city, Philadelphia, the show opened two days after the collapse of tenement housing, and this scene was added to the opening of their production.[57] The general script included empathetic portrayals of the families that lived in tenement housing and the dangerous conditions that went along with it. Living Newspaper plays frequently included a call to action after putting a problem on display. *One Third of a Nation* was effective as it intertwined the pasts and present through the history of tenement housing and urban life demonstrating other failures for improvement before suggesting new solutions. Audiences across the nation were comprised of people who lived in these conditions as the production was offered at a significantly lower cost. It was another example of the working class seeing themselves portrayed on stage authentically and leaving with hope and a greater understanding of their communities. *One Third of a Nation*, along with other Living Newspaper productions, provided a forum for "the average citizen to understand the natural, social, and economic forces around him, and to achieve through those forces, a better life for more people."[58]

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[56] "Second Inaugural Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt," Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, accessed September 12, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/froos2.asp.
[57] Gellen, "Propaganda for Democracy," 64.
[58] Ibid, 74.

The two-fold mission of the National Service Bureau, providing popular theatre and encouraging new works, represented the trends in the cultural expression of the 1930s, which "veered between escapism and a thirst to understand and combat the roots of the economic disaster."[59] The Living Newspaper genre played directly to this combination as it provided a dramatic presentation with emotional appeal while employing statistics to prove a point. In similarity to the two-fold goal of the WPA, that to provide practical support to the unemployed and to provide hope collectively to the nation, the FTP needed to serve all audiences and all of their dramatic needs. The success of local original works was proving that this was what audiences wanted. However, in any case, the importance of research and experience in the local community in which a theatre exists is evident in this conflict.

Another important discussion for building accessible theatre spaces is allowing audiences to experience theatre in natural and comfortable ways. This could mean altering the importance of traditional theatre etiquette, including nicer clothing, remaining quiet, and only expressing praise at the appropriate times to clap. The FTP experienced this discussion with the Living Newspaper productions. Accounts from the time express how the audiences for these shows were engaged, vocal, and energetic. FTP actor Norman Lloyd recalled from a performance of Living Newspaper show *Triple-A Plowed Under*, which explored issues of American agriculture, that "a lot of people who saw that show had never been to the theatre before. And they would talk back to the people up there…they really participated."[60] Different communities and populations have different ways to interact with art. The theatre etiquette that the Living Newspapers defied was established by the white upper-middle class that held the monopoly on professional theatrical experiences. Thus, theatre etiquette can be a deterrent for some. In 2019, the American

[59] Gellen, "Propaganda for Democracy," 3.
[60] Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 220.

Conservatory updated their audience guidelines published in their show programs. One guideline reads, "We encourage all response."[61] In response to criticisms on supporting vocal audiences other breaks from traditional theatre, Jeremy O'Harris, author of *Slave Play* on Broadway, tweeted "There is no right or wrong way to watch the theatre…the form is dying so I'd rather (people) just be there then not…" In the discussion of evolving theatre, it is time to open this discussion and get rid of the preconceived notions of what is correct in terms of norms and values. As observed by critic Burns Mantle about the FTP, "The WPA has turned the theatre back to the people to whom it rightly belongs and taken it from the moneyed aristocracy that has for years dictated its course and definitely influenced its productions."[62] Similarly, the course of theatre today cannot be dictated by the current white upper-middle class audiences.

The Living Newspaper model of providing the same production to multiple communities for greater impact and unity has been utilized in examples of activism through theatre in recent years. Following the 2016 shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida which resulted in the death of forty-nine victims, Alyssa Sileo of Glouceter Country's Institute of Technology organized forty-nine concurrent productions of *The Laramie Project* to honor the victims. *The Laramie Project* tells the story of a hate crime against a gay student at the University of Wyoming and brings awareness to the lack of hate crime laws. The show itself was developed from extensive research conducted by members of the Tectonic Theater Project including hundreds of interviews with community members of Laramie, Wyoming and excerpts from news reports of the town. It is similar to the Living Newspaper genre with this balance of hard facts and details with the stories and characters of humanity. The productions all took place on May

[61] Lily Janiak, "The dog whistle of phones in theater, or why audience behavior is always the wrong conversation," *Datebook,* October 1, 2019, https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/theater/the-dog-whistle-of-phones-in-theater-or-why-audience-behavior-is-always-the-wrong-conversation.
[62] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 66.

17, 2016, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia located across fifteen states and four countries.[63]

Culturally relevant theatre also includes those broader issues that affect all of humanity. It is important to balance shows that promote locally specific topics with these universal themes. To build a theatre for everyone, it makes sense to have this variety. *The Laramie Project* stagings and the Living Newspaper shows demonstrate this model of taking a show that has a general message and allowing local theatres to add elements of their culture and audience. These local elements can still require the local voice achieved through research and experience, which supports the earlier suggestions.

When asked what was wanted from their local theatre by *The New York Times,* Margot Mailliard Rawlins of Yorkville, California responded, "Local theater should bring classics and new works to its audience and provide a stage for new talent and creative ensembles. Combine traditionalism and innovation in staid and shocking balance. Not serve as a mirror but an anvil."[64] If the Federal Theatre Project's mission was integrated into contemporary local theatres, all of these aspects would be met as evidenced by the local new works, innovation in new genres, and the general attention to an audience's needs. To serve as an anvil, a local theatre needs to be comfortable with redefining what constitutes popular theatre. Popular theatre should be the people's theatre, and the people's theatre is boundless. Summarized by Flanagan, "For the theatre has never been greater than its audience, and in our own cast country the theatre should not consist exclusively of plays done in a few cities for a few people, but should increasingly involve, through immediacy of theme and sometimes through actual participation, the people of

[63] Alyssa Sileo, "*The Laramie Project* Project," *Howlround Theatre Commons,* August 17, 2017, https://howlround.com/laramie-project-project.
[64] Scott Heller, "What Do You Want From Your Local Theater? Readers Respond," *New York Times,* April 1, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/theater/local-theater-readers-respond.html.

the community."[65] Today, it is necessary to turn the theatre back over by ensuring all people gain value from their theatres.

Impact: The Negro Theatre Unit:

The FTP's priority of culturally relevant works benefitted the Black community by providing the opportunity to redefine their role in the theatre. The FTP established 22 Negro Theatre Units across the country, including Seattle, Hartford, Philadelphia, Newark, Los Angeles, Boston, Raleigh, Birmingham, San Francisco, and Chicago.[66] One of the most important benefits of these units was the opportunity for Black theatre-makers to begin the path to direct and design their projects. Before, they were largely considered by the theatre world to be exclusively performers, and there were not many opportunities for Black theatre-makers to learn technical skills or helm a production. The FTP created an opportunity for them to take on apprenticeships in the earlier years. Furthermore, there was a focused effort from the Play Bureau to find and develop Black playwrights.[67]

The success in providing representation for Black audiences in theatre is demonstrated through two examples of the Negro Theatre Unit: Orson Welles' *Macbeth* and Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog.* The first of which was an early effort to integrate Black theatre-makers into the predominantly white popular theatre industry. This version of *Macbeth* was presented in Harlem with an all-Black cast and updated to be more culturally relevant for a modern audience, including both Black and white audiences. These updates included a Haitian-like island setting

[65] Flanagan, *Arena,* 112.
[66] Ibid, 62-63.
[67] Ibid, 63.

rather than ancient Scotland and the inclusion of Voodoo priestesses rather than witches.[68] Other changes appealed to an audience greater than the typical upper middle class of New York theatre, for the Shakespeare show was made more accessible by having the actors speak "Shakespeare's verse in a simple, unstudied manner perfectly suited to the production's ferociously direct style."[69]

While the production was directed by a White man, Orson Welles, the process of the production's rehearsal process shows an effort to train Black theatre-makers. Members of the Negro Theatre Unit were brought in to learn backstage training and apprentices served under Welles. Even the fact that Welles was chosen to lead the production shows the aim to bring Black professionals into the mainstream theatre with a universal audience. Welles was ultimately chosen because of theatre connections that could provide positive reviews and funding for the project. It was a decision to ensure the production's success and provide a more professional training setting for members of the Negro Theatre Unit.[70]

The play was a massive success. It played to sold-out audiences for twenty weeks before going on tour to eight cities across the country. However, it provided the representation that theatre makers of color needed to progress in the theatre industry. The show spurred other Negro Theatre Units to update the classics with an all-Black cast.[71] This practice is still shown today exemplified by the all-Black cast of *Much Ado About Nothing* presented in the 2019 Shakespeare in the Park season in New York. Orson Welles' *Macbeth* can also be considered a precursor for

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[68] Robert Sawyer, "'All's Well That Ends Welles': Orson Welles and the "Voodoo" Macbeth," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation, and Performance* 13, no. 1 (2016): 87–103. doi:10.1515/mstap-2016-0007.

[69] Smith, "The Play That Electrified Harlem."
[70] Sawyer, "'Voodoo' Macbeth."
[71] Smith, "The Play That Electrified Harlem."

the modern initiative of color-conscious casting. Color-conscious casting is the practice of providing acting opportunities for people of color in roles that are traditionally held by white actors.[72] This practice is vital for DEI practices. The organization We See You White American Theatre is a broad collective of over 300 BIPOC theatremakers dedicated to exposing and changing the realities of racism in the theatre industry. In their list of demands, the organization calls for color-conscious casting in Western classics and revivals of classics to increase BIPOC visibility.[73] The need for this practice in the time of the FTP still exists in today's industry for the same reasons. There is still inequality in BIPOC representation in theatre, and the early practices of the Negro Theatre Unit provide an examination of the effect of practices that are still being considered for DEI initiatives today. Furthermore, it is DEI-focused organizations like We See You White American Theatre that can assist in building guidelines for a modern federation of theatres.

To provide culturally relevant theatre to the Black population in the 1930s, the FTP needed to produce works by Black playwrights. After being defined in the theatre world by musical revues, the FTP began to build a Black theatre in America in which Black playwrights could write for a Black audience. Perhaps the greatest example of original Black theatre concerned with the Black experience in America is Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog.* The show is a family drama that explores the ideologies of Black community politics in the 1920s, including Garveyism, Communism, and trust in the "American Dream." It depicts the harsh experiences of racism during the Jim Crow era, as well as interracial prejudice of differing skin colors within the community. The title of the play comes from a repeated line that represents the

[72] Vishmayaa Jeyamoorthy, "The case for colour conscious casting," *The Queen's University Journal,* October 4, 2017, https://www.queensjournal.ca/story/2017-10-04/arts/the-case-for-colour-concious-casting/.
[73] "Demands," We See You White American Theatre, last modified July 10, 2020, https://www.weseeyouwat.com/.

society's racism and capitalist exploitation that destroys the family in *Big White Fog.* It reads, "This world ain't nothing but a big white fog, and nobody can see no light anywhere."[74] In the end, the three different characters and their ideologies meant to progress the Black population in America all fail against the system of institutionalized racism.

Big White Fog was received well by many audiences and critics; however, it was its reach into Black communities that make it a lesson in theatrical accessibility. It proved that Black writers were needed to serve the dramatic needs of representative and relevant serious dramas for Black communities. Its widespread success with audiences did influence an increase in similar Black folk dramas, domestic tragedies, and realist dramas.

There was conflict during the premiere of *Big White Fog*, as unit directors debated if Black audiences would be interested in a show with sensitive and harsh depictions of their common experiences. There was a widespread belief that Black audiences wanted entertainment with escapist shows, like Orson Welles' *Macbeth* with its heavy visual and audio effects, and that they were not ready for a realist show about their lives.[75] However, this assumption came from previous feelings from their depictions on stage. They were used to representation in comic or subservient roles only.[76] For the first time, Black audiences were receiving a portrayal of themselves that was not from the white gaze, and it was realistic and authentic. The Black realist dramas became increased in popularity over time as Black communities discovered a new and recognizable image of themselves on stage.[77]

On the other side of this conflict is the still existing practice of assuming the preferences of BIPOC audiences. A necessary part of increasing accessibility is allowing the voices of

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[74] Theodore Ward, *Big White Fog* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008), 91.
[75] Gellen, "Propaganda for Democracy," 18.
[76] E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980,) 8.
[77] Gellen, "Propaganda for Democracy," 11.

BIPOC writers exist in any genre. They are not only necessary for realist dramas that discuss their experiences. BIPOC writers deserve the space to write any genre or form of theatre. In an interview, Jeremy O. Harris stated, "I would say, in this moment, where so many black artists are getting opportunities for the first time, it can feel like you have to make black art for all black people."[78] In a similar example, playwright Mike Lew shared:

> I would posit that when it comes to writers of color, we're being subjected to an anthropological gaze that places our plays under the context of 'ethnic work,' some kind of category apart from other new plays and judged by a separate criterion. There's this burden of expectation that all we have in us is stories from our homeland. Yet that expectation is increasingly at odds with what we're interested in talking about as writers, or where we're headed as a country. Early in my career I kept encountering well-meaning mentors who encouraged me to 'write about my family,' which was really code for 'write an '80s-style Asian identity play.'' But I'm third-generation Chinese-American. I couldn't write a Chinese immigrant play if I tried.[79]

The Negro Theatre Units, like the other local units within the regional centers, had the ultimate decision in what they would produce. This led to a variety of genres written by Black playwrights. For example, The Seattle Negro Unit staged musical revues, folk dramas, An all-Black adaption of *Lysistrata,* and historical dramas.[80] It is this freedom that needs to be granted to BIPOC writers in contemporary theatre spaces. There is diversity within these communities. This is why theatre companies need to include BIPOC in leadership positions, as well as the other creative positions. With this representation in high-level creative decision-making, it will open up the range of human experiences and not have a singular idea of what a BIPOC voice

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[78] André Wheeler, "Jeremy O Harris: 'People say I wrote Slave Play for white people," *The Guardian,* November 6, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/nov/06/jeremy-o-harris-slave-play-interview.
[79] Mike Lew, "I'll Disband My Roving Gang of Thirty Asian Playwrights When You Stop Doing Asian Plays in Yellow Face," *Howlround Theatre Commons,* October 6, 2014, https://howlround.com/ill-disband-my-roving-gang-thirty-asian-playwrights-when-you-stop-doing-asian-plays-yellow-face.
[80] Anthony Duane Hill, "Federal Theatre Project (Negro Units)," *BlackPast,* February 6, 2008. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/federal-theatre-project-negro-units/.

needs to be. Mike Lew argues that for the theatre to be truly diverse, companies must "embrace writers of color for what they have to say and not just the demographics they represent."[81]

Representation Through Education:

Culturally relevant works are dependent on the presence of diverse representation in the theatre-making process across cultures and communities. Telling diverse stories is difficult when there is no diversity in the company. Therefore, there needs to be a constant state of accessible education to ensure local communities and their diverse populations are receiving training to write and produce that local material. This diversity within the theatre company will lead to greater interest from represented communities. Ed Zareski, the managing director of Round House Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland, stated that the company's bestselling shows of the last season were *Father Comes Home From the Wars* and the *Who and the What*, productions that explore the Black experience and the conflict within a Muslim family respectively. These shows were the most diverse of the company's season and outsold the classic productions, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.[82] The Federal Theatre Project also discovered this cycle of representation leading to interest through encouraging and educating new and local theatre-makers.

The ultimate goal of the FTP's educational endeavors was that the productions at local theatres could be run entirely by locals. At the beginning of the program, many of the smaller theatres did not have enough trained professionals. So, the FTP sent professionals from the regional centers to these smaller theatre units to help mount a production while teaching classes.

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[81] Lew, "Asian Playwrights."

[82] Theresa Beckhusen, "Priority Report: Theatre Facts 2016," American Theatre: *Theatre Communications Group,* November 21, 2017, https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/11/21/priority-report-theatre-facts-2016/.

The artists were from all fields of theatre, including acting, directing, and technical theatre. By the end of the show, the local theatre workers had learned how to operate a theatre company and were self-supporting.[83] Another training opportunity for local theatre artists was the Teaching of Theatre Technique Unit. This education operation took place in New York City at the Studio Theatre. The program asserted, "The purpose of the Studio Theatre is to equip these directors with training and techniques, supplementing their present knowledge, qualifying them as authoritative directors in the field of community drama…"[84] The goal was to instruct these local theatre professionals to be able to fully supervise a community theatre. To do this, thirty-five community theatre workers were trained in all aspects of play production for ten weeks with the Studio Theatre professionals. A production was put together and performed in the city during the time period. After the performances, the trainees returned to their communities. This was a continuous process, as the group was then replaced.

Through its process of finding new scripts from the regional centers, the Play Bureau served an educational role for emerging, young playwrights. Clugston believed accepting writers with vision and relevant subject material but less technical skills would help "build a new school of playwriting for tomorrow." These promising playwrights would be supported by the Playwriting Department, a section of the Play Bureau. There the writers had the opportunity to progress their writing skills with the freedom to experiment with subjects, forms, and themes. Playwrights tested their new material in the Playwright's Laboratory Theatre. This test theatre allowed for collaboration among writers across the country while they showcased their original shows, often just works in progress.[85] These were early versions of staged readings that are held

[83] Flanagan, *Arena,* 109.
[84] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 152.
[85] Ibid, 184.

today as well as theatre labs with the same development concept at regional theatres. These staged readings allowed for criticism and corresponding improvements to be made. It provided a type of writing school for young playwrights from regions that did not typically receive theatre education.

The new writing talent was able to produce experimental works. Virgil Geddes, director of the FTP Experimental Theatre, argued, "In a society that is still in a transitional stage, the most vital dramas of the day are bound to be of an experimental nature also."[86] Today's society and the theatre are in this same position – a transitional stage. As the theatre industry maneuvers creating during a pandemic, there are only trials and errors being done. This mindset that the profits will likely not be financial is key to experimental creation. In this stage of society, it would be ideal for the theatre industry to follow the FTP's example and open up the discussion to promising but untrained artists. Prior training isn't useful in a time when the full extent of your technique can be expressed on stage. Therefore, it is these times that the function of education can be combined with progressing theatre in experimental ways.

The other overall theme of education during the time of the FTP was the continued evidence of collaboration among commercial, educational, and community theatres. Today, there are many partnerships between professional companies and educational theatres or universities. However, that same partnership is not shared with the community theatres. To build a lively and decentralized theatre landscape in the nation, community theatres need to be able to operate fully and successfully with their own skills and resources. For this reason, it is important that regional and professional theatres with greater resources offer training and support to surrounding community theatres. Flanagan also gives examples of universities providing support for smaller

[86] Ibid, 86.

theatres in their regions. The foundation of the FTP system with regional centers offering guidance to the smaller local theatre is entirely possible without government funding. Specifically, those theatres of LORT under their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives should set supporting local theatres as a guideline. While their initiative includes internships and apprenticeships, these programs are not always economically viable for all. There also cannot always be a system that these opportunities are only offered at larger regional and professional theatres. Local theatre professionals need to be trained and remain at the local level to maintain accessibility for their communities.

Relationship with the Community:

An editorial written about the FTP in the *New York Post* reads, "The experts came to no conclusions to how to bring theatre to the people. But WPA seems to have accomplished much of the same result by bringing the theatre to the people."[87] Theatre can be brought directly to people in more ways than just location. Bringing theatre to the people can mean a range of accessibility initiatives. Most importantly, it can and should mean making theatre a vital part of a community through civic practice. In her original plan for the FTP, Flanagan hoped "to set up theatres which have the possibility of growing into social institutions in the communities."[88] To serve as a social institution, community work needs to be a top priority and a continuous process. Along with the cycle of greater representation leading to more audience participation, a similar cycle exists in the fact that reaching out into the community is the best way to bring new and diverse audiences to the theatre.

[87] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 160.
[88] Flanagan, *Arena,* 23.

As stated earlier, two of the top barriers to access to the theatre during the 1930s were price points and physical location or distance to a theatre The structuring of the FTP, with its variety of specialized units and regional centers, worked to physically bring theatre to underserved communities for free or at affordable prices. Affordability was a widespread priority for all FTP units. Overall, 65% of all FTP productions were free, and the other productions were kept to prices under 40 cents. This is in comparison to the average Broadway ticket price of $1-3.[89] The issue of price points for theatre remains an issue today. In a study of 118 theatres across the country including community and regional in 2018, the single ticket price increased by an average of 8.1 percent over four years.[90] To combat this, there are several ticket accessibility initiatives that exist in theatres, including lower prices for students and groups as well as a specific number of tickets set aside to be sold at a lower price. For example, Crossroads Theatre Company, a Tony-Award winning theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey, offers ten-dollar tickets for their productions one day a week. According to their artistic director, Marshall Jones, these tickets always sell out. Cheaper tickets do raise concern for smaller theatre's immediate profit. However, Jones proposes there will be a financial payoff in the long run. The important consideration is that these prices are engaging patrons who otherwise would not be attending."[91] It is not a discount for regular ticket buyers. It is investing in a new audience who after being introduced, may prove to provide more support to your organization over time rather than an upfront larger ticket purchase. This idea was also clear for FTP audiences. Flanagan saw the

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[89] Wendy Smith, "The Play That Electrified Harlem," *Library of Congress,* Accessed March 17, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/articles-and-essays/play-that-electrified-harlem/.

[90] Jerald Raymond Pierce, "Crucial Connections: Theatre Facts 2018," American Theatre: *Theatre Communications Group,* November 26, 2019, https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/11/26/crucial-connections-theatre-facts-2018/.

[91] Marshall Jones III, "Is The Ticket Price Right?" *American Theatre: Theatre Communications Group, December 22, 2016, https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/12/22/is-the-ticket-price-right/.*

impact of offering theatre to more people in creating an expanded audience to continue beyond the length of the project. Flanagan stated, "Commercial producers ought to thank the Federal Theatre for this service. There is no doubt that the audience of the immediate future is being developed by Federal Theatres all over the country."[92] Therefore, theatre companies today need to consider initial engagement as a key performance indicator for success. Future research for company reporting should consider following these first-time engagers to see future contributions to their theatre. Genevieve Beller, a costume professional, suggests focusing on new audience engagement secures a more stable future for companies. This should go as far as cutting costs in the production process, including scaling down performances, renting out theatre space, and using existing resources, to provide financial space for select lower ticket prices.[93] To prove the benefits of lower ticket prices, the StageOne Family Theatre and Kentucky Shakespeare companies experienced increases in overall attendance and financial contributions after eliminating a ticket cost.[94]

Research from John O'Conner demonstrates that location was the greatest factor for bringing working-class audiences to the theatre during the FTP.[95] The FTP's regional centers set up touring units to provide performances to smaller towns across the country. These towns were serviced by tent theatres and their traveling groups. Tent theatres were playhouses on wheels that included "a portable stage, scenery, property, lights, and folding canvas seats accommodating these plays."[96] The tent theatres performed in unconventional locations to deliver theatre to a

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[92] Flanagan, *Arena,* 254.
[93] Beller, Genevieve, "Rebuilding a Better Theatre Industry Post Pandemic," *Howlround Theatre Commons,* May 14, 2020, https://howlround.com/rebuilding-better-theatre-industry-post-pandemic.
[94] Talleri Mcrae, "Community Specific Theatre: Conversations, Connections, and Considerations," *Howlround Theatre Commons,* April 10, 2020, https://howlround.com/community-specific-theatre.
[95] O'Conner, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," 181.
[96] Flanagan, *Arena,* 93.

wider audience in areas without stages. Specifically, the New York City region had a Suitcase Theatre Production unit that toured the boroughs and played shows in repertory.[97] Through these touring companies, more than 37,000 performances were given in "parks, schools, hospitals, auditoriums, labor halls, prisons, orphanages, and homes for the elderly."[98]

The touring of the Civilian Conservation Corps Camps (CCC) resulted in the greatest audience numbers. The CCC camps were the home to young men between the ages of 18 and 25 who enrolled to be employed working on public works projects, including building bridges, dams, and reservoirs. The camps also included an educational component where many enrollees learned to read and write. CCC camps existed in every state.[99] Over 350,000 people saw plays from the FTP in the CCC camps.[100] One production in particular, *CCC Murder Mystery* by Grace Heyward, was developed specifically for the young men in these camps. The show included audience experimentation, which was experimental at this time, for enrollees would be chosen as jurors for a trial of one of their camp members while others served as witnesses. Heyward traveled with the production and catered each mystery to the specific camp. A witness of one production, Tony Buttita, remembered how camp members packed into the main mess hall and "watched the play unfold while sitting on tables, window sills, and the floor."[101] This touring production illustrated the interest in theatrical productions that existed beyond commercial theatre and how touring shows could make it specialized for each audience. It served the audience for which it was intended.

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[97] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 117.
[98] O'Conner, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," 174.
[99] Cynthia Clark, *The American Economy: A Historical Encyclopedia,* 2nd ed., s.v. "Civilian Conservation Corps." (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 76.
[100] O'Conner, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," 174.
[101] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 76.

Site-specific theatre, different from touring in that a production is typically designed to be performed at one unique location, is a contemporary theatre trend. The name site-specific is believed to have first been used in the early 1980s.[102] Third Rail Projects company in Brooklyn has produced this kind of immersive theatre in a Williamsburg warehouse and a touring camper.[103] En Garde Arts ensures the chosen location is a part of the show's narrative. For example, they produced Jonathan Larson's musical *JP Morgan Saves the Nation* at the statue of JP Morgan with Wall and Broad streets continuing in both directions. The important part of this genre is the mission behind the choice to utilize it. For many companies, its purpose is to increase its entertainment value through this more participatory experience. However, it is the deeper impact these site-specific productions can have that make them a vital consideration for theatres hoping to increase accessibility to their work. Anne Hamburger of En Garde Arts prioritized bringing new people to the theatre through her work, so her site-specific shows were highly public and highly accessible. It was these unconventional areas that allowed "kids from the nearby projects" looking for something to do, residents from the surrounding apartment buildings, and workers from the area on their way home to stop and watch the show. Hamburger pointed out that many of these spectators had never seen a theatre production before.[104]

The Chicago Home Theatre Festival uses private homes to produce work that is a response to the physical location of that home and its neighborhood. Its mission is for its productions to be a space for dialogue around issues of community and identity, as well as

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[102] Andy Field, "'Site-specific theatre'? Please be more specific," *The Guardian,* February 6, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/feb/06/sitespecifictheatrepleasebe.
[103] KC Wright, "7 Companies Producing Groundbreaking Immersive Theater," *Backstage,* August 5, 2014, https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/companies-producing-groundbreaking-immersive-theater-11465/.
[104] Anne Hamburger, "The Why and How of Site-Specific," *Howlround Theatre Commons,* May 2, 2019, https://howlround.com/why-and-how-site-specific.

creating a connection throughout art outside of institutional bounds.[105] The performances are meant to "explore the ways by which culture and institutions shape how people navigate public and private spaces, and what we can do to create more access, inclusion, and justice."[106] This goal for Chicago society parallels how the festival is reaching those values of access and inclusion through the choices of their touring site-specific theatre, for the Festival aims to cover a range of Chicago neighborhoods. In one example from the 2014 festival, a performance in the Lakeview neighborhood in Chicago explored how gentrification displaced the gay bars and clubs that the surrounding area was known for. The show included performances from these displaced communities, including queer burlesque and voguing while telling the story of how inclusion and exclusion impact neighborhoods.[107] This production was developed from the location. It succeeded in bringing together diverse and excluded groups from both traditional theatres and the gentrified neighborhood. The show was culturally relevant and physically brought to the needed audience.

Using the FTP touring productions and its complementary modern model of site-specific theatre, contemporary theatres need to consider where the unserved audiences exist and go there. It is not just for the reason of increasing proximity to as many people as possible, but it is also about redefining what it means to attend the theatre. These examples demonstrate how audiences who are unaccustomed to attending the theatre are not drawn to a formal stage production. They will not be drawn into a show through lower prices or advertising, because they do not view themselves as the intended audience. Theatre in varying locations is a way to open productions

[105] Dani Snyder-Young, "Community Building with the Chicago Home Theater Festival," *Howlround Theatre Commons,* June 24, 2014, https://howlround.com/community-building-chicago-home-theater-festival.
[106] "About," Chicago Home Theater Festival, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.chicagohtf.org/about.
[107] Snyder-Young, "Community Building."

beyond the typical upper-middle-class audience by placing the shows in places that are known and welcoming to other communities.

Community outreach is the first step for a theatre company in establishing a meaningful relationship with the people around that encourages attendance and participation in their work. The FTP units became vital to the communities they served by prioritizing group sales and sponsorships. Group sales, or block tickets, are frequently used for theatre marketing today. It is the process of offering discounts on tickets purchased in a large quantity. The FTP utilized group sales to attract working-class audiences by providing this option to unions and labor trade unions. For FTP shows, block sales were the source for nearly half of all tickets, and labor organizations accounted for the largest block of tickets. Other organizations that were included in group sales included civic groups, building and construction trades, heavy and light industry, and transport and communications workers.[108] Contemporary theatres consistently use group sales to market a show. It is important to use for this initial engagement, but for a theatre company to survive it needs to build upon these existing relationships. Selling a block of tickets cannot be the end of the relationship.

In her testimony on behalf of the FTP for the House Special Committee on Un-American Activity, Flanagan gave an extensive outline of sponsors that worked with the FTP:

> We have, as sponsoring bodies for the Federal Theater, lists of organizations covering twenty pages of this brief, which I intend to write into the record; and I will summarize them for you. Two hundred and sixty-three social clubs and organizations, two hundred and sixty-four welfare and civic organizations, two hundred and seventy-one educational organizations, ninety-five religious organizations, ninety-one organizations from business industries, sixteen mass organizations, sixty-six trade-unions, sixty-two professional unions, seventeen consumers' unions, twenty-five fraternal unions, and fifteen political organizations. Note, gentlemen, that every religious shade is covered and every political affiliation and every type of education and civic body in the support of our theater.[109]

[108] O'Conner, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," 172.
[109] Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason* (New York: Penguin Press, 1973), 25.

This list exemplifies how the FTP became a social institution through its partnerships throughout the communities. Nearly every production from the FTP had one or many sponsors. The Cincinnati, Ohio unit partnered with various local industries to stage their production, making it a "city enterprise."[110] One of their productions *H.M.S. Pinafore* received their location from the Park commission and timber and light from local industries. In other cases, certain productions would not have been produced without the help of a producing organization. The Boston unit struggled with developing new works that attracted local audiences. The first show that was able to be performed was a historical play about Lucy Stone, the first National President of the League of Women Voters. It was sponsored by the Boston University Women's Council whose sponsorship brought the majority of advertising efforts and audience.[111] Furthermore, all of the Living Newspaper productions were sponsored by the American Newspaper Guild. This partnership included the sharing of employees from the guild to the productions.[112] One Living Newspaper production was created out of a partnership between the FTP and local WPA health organizations. *Spirochete* staged the history of syphilis while presenting facts and suggestions from contemporary medical researchers and doctors. Its purpose was to minimize the taboo of the disease and open a dialogue on the practice of mandatory testing. *Spirochete* was staged in multiple cities and each received numerous sponsorships from local health organizations. In one example, the Seattle production was sponsored by the State Board of Health, the Washington Medical Association, the County Medical Association, and the City and County Health Department.[113]

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[110] Flanagan, *Arena,* 170.
[111] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 173.
[112] Buttita and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents,* 35.
[113] Flanagan, *Arena,* 309.

The value of engaging with community organizations through group sales and partnerships for modern theatres is the greater number of stakeholders for a production and ultimately a company. With more groups of people in a community invested in a production, it naturally encourages more interest from peers. Diana Stiles of Castillo Theatre in New York City stated, "As we're bringing in more new audiences with our co-production partnerships, there is an incremental increase in new members coming on board to support the mission."[114] Moving forward, local theatres have to commit to having a continuous partnership with organizations that extends past the first group sale or sponsorship.

To truly serve a community, a theatre needs to be continuously assessing the community's needs and creating ways to meet them where they are. The FTP succeeded in working flexibly to meet the unique needs of communities across the project. Flanagan was proud of the fact "Federal Theatre actors played wherever they were needed."[115] After a tragic flood, the Cincinnati unit chose not to open their production of *It Can't Happen Here* to instead travel the state performing over forty shows to 14,660 flood sufferers. The actors in the unit played in emergency shacks using overturned tables as a stage and lanterns as light. This community needed entertainment, and the actors changed their performances to meet this need.

It is this continuous assessment and creative solutions that are needed for theatres to build civic practice. In his article "The New Work of Building Civic Practice, Michael Rohd expresses the need for different kinds of partnerships between a theatre and an organization, partnerships that are not based on selling a block of tickets, actors making a play about a community, or talkbacks after a show. The partnership should be a dialogue and projects should develop from

[114] Beckhusen, "Theatre Facts 2016."
[115] Flanagan, *Arena,* 166.

an organization's need for help with advocacy, meaningful dialogue, story-sharing, and civic application.[116]

A defining example of a theatre company offering services of civic application is Sojourn Theater's work with the New River Valley Planning Commission and Virginia Tech. Sojourn Theater developed an interactive performance piece called *BUILT* to allow dialogue from public engagement to inform the state's process of urban planning. Through a series of critical questions, audience members strategized together to plan cities and establish priorities for urban planning decisions. The audience was representatives of the area, and their thoughts on housing, infrastructure, neighborhood cohesion, and equity were then shared with local planners to make decisions based on their constituents. Fitting with other accessibility considerations, Sojourn Theatre produced the show in low-income areas and provided free tickets to community members to ensure a diverse audience.[117] The company also toured the show to three other cities working with local government agencies at each. The importance of this example is the idea of expanding the expectations of what theatre can provide for a community. It is known that theatre can be therapeutic and bring people together. However, through this process of civic practice, theatres can prioritize listening to the needs of their community to develop unique solutions that may not look like a typical show.

For a theatre company, the importance of continuous community involvement and dialogue is that it is the best way to keep a loyal base of subscribers. Without a consistent audience, companies likely have to rely on single ticket purchases and thus increase these prices. An analysis of 119 Theatre Communication Group Member Theatres shows that there is a steady

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[116] Michael Rohd, "The New Work of Building Civic Practice," *Howlround Theatre Commons*, July 9, 2012, https://howlround.com/new-work-building-civic-practice.
[117] "BUILT," Sojourn Theatre Company, accessed September 8, 2020, http://www.sojourntheatre.org/built.

decline in the number of subscribers and subscription tickets.[118] The way to solve this collective issue is to invest in the community and build up a subscriber base. Investing in a community can be accomplished by following the FTP model – by providing relevant theatre, investing in diverse future artists through education, and meeting a community's needs.

Conclusion:

In the early stages of the planning of the FTP, Flanagan expressed the hope that the project would become "so vital to the communities involved that they will be able to continue after federal aid is withdrawn."[119] To be vital to communities, the theatre industry needs to be accessible to them. To increase access to the theatre, there needs to be a federation of theatres, including professional, education, and local institutions, that agree to follow a set of guidelines aiming for this purpose. This federation would be collaborative with member theatres providing support and sharing ideas. This suggestion is achievable, as a majority of theatres across the country already belong to a group of theatres that enforces bylaws, such as LORT or AACT. The guidelines under which this group would operate would focus on actions to increase accessibility. These actions would be derived from the methods of the Federal Theatre Project that had an impact, including the hiring of local playwrights to provide locally relevant theatre, research departments in the organizational structure to determine a community's dramatic wants and needs, diversity in all positions, emphasis on new works, education and training programs, efforts to provide a number of free tickets, partnerships with community organizations, and innovation. Through the sharing of ideas and resources, the impact of one theatre can be the impact of hundreds of theatres across the country. As Flanagan intended for the FTP, this

[118] Pierce, "Theatre Facts 2018."
[119] Flanagan, *Arena,* Forward.

federation would "improve standards by pooling experiences, and…decide mutually upon the lines of activity to be stressed."[120] This includes sharing scripts, training resources, professionals, audience takeaways, and more. It is necessary to use the instant transmission of information that is available today and become an industry working towards a common goal rather than competition.

As evidenced by the campaign of We See You White American Theatre, whole communities are turning away from the industry that exists, because they do not find it valuable. The theatre is not currently accessible. In the same parallel between the society of the FTP and today outlined in the introduction, the theatre industry has willing theatre workers to complete this work. There is a large number of unemployed theatre workers that may be more flexible in the work they choose post-pandemic. This is a reason that this work to increase accessibility needs to be considered now. To build a better theatre post-pandemic, the industry needs to turn to the model that brought art to thirty million people over four years across thousands of towns and cities, 65 percent of whom were seeing theatre for the first time.[121] This is the point of accessibility– to deliver theatre of value to as many people as possible.

[120] Flanagan, *Arena, 16.*
[121] Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre,* 299.

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