

Fostering Creativity and Community in Politically Polarized Environments: A Reintegration of Community-Engaged Practices to Develop Community-Framed Definitions of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

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RE:THEATRE

ABSTRACT

On May 18, 2021, I awoke to a New York Times article about my small town in the middle of Wisconsin entitled: "A "Community For All"? Not So Fast, This Wisconsin County Says." (Epstein, 2021). Marathon County was attempting to pass a resolution stating that it was a place that celebrated and embraced equity, inclusion, and diversity. Crafted using standard national talking points around this topic, these three words created a firestorm that divided the community.

This aesthetic Inter-subjective, auto/ethnographic case study examines the polarizing impact of "equity, diversity, and inclusion" in a non-metropolitan county. Emergent data suggests that broad definitions of these words minimize the unique and fractal nature of the

issues specific to a locality. Analyzing the data through the theories of rural consciousness (Cramer, 2016) and the anti-critical race theory movement (Rufo, 2021), the study demonstrates the need for nuanced community-framed definitions of equity, diversity, and inclusion. This article explores ways a re-evaluation of arts-based community-engaged practices could utilize concepts of community consciousness to create and dismantle contentious, politicized ideology through artistic interventions.

INTRODUCTION

When I was 12, I sprinted home from the school bus, determined to intercept my mid-quarter progress report before my parents got home. I knew the grades posted would be a groundable offense and had devised a plot to stealthily place it in the trash and blame its absence on the postal system. Unsurprisingly, my plan did not work, and I wound up grounded for two weeks from the two things I loved most: rehearsal and C-SPAN.¹ Though at the time I thought my life was over, my love of the arts and politics continued to thrive and intertwine.

When entering college, I left my rural, conservative, Christian community for the slightly larger and slightly more liberal city of Green Bay, Wisconsin. I waffled between education, politics, and theatre until a student teaching assignment. Growing up in my community, there was an extensive list of demonized issues never to be spoken of, including my bipolar disorder. However, in the school where I was working, these issues were addressed publicly within the curriculum and broader learning community. Inspired by this approach, I officially solidified my education major. More importantly, it inspired me to found a company in my hometown that created a space where young people could address the issues adults in the community wanted to ignore, Introspect Arts.

Introspect Arts was an artist collective of more than 300 artists under 25 who wrote, produced, and performed original works meant to inspire community dialogue that would lead to social change. Our process was three-pronged: art-making, knowledge-making, and

¹ C-SPAN is a US-based cable network that broadcasts proceedings of the United States federal government, as well as other public affairs programming.

community-making. While most of our rehearsal time was spent traditionally, a quarter was dedicated to researching and exploring topics within the show. Rather than structuring our productions as performances, we approached them as community events. From pre-show talks, lobby displays developed by the cast, art exhibits, post-show talkback, and receptions, our goal was to cultivate an audience experience that had the opportunity to be more transformational than transactional.

At first, we received significant pushback from the community. People did not think teenagers should be discussing topics such as suicide, sexual assault, drug abuse, and depression. However, when the company sunsetted in 2015, we created a framework that led to significant community support, over \$20,000 in grant funding, and recognition statewide by the Autism Society of Central Wisconsin and The Drug Endangered Children's Alliance of Wisconsin for our community initiatives.

Shortly after Introspect Arts closed, I was contacted by organizations and artists about our community-engagement practices. Over time, I developed the following codified show selection and community-engagement framework and have since taught it in various forms ranging from state Thespian conferences² to school districts to professional development workshops for the American Alliance for Theatre (AATE) and Education and the Educational Theatre Association (ETA).

MAKING ART THAT MATTERS: A FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED THEATRE

Step One: Survey of Community and Needs

To make art that matters to your community, you must first understand who lives there. Essentially an informal census, consider the following:

1. Race/Ethnicity
2. Age
3. Religion
4. Socio-economic status

² Local theatre-educator conferences for teachers whose students participate in theatre competitions, run by the Educational Theatre Association (ETA).

Next, consider what issues/topics are relevant to your community. While, at times, these might require more complex interrogation, that is not always the case. When schools began to re-open in 2021 as pandemic-related closures abated, I worked with numerous educators who identified the predominant needs of their community as laughter and joy after months of isolation and mounting tensions. This pursuit is just as valid as addressing any social issue if it is genuinely a community need.

Step Two: Identifying Audience

Before you begin identifying possible shows to produce, you must identify your audience. A lack of nuance when approaching understanding your audience is a common pitfall in the show-selection process. To explore these complexities, we can reframe the term 'audience' as the summation of six sub-groups that can be configured in several models:

1. Central Community (also-known-as the cast)
2. Creative Team
3. Producing Team
4. Related Community (broader community of the central community)
5. Immediate Audience (subscribers, family, friends)
6. Community-At-Large

Commercial Model

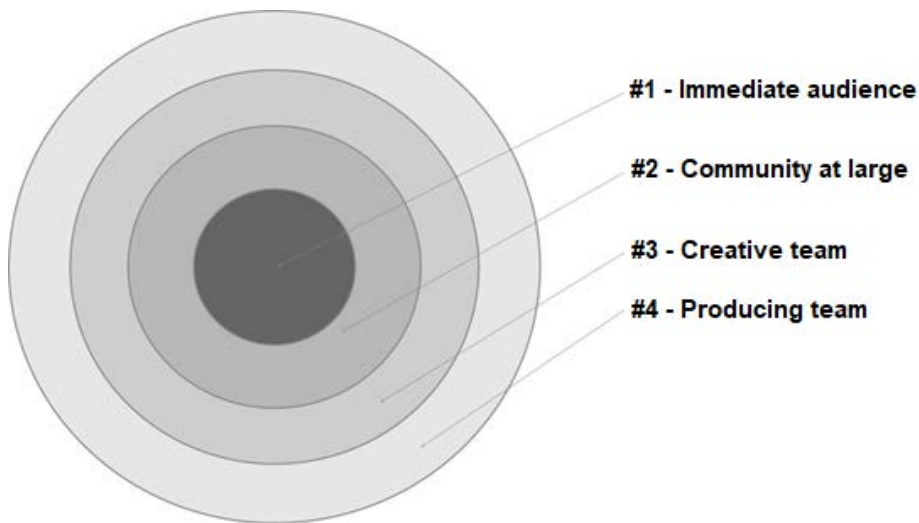


Figure 1: Breakdown of how the most-commonly used commercial model prioritizes selecting material.

The most-commonly used commercial model prioritizes selecting material that will draw the largest audience and generate the most revenue to ensure longevity. Therefore, the most important sub-group you must consider is the immediate audience, narrowly followed by the community-at-large.

Frequently, when financial and structural fractures occur in non-profits, regardless of size/notoriety, it is because the producing team and/or creative team center themselves in the show-selection process. Rather than the organization creating art for the wider community, it becomes an outlet for those in leadership to live out their artistic desires. A finely tuned equilibrium is required; as art cannot be created without passion, it cannot survive without an interested audience.

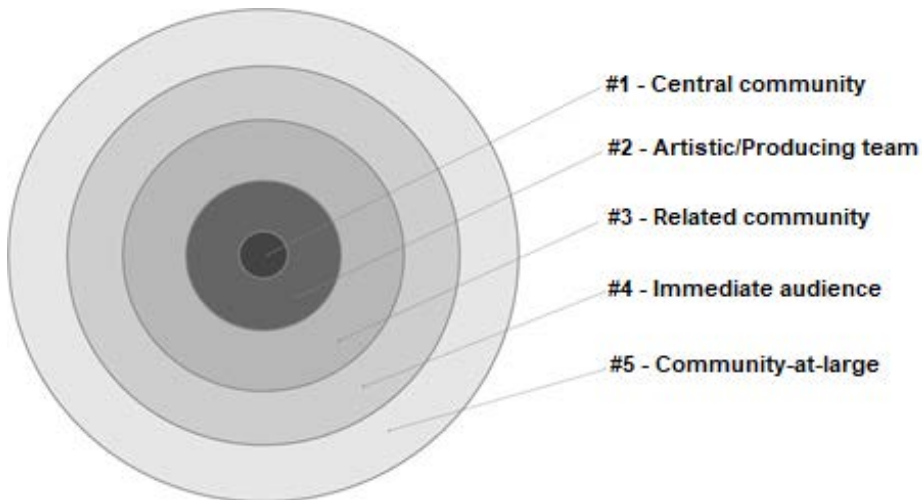
Educational/Community-Engaged Model

Figure 2: Applying an educational/community-engaged model to the selection of material.

When creating art to cultivate change-inspiring conversation, we must decenter, yet not disregard, financial goals. In this model, one assumption must be established: art is an interactive educational experience, regardless of who or where it is performed. From this positioning, we can use Howard Sherman's education model (Strauss et al., 2017). Since the people who intimately engage in the world of the show will have a more significant opportunity to be affected by the material, the central community (also-known-as 'cast') must be centered.

This model is more challenging to achieve in many ways as you must maintain equilibrium between the artistic/production teams, the broader community, and the central community. Since this model's goal is not just to entertain but to engage, you may encounter tensions as the material your central community and/or artistic/production team want to explore may be seen as polarizing or "inappropriate" by the frequently overly-vocal community-at-large. Increased budget cuts to arts education add a second complicating factor, as you need community support for financial viability. Therefore, as educators and theatre-makers, we are frequently put in a position where we must choose "safer" material than our central community wants or would benefit most. Over time, with vigilant messaging and demonstration that our mission is to engage the community in educational

opportunities, it is possible to achieve this model.

Step Three: Solidifying Intent and Implementation

You can now begin identifying potential titles by combining information from parts one and two. Once you have narrowed your search to two or three shows, use the following questions to determine which has the potential to make the most impact within your community:

The Why

- Why are you selecting this show?
- Why must it be done at this moment?
- Why should your organization/program tell this story (and why are you the one to lead this effort)?

The How

Often, we try to engage our audience in too many different ways. Instead, consider one specific way your piece will interact with your audience.

- **Invite** specific communities who may or may not generally attend your shows.
- **Entertain** by celebrating and bringing joy to your community.
- **Connect** communities who traditionally may not often interact.
- **Challenge** community members to engage in discourse that lends to transformative.

Implementation

The final step is to devise your community-engagement strategy. Some considerations:

1. How will you [invite/entertain/connect/challenge] and engage your audiences?
2. What partnerships can you establish? How are they aligned with the work, and how will they contribute to the engagement process, both internally and externally?
3. What opportunities will you create internally for engagement outside the standard rehearsal structure?
4. In what ways will your audience be able to interact with the world of the show? Will there be lobby displays or activations,

pre or post-show talks, digital resources, etc.?

Step Four: Ethical Considerations

The final step is to check for any overlooked ethical concerns.

1. In the show-selection process, it must be acknowledged and remembered that all Golden Age Musicals were written before the conclusion of the civil rights, gender rights, and LGBTQIA+ rights movements and, therefore, inherently have dated and problematic material. You may still be able to do work from this era; however, additional scrutiny is required.
2. Race/Ethnicity/Gender/Ability/Orientation are not a role you can play or costume you can put on. Therefore, if a character's identity includes any of these, it must be played by someone with the same identity. Consider whether you have the correct population to achieve these casting requirements without tokenization.

Rising Tensions within the Framework

Interest in the framework grew, and in 2016, I opened my consulting company, RE:THEATRE, to help more organizations implement this work. Initially, when clients would ask how equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) fit into the framework, I would focus on the importance of representation. Slowly these questions morphed into frustration and desperation, reaching its peak in 2020. Regardless of demographic or location, nearly all my clients expressed that they understood the need for EDI; however, their community, especially rural communities, did not have the same diversity to meet the standards established mainly by those in metropolitan areas.

The disconnect between artistic leaders and educators in metropolitan vs. non-metropolitan areas has only escalated. As I worked with educators in rural communities while living in New York and Seattle, I identified a lack of practical application of EDI within the framework; however, I could not pinpoint the exact issue. My frustration only grew as I began feeling trapped by the rising tension around EDI from all sides.

Frankly, I became burnt out. Deciding to make a career change, I entered the Master's in Educational Theatre in Colleges and

Community at NYU in the Summer of 2021, intending to change career paths away from consulting towards dramaturgy. This intention was further solidified a few weeks before classes began when my hometown showed up in a *New York Times* article, "A 'Community For All'? Not So Fast, This Wisconsin County Says." (Epstein, 2021), for the community outcry over essentially an innocuous EDI statement. If the place Introspect Arts thrived for years, where I developed the community-engaged practice I was teaching across the country, had changed this drastically, I felt at a loss.

When selecting topics for our Methods and Materials of Research course, I conducted a case study surrounding this article, hoping it could give me some sociological insight into the perceived drastic change in my community. I did not realize that this case study would turn into much more than my Master's Capstone; it would illuminate significant gaps in the literature regarding the implementation of EDI in rural communities and insight into the missing piece of the framework.

OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY

In 2020, the Marathon County Board of Supervisors tasked the Diversity Affairs Commission (DAC) to address rising racism, mainly directed at the Hmong community. The DAC created "The Community For All" (CFA) resolution, which broadly defined diversity, stated that equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) were necessary for a healthy community, and recognized that systemic inequities prevent this. The county board meetings turned into a toxic proxy war for political ideologies and grammar lessons focused on EDI and critical race theory (CRT), so much so that *The New York Times* covered the CFA in May 2021 (Epstein, 2021).

This aesthetic intersubjective, ethnographic case study aimed to investigate the evolving polarization in small communities across the country and its impact on embracing equity, inclusion, and diversity through analysis of the Marathon County "A Community For All" resolution. Specifically, to what extent did tension around the words "equity," "inclusion," and "diversity" prevent the passing of Marathon County's "A Community For All" resolution? The following questions additionally guided the research:

- To what extent did national and state politics influence the

outcome of the county-based resolution?

- To what extent have concerns around the issues of equity, inclusion, and diversity increased over the years, and can we discern their origins?
- To what extent have community members seen Marathon County change, specifically over the last 33 years?

History & Context

Wisconsin has always been at the forefront of political movements. It is the birthplace of the Progressive Party,³ a pioneer in workers' rights, and was the first state in the US to ratify women's suffrage in 1919. It is also the home of Senator Joe McCarthy⁴ and the Tea Party movement's rise with Governor Scott Walker's election.⁵ In many ways, Wisconsin has been the testing ground for national political and social trends, making it a critical bellwether state politically in the US.

There are eight key bellwether counties within the state, one being Marathon County, where I was raised. The largest county by land and 10th in population density (Wisconsin Demographics by Cubit, n.d.), it was initially settled by German protestants and Polish Catholics. Then in the 1980s, it became home to Laoation refugees from the Vietnam War. Today, the county seat of Wausau is home to the highest Hmong community per capita (12%) of any city in the country (Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association, n.d.).

³ The Progressive Party was a US political party formed in Wisconsin in 1934 and lasting for 12 years. In it's time, it "served as one of the most important voices of radical farmer-labor sentiment in the nation" (McCoy, 1951, p. 70).

⁴ Senator Joe McCarthy infamously served as chairman of the Government Operations Committee and its Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the US Senate and is widely associated with blacklisting in the 1950s, dedicated to rooting out suspected Communists and homosexuals in the US (Herman, 1999). This movement is known today as McCarthyism, a period allegorized in the witch-hunts of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

⁵ Scott Walker served as governor of Wisconsin from 2011-2019, during which time he faced controversy for (among other things) limiting the collective bargaining rights of public employees and subsequently establishing Wisconsin as a right-to-work state, prohibiting union security agreements which require employees who are not members of a union (but benefit from the union) to contribute to the cost of union representation. These actions were inflammatory given the strong history of labor unions in the state (Cramer, 2016).

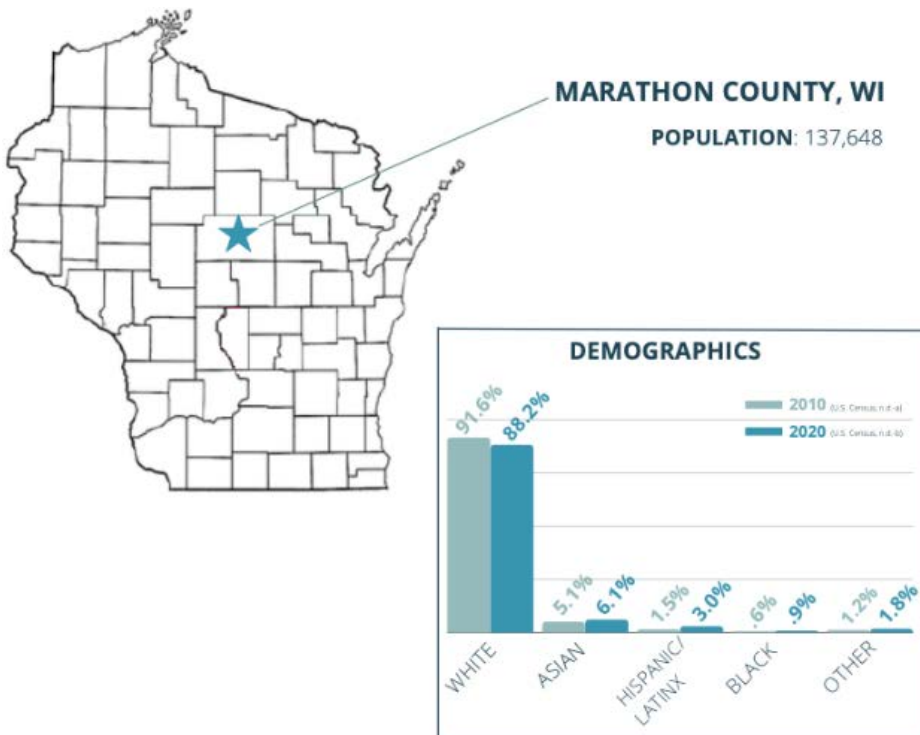


Figure 3: Marathon County, Wisconsin population and demographics

A Community For All Resolution

Due to a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes fueled by the onset of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd, the Marathon County Board of Supervisors appointed the Diversity Affairs Commission (DAC) to craft a resolution affirming their commitment to creating a safe, healthy, inclusive community. The resolution defined what the board classified as diversity and recognized that inclusion was essential for a healthy community, but systemic inequalities prevent this from happening.

Once the DAC's draft of the "Community For All" resolution was made public, community backlash exploded. Opponents and proponents engaged in an ideological war over the merits of "equity," "diversity," and "inclusion," which would eventually make its way to *The New York Times* (Epstein, 2021).

Methods

To interrogate the study, the following are some of the methods that were used:

- More than 100 individual comments taken from county board meetings, social media posts, talk radio commentary, and news reports were transcribed and coded to meet criteria informed by the study's central question.
- Interviews with four local leaders (two proponents and two opponents) directly involved and two focus groups with community members passively engaged in the conversation.

Findings

Emergent data suggests the fractal nature of the tensions surrounding "equity," "diversity," and "inclusion" fueled by the national political climate was the critical factor in the failure of the CFA. Marathon County's experience navigating issues of EDI both mirrored and diverged from the national conversation. Rather than use language to specifically address the anti-Asian hate happening within the community, the DAC opted for broad language most often associated with Black Lives Matter and other national talking points. Additionally, it rested on platitudes rather than providing concrete, actionable solutions. By failing to address hyper-localized concerns, an opportunity for the community to engage in meaningful, transformative dialogue was lost in the noise of national rhetoric in two key ways.

(Anti-) Critical Race Theory and Inclusion

The most frequently debated topic was the word "equity" and its association with critical race theory (CRT). While there are many factions and interpretations, the core tenants of CRT are:

- Racism is an integral part of the social fabric and, as a result, is challenging to eradicate through targeted policy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8).
- Racism creates a coalition of economic benefits between the white elite and the white working class, allowing the rich to maintain the status quo while ensuring the working class priority to jobs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8).
- The biological differences used to codify race and ethnicity have little bearing on the societal factors often used to define race; therefore, race is a social construct (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2012, p. 9).

Brought to prominence by Christopher Rufo, Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, Anti-CRT is central to the ideology of the modern Republican Party in the US. While Rufo links the Marxist theory of class conflict to the theory of systemic racism (Rufo, 2021, para. 5), he identifies the use of the word 'equity' rather than 'equality' as the greatest threat. He argues that equality, the basis of the American Constitution, ensures equal protection under the law, but equity is the guarantee of equal outcomes (Rufo, 2021, para. 12). Capitalism cannot function in an equity-based society; therefore, CRT undermines America's economic and belief systems (Rufo, 2021, para. 11)

Opponents of the CFA frequently pointed to the use of the word equity and the lack of conservative voices included in the DAC, which was overwhelmingly, if not entirely, liberal. To address this issue, the County Board of Supervisors created a work session that included those who disagreed with the resolution's language. The work session proposed a new version of the draft that, among other things, replaced the word equity with equality. Rather than engage in dialogue, the DAC swiftly dismissed the proposed resolution entirely.

As one county supervisor astutely pointed out before voting against the resolution, the task was to craft a statement entitled "Community For All" therefore, all voices within a community must be included. In 2020, 58% of Marathon County residents voted for Donald Trump. The complete exclusion of any conservative thought or considerations when drafting the CFA only intensified tension. It fueled fears that a nefarious, woke, liberal takeover of the county was happening and would result in the silencing of any who held different beliefs.

Diversity

While the CFA contained a broad, intersectional definition of diversity, religion was initially omitted. On a national scale, the acknowledgment of religious diversity among different factions of Christianity may not seem significant; however, on a local level, this may still be crucial. Less than 50 years ago, Marathon county was deeply divided ideologically, socially, and geographically by religious affiliation. Throughout the data, community members drew attention to the county's ability to move past these fractures as proof that this

resolution was not needed; however, the absence of religion in the definition was discriminatory. Because the DCA contained politicized terminology, opponents saw this as a direct attack and stoked fears of a more significant culture shift.

A Vocabulary of Fear

Throughout the research, fear constantly emerged with a hyper-politicized vocabulary where the words 'equity,' 'diversity,' and 'inclusion' were sharpened into weapons used to fight an ideological proxy war. Rather than working together to address issues within the community, both sides turned against each other, favoring broad fear over community dialogue. Ultimately, the only option, I believe, is to temporarily provide a place for this fear to be frozen in time, so it can be disarmed to reveal the crux. As theatre-makers and educators, we are given the gift of freezing time and creating art that provides space for the audience to engage in meaningful community conversations. We must only discover how to wield this power.

COMMUNITY-FRAMED DEFINITIONS OF EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

When revisiting the framework, it is clear that while space was made for identifying who lived in the community, there needed to be a process for identifying how micro-communities interactions within our community inform how equity, diversity, and inclusion look. In a less politicized world, a causal understanding may have been acceptable. However, our praxis today requires us to more diligently understand the complexities of the multitudes of identities within our community. Therefore, the first step of the framework must prompt the user to go beyond just assessing needs and towards teasing out local complexities to understand how equity, diversity, and inclusion differ from that of national standards utilizing the following questions:

1. What micro-communities make up your community at large?
2. How does this make your community uniquely diverse?
3. Because of this, what disparities and tensions exist in your community?
4. How do these mirror national issues?

5. How do they differ, and why?

Once we have spent time interrogating these questions, we have the data to accurately define what equity, diversity, and inclusion mean within our community.

IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS

When directly addressing an issue within our community, we must understand the epistemologies of the micro-communities represented within our work. In the book, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness and the rise of Scott Walker* (Cramer, 2016), Dr. Katherine Cramer distills political polarization in rural, non-metropolitan communities epistemologically through Rural Consciousness.

Rural Consciousness – a perspective established through the lens of place and class, specific to distributive injustice in rural communities. It is rooted in a belief that policymakers, state, and national governments do not represent rural communities, that rural communities do not receive an equal share of resources, and that their values and lifestyle are disrespected by those in urban areas. (Cramer, 2016, pp. 11-12)

As educators, theatre-makers, and even policymakers, attempting to cultivate spaces for transformative dialogue, I posit an even further distillation. As demonstrated in the case study, relying on platitudes rarely yields results. As artists attempting to use our work as a vehicle for change, we must understand the epistemology behind the various viewpoints within our community and how they interact with each other to create a space for productive discourse.

Community Consciousness – a perspective established through the lens of identity in relationship to place and specific to distributive injustice (perceived or factual). It is rooted in a belief that local, state, and/or national policymakers do not represent their community, that locally, their community does not receive an equal share of resources or representation, and that their values and lifestyle are disrespected nationally and locally, especially by those perceived to be in power.

This allows us to more objectively enter into the material selection process and crafting community engagement tactics. In particular, it allows us to navigate the required equilibriums discussed in step two of the original framework so that artist(s) and communities can support and serve each other symbiotically.

FUTURE STEPS

The impact political polarization will have on our education system and sociological structures on a local level have yet to be seen. This community engagement framework remains nebulous as we enter this uncharted territory, and as such, I leave the reader with three key questions to ruminate on throughout that journey.

1. Many opponents of the Community For All resolution (CFA), and conservatives nationally, frequently stated they felt marginalized based on their Christian faith. One could easily dismiss this; however, in 2010, 61% of Americans belonged to a religious congregation, compared to just 47% in 2020 (Jones, 2021).
 - a. How will this perceived marginalization of Christians impact society and inform our understanding of diversity?
2. With the rise of tensions at school boards mirroring those of the CFA, how do teacher training programs prepare educators to address EDI in classrooms that respond to and reflect communities in non-metropolitan areas? Perhaps one way to do this is to interrogate current pedagogical frameworks and explore how EDI approaches could benefit from considering a Rural Consciousness framework.
3. How do we include various perspectives when discussing potential EDI solutions yet not disregard the core principles of these tenants? This is the most perplexing of all.

Today, local news makes national headlines, and we look to national dialogues to address local concerns. More than ever, we need spaces to make meaning of the mass amount of information rather than tailspin further apart. Theatre provides an excellent vehicle for

communities to have these critical conversations in a way that is (ideally) more productive and (hopefully) more engaging than the county and school board meetings, where they are often relegated. To do this, we must meet the moment and make art that matters. We can only do this by leaning into the uncomfortable, centering our community, identifying a clear goal, and building an intentional framework that can cultivate transformative conversations.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Lindsay Kujawa is a researcher and creator passionate about creating artistic opportunities that cultivate change-inspiring dialogue. For the past decade, Lindsay has worked in non-metropolitan areas supporting schools and community arts groups to navigate the intersections of show selection, community needs, and student-centered practice. Seeing a need for equitable access to professional development, in 2016, she began creating digital opportunities that challenge theatre-makers to re:imagine the intention and impact of theatre through her consulting company, RE:THEATRE. Lindsay is frequently a guest artist and facilitator at national and local conferences, notably the AATE, EdTA, and International Thespian Festival.