CHAPTER 1

Bad Manners: Talking about Race

Let me begin by burnishing what has become, in fairly short critical order, an old chestnut: within the United States, blackness and performance are ineluctably linked. Some of the nodes of this linkage are already quite obvious within black cultural and performance studies: from the ignoble tradition of blackface minstrelsy to contemporary NAACP boycotts of television networks that underutilize black talent on- and offscreen, to Barack Obama's recent history-making presidential campaign, we are by now keenly aware of the politics and burdens of representation within the United States. Critical and political attention to the quantity and quality of black cultural performances is certainly warranted, given the ever-increasing power of cultural representations to shape public attitudes in matters of race, and the global commodity that hip-hop culture—often collapsed into a complicated synonymity with black culture—has become.

What I want to add to this truism, though, is the suggestion that we couple our attention to the power of expressive culture with an understanding that other modes of performance—related to institutional and capitalist imperatives of surveillance, productivity, and efficacy—play equally significant roles in constructing the lived experience and political possibilities of black Americans. As Jon McKenzie illustrated in *Perform or Else,* the isolated valorization of cultural performances as liberatory, transgressive practices risks ignoring the other, more normative registers of power within which notions of performance have always also functioned. He writes: "Our attentiveness to liminal performance has kept us out of the loop with respect to the performativity of power, and in doing so, has limited our liminality," and this is nowhere more true than where black subjects must contemplate which thresholds we may or may not

cross during the presentation of self in everyday life and elsewhere.[1] This, too, guides Herman Gray's critique of an outdated mode of black cultural politics that "continues to privilege representation itself as the primary site of hope and critique."[2] Representations in the realm of cultural performance—just like bodies (Butler) and race (West)—continue to matter, of course, but should be analyzed relationally rather than hierarchically in order to understand how the multiple formulations of performance cohere to regulate, to provide pleasure, to enact possibility. For example, if we accept the central role of slavery in the production of the African American subject, we must address not only the performative affect of certain twice-behaved behaviors in stylizing black bodies to occupy a certain social role, but also the economic imperatives that performance opens up in relation to these black bodies at different moments in history. Surveillance of black bodies through the system of slavery, for example, was designed not just to quell any assertions of subjectivity that would threaten white supremacy, but also to ensure that these working black bodies performed their labor tasks as efficiently as possible. Indeed, as Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* demonstrates, the relationship between performance as aesthetic practice and performance as evaluative rubric of labor is not just one of complementarity but of mutual constitution. Observing black bodies engaged in what was acknowledged as physical labor had entertainment value for white spectators, just as "the transubstantiation of abjection into contentment" required a great deal of faith and work, given the abject circumstances into which enslaved blacks were forced.[3]

This supervisory dimension of the national investment in black performance manifests in other areas as well: as a mundane example, library searches for work on "black performance" reveal an extensive bibliography of research not just on expressive cultural forms but also on black academic and athletic performance, and the external factors contributing thereto. This quantitative analysis resonates both in California, where I live and work, and across the country, as efforts to dismantle affirmative action in higher education routinely rely upon disparaging arguments about undeserving, underqualified minority applicants. The argument in favor of California's 1996 Proposition 209, which ended affirmative action programs in the public sector, used inflammatory language to explain why affirmative action was wrong: "set-aside" policies "hijacked the civil rights movement," creating "terrible programs which are . . . tearing us apart," an outcome that "naturally [causes] resentment when the less qualified are preferred."[4] Such rhetoric makes clear that one of the most urgent current discussions of blackness and performance in their many meanings re-

volves around national anxieties over the racial crossroads at which we have arrived (or stalled): are we a consciously pluralistic nation, or a color-blind one?

This book is an attempt to understand the function of these complementary, even overlapping, modes of performance—aesthetic and efficacious—in settling this question. *The Problem of the Color[blind]* argues that an examination of black performance practices from the last decade of the twentieth century, after the abatement of the 1980s culture wars, exposes color blindness and a strictly quantitative multiculturalism as far more ideologically linked than they are oppositional responses to the politics of racialized representation, and clarifies the need for a new vocabulary and evaluative framework through which to understand how performance in particular might intervene against the limitations that stereotypes impose upon black expression. On both institutional and cultural levels, performance has become the medium through which American anxieties about race (and in particular, blackness) are pondered, articulated, managed, and challenged. Whether we talk about artists who subvert our habits of looking at black bodies or we discuss conservative politicians' attempts to measure and yet detach performed productivity from the racialized bodies that execute various types of work, looking at what black bodies do through the conceptual parameters of performance and its attention to embodiment, temporality, and repetition's concretization of discursive formations allows us to understand the simultaneous, even mutually constitutive, opening up and shutting down of representational possibilities that shifts in our national discourses about race have produced for black performers and black performance.

THE PROBLEM OF THE COLOR[BLIND]

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois published his landmark text, *The Souls of Black Folk.* A collection of essays that fused culture with politics, *Souls* offered a meditation on the possibilities of black progress within American society, criticizing entrenched racism while carefully enunciating black responsibilities for racial uplift within a society that saw blackness and Americanness as quintessentially opposite formulations. Key among the many foundational concepts that DuBois explicated within his text was the notion of double consciousness, understood in relationship to the system of segregation that the Supreme Court had affirmed in *Plessy v. Ferguson* a mere seven years earlier. DuBois recognized that by declaring the possibility—even desirability—of a nation with "separate but equal" social, economic, and political infrastructures, the Supreme Court

had ensured that "the problem of the Twentieth Century [would be] the problem of the color line," a dividing principle that was problematic in part because of the misapprehension of blackness that it fostered and foisted upon whites and blacks alike.[5]

On October 7, 2003, a century after the publication of DuBois's text, California voters participated in an unprecedented recall election that ousted Democratic governor Gray Davis from office, replacing him with Hollywood action hero and Republican party candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger. The spectacle of this election garnered national attention, with movie stars, child stars, porn stars, and career politicians all vying for the top elected position in the state. While Schwarzenegger's eventual victory was a foregone conclusion to many, the fate of another measure on this special ballot was far more suspenseful: Proposition 54, dubbed the Racial Privacy Initiative (RPI), would amend the state constitution to prohibit the "classif[ication of] any individual by race, ethnicity, color, or national origin in the operation of public education, public contracting, or public employment . . . [and] in the operation of any other state operations."[6] Spearheaded by Ward Connerly, who in his previous capacity as a regent of the University of California successfully led the effort to eliminate affirmative action in college admissions (the aforementioned Proposition 209), the campaign for Proposition 54 branded racial consciousness an inherently divisive discourse that only perpetuated, rather than ameliorated, racism.

Voters defeated the Racial Privacy Initiative by a margin of nearly 2 to 1, protecting a place for race in public discourse. However, while the campaign for Proposition 54 was centered on achieving a color-blind society in which racism had no discursive or procedural defense, opponents of Proposition 54 chose not to rely upon the typical, politically inflected critiques of color blindness. Instead, they cannily focused on medical research and treatment as proof of the continuing relevance of race in public life, predicting the disastrous consequences of ignoring health disparities between racial groups, such as unequal rates of diabetes, sickle cell anemia, and osteoporosis. After the election, Ward Connerly conceded, "I think the voters generally embrace the ideas of Proposition 54, but the opposition very, very effectively raised doubts about the health issue."[7] Indeed, Eva Paterson, then-director of the Equal Justice Society, foregrounded health in her celebration of the proposition's defeat: "'The people of California rejected being blinded to race. They realized there were health implications.' . . . It is a great day for civil rights.'"[8] Paterson's conflation of health implications and civil rights strategically reframed the consequential dimensions of race, making it indistinguishable from civic personhood in contempo-

rary political life: the possibility of privacy that the initiative aspired to offer was, in practice, impossible. Or, as one senior scholar quipped when we were discussing the RPI, some of us don't have the option of racial privacy, do we? She and I laughed, imagining the seclusion that would be required to keep our brown skin to ourselves, even as we recognized the political quagmire tactics such as the RPI initiated: privacy is an important and contested privilege in American society today, granted to some and denied to others, but for people who have been denied voluntary, protected access to both private and public spheres of their own choosing, privacy can end up feeling a lot like exile.[9]

While Proposition 54 dealt directly with the proper role of race in American life, it was in fact part of a much larger cultural struggle relating to the tensions between the public and private sectors. Electoral and legislative activity in the earliest years of the twenty-first century have established deeply important yet seemingly inconsistent boundaries between personal and public (group) rights, from the "defense of marriage" statutes that have spread across the country to deny same-sex couples the legal protections that marriage affords to the second Bush administration's efforts to privatize Social Security. In the former instance, the public (and by extension, the government) has a right to structure the most private of relationships between consensual adults, yet in the latter case, the public and government are framed as intrusive presences in what ought to be personal decisions regarding finances, wealth, and quality of life.

In subtitling Proposition 54 the Racial Privacy Initiative, Connerly and his associates exposed and affirmed a racial etiquette that dominates contemporary American culture. As I have attempted to suggest with the title of this chapter, twenty-first-century social graces dictate that references to race always be issued *sotto voce,* so as not to cause any undue discomfort. Proposition 54 extends this logic, in effect criminalizing racial consciousness in the public sphere. Implicitly, the legislation suggests that race is exclusively a matter of private consciousness, only gaining publicly relevant materiality when and if individuals confess their awareness of one another's bodily differences. In this schema, race is the unruly chin hair on the face of an otherwise unblemished America: only bad manners would compel anyone to bring it up, and the politest among us will instead do others the favor of not mentioning a thing that can only cause embarrassment, discomfort, or shame. Anticipating these as the likely and logical outcomes of foregrounding race is a reflection of what John L. Jackson names "racial paranoia," a post–civil rights phenomenon "constituted by extremist thinking, general social distrust, the nonfalsifiable embrace of intuition, and an unflinching commitment to contradictory thinking."[10] Such

paranoia overdetermines racial identity rather than racial injustice as the core problem of American society, daring people to speak of race in a perverse game of tag: "whoever mentions race first is the racist in the room."[11]

The irony of such foolish games is their ostensibly benevolent intention. We can read them as facile responses to W. E. B. DuBois's overinvoked claim about the color line. However, DuBois wrote at a moment of unique urgency for black Americans: at the beginning of the twentieth century, decades after emancipation from slavery and the backlash against Reconstruction, blacks continued to exist just beyond the limits of the civic imaginary, to be prefigured, in DuBois's simple yet trenchant words, as "a problem" that could not or would not be solved through incorporation into the dominant society.[12] A century later, we continue to struggle with repairing racial inequality on one hand and, on the other, recognizing the celebratory, emancipatory aspects of both elective and sometimes coerced membership in racialized communities. In fact, DuBois's concerns could now be reframed to assert that the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the color-*blind:* those who wish to disavow the continued material manifestations of race in our society. For reasons both well intentioned and sinister, a significant number of Americans believe that a total ignorance of race is the obvious, and only, solution to the problems that an acute attention to race has brought our society.

And yet if I am critical of the rhetoric and enactments of color blindness, the supposed alternative, "multiculturalism," is barely more satisfying. Deeply attached to the culture and canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism was in part a response to the fact that lopsided representations of American society normalized whiteness by making other racial groups (and by extension, cultures) invisible. It affected school curricula as well as public policy, and according to David Hollinger, manifested primarily through two strains, pluralist and cosmopolitan.[13] In keeping with the second of these strains, Robin D. G. Kelley coined the term *polyculturalism* as an alternative to multiculturalism, "since the latter often implies that cultures are fixed, discrete entities that exist side by side—a kind of zoological approach to culture."[14] According to James Lee, multiculturalism is primarily a discourse of representation that has to date remained detached from materialist concerns over the inequitable distribution of resources.[15] Likewise, after famously arguing "against race" altogether, Paul Gilroy went on to introduce the notion of "conviviality" as an alternative to multiculturalism and its attendant connotations of an impossible "absence of racism or . . . triumph of tolerance."[16] Ironically, color blindness, through its efforts to dematerialize racial difference, offers itself as the structural vehicle

through which material racialized differences and discrimination will be overcome. Racialized minorities have been forced to navigate an ethical dilemma: visibility where and at what cost?

The competition between color blindness and multiculturalism as the modes through which we could come to know ourselves and others as American was not restricted to curricula or even to court cases about discrimination. Indeed, the "culture wars" moved outside of the university system to include the realm of aesthetic practice, as evidenced most famously by the NEA Four, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, John Fleck, and Karen Finley, artists who received modest funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1990 only to have it revoked because of objections to the content of their work. Although the artists eventually had their funding restored after years of litigation whose costs far exceeded the value of the original grants, the NEA subsequently enacted a "decency clause" that enabled them to censor future funding recipients in order to preserve particular understandings of both "National" and "Arts," and also did away with grants to individual artists, who could be harder to pressure into compliance than organizations relying upon NEA funding for institutional stability and longevity. Notably, most of the artists we hear referenced in relation to government funding conflicts and affiliated concerns over the decency of images produced in the name of publicly funded American art were white. In some instances, these white artists were also engaged in representing blackness, such as Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial nudes, or the Wooster Group's use of blackface in *Route 1 and 9*.[17] For the most part, though, black artists themselves were not as visibly implicated in this understanding of the battle lines drawn in the war over American culture. According to Michele Wallace, "the culture wars represent[ed] a pitched battle among hegemonic white insiders only," because "black artists rarely (actually never) occupied the hallowed berths reserved for art world stars."[18] Nevertheless, black artists and audiences were present in other spheres, especially hip-hop, whose various elements all challenged the spirit of what gets valorized as art that reflects positively upon the nation. From the freestyle lyrics of MCs to the appropriated sounds and lyrics of DJs who sampled existing audio tracks to the writers and b-boys who commandeered public space to make graffiti art or to dance, hip-hop, as Abigail DeKosnik argues, is not only raced but also pulled into questions about ownership, appropriation, and appropriate distinctions between the public and private spheres.[19] The culture wars also provide a useful lens through which to evaluate other sites of black performance, from actors in mainstream Hollywood cinema to playwrights working on and off Broadway. The rhetoric of the

culture wars seemed to be about the elite registers of high art and higher education and their trickle-down potential, but as I hope to demonstrate through my analysis of an eclectic, variously situated array of cultural representations, the politics of representation had and have urgent, often material consequences at each rung of our cultural hierarchy in its own right.

My emphasis on theatrical performance and its close relatives in film and television exists in productive continuity with this analysis of how American society grapples with its polyglot status. The term *melting pot,* a metaphor that has long idealized the peculiarly American convergence of multiple races and cultures, comes from the theater. In 1908, Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* premiered, fittingly, in the nation's capital and offered a romantic narrative of America as the site where cultural difference was transformed into strength that would change the world. The young protagonist, David Quixano, an immigrant of Russian Jewish heritage, spoke of the symphony he was composing in homage to what he saw as America's epic task:

> America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! Here you stand, good folks, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to—these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American. . . . the real American has not yet arrived. He is only in the Crucible, I tell you—he will be the fusion of all races, the coming superman.[20]

A return to Zangwill's words allows us to understand more clearly the raced and gendered assumptions built into this model of assimilation as the key to America's strength. The prototypical American is masculine, and is derived from European stock. Although the character David later expands his vision of the melting pot to include not just the various races of Europe, but also "black and yellow . . . East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross,"[21] the methods by which this amalgamation occurs are incendiary, and violently obliterate any distinct traces of what came before. Excavating Zangwill's actual language helps to clarify precisely why this metaphor has fallen out of favor with those who resist the idea of the complete death of the individual subject (and, implicitly, her past) as the

price of inclusion in America, who do not believe that totality must always eradicate the particular. Equally important to note about this patriotic text is the fact that both Zangwill the author and David his protagonist have turned to art to express these nationalist sentiments, to grapple with the question of what it means to be an American. Premiering at a time of massive immigration from Europe, *The Melting Pot* offered powerful instruction to its audiences on how to embrace American ideology performatively. This influence is characteristic of performance's affective potential. Whether through realism, which masks its recursive force with claims to passively reflecting an exterior truth, or through experimental work that actively challenges the prejudices that realism instills, performance gives order to our perceptive abilities, and affects nationalist and racialist discourses alike.

THIS IS NOT A BOOK ABOUT NONTRADITIONAL CASTING

But once upon a time, I thought it would be. This conviction was most likely forged in a woodsy glade on the Berkeley campus in the spring of 1994, where I worked one afternoon with my partner from acting class. We were rehearsing the scene from *Twelfth Night* where Rosalind, dressed as a boy, is plotting with Orlando. It was spring, it was gorgeous outside, and we were both really happy: the scene took place in the woods, and we were actually rehearsing *in the woods!* How Method! Our deep-tissued understanding of the spatial dynamics informing the characters' encounter would certainly yield one of the best scene showings of the semester. Everything was going swimmingly, but I kept getting stuck on this one line, uttered by my partner:

"And I swear, by the white hand of Rosalind . . ."

My hand is not white.

My hand is brown.

My hand, silent yet ever so present, posed an obstacle to my total disappearance into the role. I *got* Rosalind on so many levels, but because I didn't *get* at birth the same skin color that Shakespeare imagined for her, I was forever estranged from the character in ways that some of my classmates could never have understood, estranged through their very eyes as spectators who would respond to the dissonance between words and body in different ways.

How did I resolve this problem, this tension between comprehension and apprehension? When we performed the scene for the class, I made a "bit" out of it: I stood speaking to Gabe with my hands clasped behind my back, and when he uttered the fateful line, I snuck a peek at my brown hand in momentary con-

fusion, then continued to nod encouragingly. The audience laughed, and our scene was a success. I couldn't not acknowledge the material specificity of my body in that moment of performance, but I didn't quite know what to do, so I took it as my responsibility to demonstrate my awareness of my nonnormative performing body, and to diminish its significance by laughing it off. I was, as David Wiles put it, "trying to live in the 'world of the play' while performing in the world of race."[22] While this is one of the most conspicuous examples of my embodied relationship to the questions explored in this book, it is by no means the only one. As an actor and director, I have had to confront the conflicting impulses of recognition and disavowal that race in performance introduces, and as an educator, I have come to understand how deeply it continues to vex even the most recent generation of actors. A few years ago, one of my students explained her understanding of her curriculum in a nationally respected MFA program to me: "They spend the first two years making me believe that I can play anything, and then they spend the last year telling me that I can't, so I should get really good at my 'thing,' which will probably be 'the black best friend.'" Such pragmatism would prepare her to work in regional theater as well as in film and television by making her skilled at and legible within the still-racialized worlds of "mainstream" performance. This book emerged from an effort to understand my own experiences relative to nontraditional casting in the theater and to imagine alternatives, but it has evolved into a broader meditation on the integration of black performance into our conversations about the future of race in national culture. Nevertheless, an understanding of nontraditional casting—its origins and applications—remains essential to this project.

When most people think of nontraditional casting, they think of nonwhite actors in "white" roles, such as Phylicia Rashad's 2009 performance as Violet, the matriarch in *August: Osage County,* or Wendell Pierce's turn as Didi in the Classical Theatre of Harlem's 2006 and 2007 productions of *Waiting for Godot.* As the rough equivalent of affirmative action for the world of performance, nontraditional casting—crudely put—gets underrepresented minorities on-stage. In its affinity with affirmative action, it is a programmatic response to various aesthetic and institutional barriers that have kept nonwhite actors (along with women and members of other minority groups, including the disabled) from finding employment onstage, especially in mainstream theaters.[23] Harry Newman, then–executive director of the Non-Traditional Casting Project, wrote in 1989 of a "four-year study by Actors' Equity Association completed in January 1986 [that] revealed that over 90 percent of all the professional the-

atre produced in this country—from stock and dinner theatre to the avant-garde to Broadway—was staged with all-Caucasian casts."[24] This discovery motivated Equity's Ethnic Minorities Committee to codify a definition of nontraditional casting that was then "successfully negotiated . . . into several contracts and [began] to get acceptance for the notion, at least from those on the business side of the theatre" (24).[25] Newman's history of the institutionalization of nontraditional casting affirms that its efficacy is defined almost entirely in economic terms: Equity representatives curried business (rather than artistic) favor in the hopes of yielding quantitatively measurable gains for its members, as would be expected of a labor union. Quantity rather than quality of nonwhite representation took the forefront in lobbying efforts, with the tacit assumption that improving the former would improve the latter.

A month after the publication of this 1986 report, Actor's Equity Association helped to support the founding of the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP).[26] Still in existence in the twenty-first century, the organization "works to promote inclusive hiring practices and standards, diversity in leadership and balanced portrayals of persons of color and persons with disabilities."[27] The NTCP moves beyond the quantitative imperatives of AEA and explicitly works for qualitative change in the representation of minorities, "consider[ing] diversity a comprehensive issue which extends to the participation of those who make up the artistic team—actors, directors, designers, writers, stunt performers, choreographers—as well as the production team and administrative staff, board of directors and the audience."[28] In this way, the NTCP recognizes American theater as a microculture reflective of larger social practices that produce and sustain racial hierarchies. The organization's polyvalent mission reflects its awareness that true cultural diversity cannot be localized: artistic choices must be complemented by business practices, the distribution of authority, and other types of institutional reform. Their work emanates from an assumption that the politics of representation are both aesthetic and structural.

Envisioning itself as both an advocacy organization and a practical resource, the NTCP convened the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting in November 1986 in New York City. In addition to panel discussions, practical sessions featured nontraditionally cast actors in scenes from plays that could be successfully realized with actors of any race or physical ability.[29] Selected transcripts of the proceedings were published under the title *Beyond Tradition,* and the speeches and panel discussions documented in this volume make consistent appeals to practitioners and producers with rhetorical strategies rooted in both universalist/transcendent and nationalist discourses. From

Paul Robeson, Jr.'s assertion that "non-traditional casting in its best sense draws upon the enormously rich universality of the best in minority cultures"[30] to Margaret Wilkerson's claim that "the vitality that is a part of our total American culture needs to be a part of our imaginations,"[31] the discourse of the symposium was fervent and optimistic. After a year in operation, the NTCP received a special citation in 1987 from the *Village Voice*–sponsored Obie Awards, a significant recognition of the contributions the organization was making to American theater.

None of this addresses the question: what philosophy of race (in and as performance) implicitly forms the foundation of the NTCP's advocacy platform? In *Beyond Tradition,* Clinton Turner Davis and Harry Newman define nontraditional casting as "the casting of ethnic, female, or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender, or physical capability are not necessary to the characters' or play's development."[32] They further divide the practice into four subcategories:

Societal Casting: ethnic, female or disabled actors are cast in roles they perform in society as a whole.

Cross-cultural casting: the entire world of a play is translated to a different cultural setting.

Conceptual casting: an ethnic, female or disabled actor is cast in a role to give a play greater resonance.

Blind casting: all actors are cast without regard to their race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability.[33]

This delineation produces an ideologically fluid spectrum that alternately uses race to Say Something, to Reflect Truth, and at the extreme, to Say Something By Saying Nothing. Although nontraditional and color-blind casting are routinely understood as synonymous, color blindness informs only one of the four practices that NTCP codifies, while the principles of multiculturalism seem in some form to undergird the other three. Mixing what Hollinger would define as cosmopolitanism and pluralism, these other three modes invest, to varying degrees, in the salience of race even to "neutral" narratives. Societal casting seems most cosmopolitan, suggesting that racially homogeneous casts don't reflect the more eclectic patterns of interracial social mobility that we experience today. In truth, it is the one category that justifies all of the other variations on nontraditional casting because it serves a redressive function against the artificially imposed sameness of our theatrical, televisual, and filmic land-

scapes. It suggests that realism—which is the genre where most conversations about nontraditional casting reside—contains ideological biases that must be laid bare in order to be resolved. Societal casting takes a pragmatic approach to the hypervisibility of whiteness by suggesting that if we only cast our stages as we live our lives, diversity will automatically increase. Conceptual and cross-cultural casting, however, both tend toward the pluralistic, investing in the specificity of racially discrete groups, while also believing that these differences do not preclude an understanding of the racially nonspecific themes a text might address. Conceptual casting (itself a bit of a red herring, as all casting choices belie a production's conceptual orientation) is the most oxymoronic for its simultaneous reliance upon and denial of the significance of race: privileging or harmful definitions of race should not preclude certain actors' access to productions, but the overdetermined (as privileged or harmful) definitions of actors' racial categories provide the "greater resonance" of which a racially nonspecific play is capable.

Blind casting is in some ways the most ambitious of these approaches, particularly if audiences are expected to be blind to more than one social category at the same time (e.g., race and physical ability). Rather than the typical ranking of identity politics through strategic (or not) essentialism, it asks, potentially, for their wholesale erasure. Director and theorist Richard Schechner suggests that blind casting, although utopic, would be possible if we managed to cultivate

> a . . . theatre where several different kinds of responses are possible: times when perceiving the race, gender, etc. of performers matters; times when spectators perceive the categories but it doesn't matter; and times when it should not even be perceived—not because of disguise (like in *Le Cage aux Folles*) but because spectators have been trained to be race, gender, age, and body-type "blind."[34]

Schechner's admonition emphasizes the performative dimensions of both theater and race through his recognition that identity categories can be transformed, in real time, by spectators with the cultural literacy to produce alternate readings of how raced, gendered, and variously abled bodies signify onstage.

The production community has taken up the issue of nontraditional casting with a very clear sense of its nationalistic implications. Advocates and critics alike recognize the power dynamics embedded in racialized discourse. Proponents such as Alan Eisenberg, former president of AEA, celebrate

nontraditional casting as "a belief in the potential of the American theater."[35] This language offers a backhanded compliment to performance practices that could make greater interventions into the cultural landscape. Rather than allowing complacency to rob the American theater of a potential source of vitality, the thoughtful use of nontraditional casting and its attendant redistribution of artistic authority destabilize the institutional and aesthetic forces that normalize a decidedly un-American monoraciality. Offering a similar defense of nontraditional casting, British director Nicholas Hytner defended his conspicuously multiracial 1994 Broadway production of the musical *Carousel* with the claim, " 'This is so quintessentially an American show that it would have been odd to have excluded a large part of America from it. . . . What I would have had to justify is racially exclusive casting.' "[36] As I will discuss in greater detail in the sections and chapters that follow, this perspective—notable because it comes from someone who views America from the outside—recognizes the historical dimensions of racialized representation. Monoracial casting in "neutral" plays, or, as playwright Charles Mee describes it, "the bizarre, artificial world of all intact white people, a world that no longer exists where I live,"[37] often imposes an anachronistic tableau upon American theater. More specifically, it reifies the fiction of American theater as monoracial, when in fact it has always been deeply invested in presenting (and sometimes misrepresenting) racial difference in order to ponder and contain it, whether through explicit representations of racial others (e.g., mixed-race figures who embody the crises of racial categorization and citizenship) or through sublimated meditations on difference (such as Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape,* which reflected both anxieties over the fraught racial categorization of the Irish and antipathies toward people of African descent). What Mee and Hytner are actually gesturing toward, implicitly, is the power dynamic that expects people who are seen as nonnormative to accept a continued ancillary self-representational status within the institutions that self-identity as leading sites for the production and preservation of America's theatrical culture.

From the opposite perspective, theater critic John Simon is an especially notorious opponent of nontraditional casting. In addition to disparaging Hytner's *Carousel* for racial casting that " 'militates against the meaning of the work,' "[38] one of Simon's most antagonistic relationships was with Joseph Papp, producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival. In the 1960s, when Papp began staging Shakespeare's plays with multiracial casts, Simon took great umbrage at Papp's sullying of the Bard's verse:

> Out of laudable integrationist zeal, Mr. Papp has seen fit to populate his
> Shakespeare with a high percentage of Negro performers. But the sad fact is
> that, through no fault of their own, Negro actors often lack even the rudi-
> ments of Standard American speech. . . . It is not only aurally that Negro actors
> present a problem; they do not look right in parts that historically demand
> white performers.[39]

Simon's aversion to the bodies and voices of black actors laying claim to one of
the icons of Western high culture is juxtaposed against Papp's determination to
create an experience of Shakespeare that made his language accessible and rel-
evant within a specifically American context. Like Hytner's production would
some thirty years later, Papp's work privileged the resolute temporality of per-
formance, emphasizing the political realities and frames of reference of the
spectators who would see the show in the 1960s (or 1990s, in Hytner's case),
rather than asking those audiences to employ habits of mind that were decades,
centuries, or continents away.

Recent academic discourse has taken the issue of nontraditional casting
and opened it to even greater scrutiny, hoping to explain the mechanisms
through which it produces (and denies) racial meaning. Josephine Lee offers a
critique of the paradoxical politics of liberalism that often motivate the imple-
mentation of nontraditional casting. In "Racial Actors, Liberal Myths," she sug-
gests that nontraditional casting is an extension of the politics of liberal inte-
grationism, which seek at once to acknowledge and efface difference, reifying
the desirability of the ideological institution into which the raced body is
meant to be assimilated.

> Rather than effectively ending the stereotyping of "colored" bodies, the liberal
> impulse of cross-racial casting, particularly in its color-blind incarnation,
> wound up complicating the issue of racial visibility. It did so first by de-politi-
> cizing the racialized body, imagining race as a superficial quality that had to be
> transcended in order to ascertain the true merits of the actor. Bodies of color
> that could or would be so easily de-racinated would in fact be at a loss. This
> paradox of seeing and not seeing race . . . in a sense allows this liberal thought
> to co-exist with the very racism that it had tried to eradicate.[40]

Lee historicizes the practice of nontraditional casting in order to shed light es-
pecially upon the often tacit traditions that it tries to subvert. As a theatrical

manifestation of post–civil rights activism, cross-racial casting relies upon the assumption that structural inequality is a thing of the past: enduring cultural and racial differences are reduced to surface distractions that a discourse of color blindness (often connected with notions of transcendence) can remedy. For Lee, the politics of visibility embedded especially in notions of color-blind casting sustain the undesirable meanings of race, and offer hope that actors can leave behind its facade in order to express their true, interior selves. Demonstrating the intersection of theatrical and social discourses of race in performance, Lee connects this notion of color-blind casting to everyday social practices in which nonwhite individuals are turned into "racial actors," the limits of whose agency to act as individuals are experienced when they fail to conform to others' racialized expectations of them.

In a similar vein, Angela Pao discusses the extent to which "national identity is at the very heart of the debates over non-traditional casting."[41] Focusing on the politics surrounding Asian American theater companies' productions of classic (white) dramatic texts, Pao demonstrates that the anxieties about American national identity relate to the physical vulnerability of the nationalist paradigm through the embodiment of culture. All–Asian American casts that perform classics of the American canon performatively produce their equal access to narratives valorized as emblematic of American (theatrical) culture. When they do so in a color-blind way, rather than according to conceptual or cross-cultural conceits, they fail to respect the silent conflation of whiteness with Americanness.

Pao cites productions of plays by Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller as proof of this claim: when Asian American actors assumed that their performing bodies were as neutrally available to the texts as white actors', they disappointed critics wedded to the racialized logic of American society (or at least, of the American theatrical canon). However, when Arthur Miller himself directed *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing with an all-Chinese cast, the production served as a successful instance of cultural exchange (if not imperialism) because the Chinese actors' performance in Miller's play at once instantiated the Chinese artists' recognition of an American cultural icon and an acceptance of their literal and figurative distance from it. According to Pao, the transfer of *Salesman* to Beijing served as "a sign of the significance and quality of [the] play, a confirmation of [the] work's high standing in the canon of American theatre . . . a critical step in elevating [the] work from the standing of being just an American classic to a classic of world drama as well."[42] In an American context, quite the opposite occurs: color-blind or cross-cultural productions "ultimately

upset the logic and ideology of coherent and homogeneous national identities and cultures."[43]

However, while challenging the purportedly monoracial foundations of American cultural identity, such casting choices rarely effect a total disruption of these foundations. Pao pays attention not only to casting choices but also to their mediation through general audience reception and more specifically, theater critics' responses, whose documentation can not only influence audiences but, as part of the archive, attempt to fix performances within a racial consciousness against which the performers may be working. In citing one reviewer's disappointment at a cross-racially cast production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* that failed to include any overtly "Asian" cultural references, Pao notes that nontraditional casting can produce contests of interpretation that reproduce, rather than reject, the stereotypical demands placed upon nonwhite performing bodies.[44]

Nontraditional casting practices not only provide opportunities to challenge how we understand the nation as implicitly raced, they also risk acquiescing to a hierarchy of valuation, suggesting that their only function is to improve people of color. White theaters and white texts are affirmed as the pinnacle of artistic opportunity in practices that assume that escaping nonwhiteness is the true task of color-blind social progress. William H. Sun's essay "Power and Problems of Performance across Ethnic Lines" describes the simultaneously political, aesthetic, and educational dimensions of nontraditional casting. In addition to insisting upon an awareness of the various social and cultural spaces within which the consequences of nontraditional casting can be felt, Sun criticizes the disconnect between the universalist discourse that legitimizes nontraditional casting and the decidedly nonuniversal ways in which it is implemented. He asks, "Why do I hear so little about performance across ethnic lines *in both directions*?" but answers his own question by noting that white performers crossing the color line "might bring back the painful memories of blackface minstrelsy" and other racist representational practices.[45] White performers telling nonwhite stories is anything but nontraditional, and in fact constitutes a significant part of the tradition against which actors of color are working. Nevertheless, Sun proposes that there may be contexts in which the educational imperatives of cross-racial casting warrant the risky proximity to an ignoble, performed past. Not only can audiences benefit from seeing that the social constructionist turn cuts both ways, performers themselves might learn from the temporary occupation of different patterns of language, movement, and relationships to history.

black performance: transgression or transcendence?

Nontraditional casting as such is the most obvious frame of reference for fully appreciating this argument for the relationship between racial representation and racial reality. Attendant to this is the performativity of race, which demonstrates the shortcomings of color blindness's emphasis on transcending racial discourse, while creating a space for thinking through the possibilities of racial transgression as a productive alternative. I align myself with the discourse of race that argues for its antiessential nature without discounting what Harry Elam refers to as its "situational significance."[46] Similarly, cultural theorist Stuart Hall has said that race is "like a language," a sign system whose significance exists within, but not before, the act of social exchange.[47] Race may have no absolute position within biological discourse, but the influence of this "profound ordering of difference instantiated at the sight of the body"[48] structures social situations to the benefit and detriment of various types of bodies according to their valuation within the hierarchy of racial classification. Race, therefore, gains its currency from discourses that enact the reality they describe, meeting the most elemental standards of performativity. Shannon Jackson goes even further in the theorization of racial performativity to argue that racism, rather than race, "is the ultimate performative,"[49] because of its inherently structural and institutional dimensions, which allow us to distinguish between conscious, voluntary notions of race as performed identity and racism as a broader social system that recruits individuals wittingly and unwittingly to fortify the institutions that create distinctions in privilege.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant articulate the idea of racial formation as "a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized."[50] Rather than postulating race as either entirely real (biological) or entirely illusory (social construct), they propose a definition of race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of bodies,"[51] one that recognizes bodies as the cultural sites upon which ideas are routinely mapped. This intersectional framework is especially valuable when trying to understand nonconforming (perhaps a better word than *nontraditional*) racial casting and performances: sometimes the body doesn't do what it says it's doing, and sometimes this failed correspondence is produced not solely by the performer but partially by the spectator whose interpretive competencies challenge the performing body's efforts to speak for itself—the history of social conflicts and in-

terests of which the spectator is aware, and therefore uses to comprehend an ac-
tor's performance, might grate against the narrative circumstances the actor
tries to inhabit.

These understandings of race are of course very closely related to Judith
Butler's theorization of gender as a "repeated stylization of the body, a set of re-
peated acts, within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to
produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[52] Performance
offers the opportunity for both gendered and racial subversion by allowing so-
cial and theatrical actors the opportunity to "restyle" the body and attempt to
gain momentum that will cause repetitions of this restylization to spread from
their local bodies to broader cultural sites. To borrow from Ann Pellegrini,
"'We' (the collective and collaborative 'we' of writer and reader, performer and
audience) can only catch ourselves in the act of becoming [racial] subject[s]
when we see ourselves as if through the other's 'I.'"[53] I would argue by extension
that we can only catch ourselves in the act of imposing racial objecthood upon
others when we feel deeply invested in our own racial "I." Understanding race
in this way privileges its external dimensions, rather than its private ones, by
emphasizing racial categorization of the self and other as the enunciation of a
social contract of sorts, an invitation to or provocation of a host of behaviors
and expectations that grant one access to society as a member of a privileged or
problematized group. Race is best understood as a complex synthesis of invol-
untary and voluntary attributes and affiliations whose significance is perfor-
mative, produced through our fidelity to them rather than as anterior, interior
fact. Furthermore, this fidelity is structured around the allocation of privilege.
In the theater and in everyday life, knowing how and agreeing to perform your
racial role correctly is often a guarantor of personal safety, financial reward, in-
terpersonal respect, and even affection, reflecting E. Patrick Johnson's claim
that "the pursuit of authenticity is inevitably an emotional and moral one."[54]

It is for this reason that racial categories are so energetically kept "within a
highly rigid regulatory frame" in some quarters of society: concepts of race ab-
solutely do not take care of themselves. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedg-
wick discuss "the torsion, the mutual perversion, as one might say, of reference
and performativity"[55] in order to cast doubt upon the functionality of racial
meaning as a referential endeavor. The oscillating practices through which the
referent grants felicity to the performative and vice versa deny the ontological
stability of referential priority. That to which performatives refer is altered in
the very act of referencing: "originals" accrue significance in the act of invoking
them as worthy reference points, and this accrued significance shapes the ways

in which the performance gains sanction as achieving its intended function. Within the discourse of racialized performance, Parker and Sedgwick's exposition of the fragility of ontology reminds us that the discourse of racialized realism is constantly corrupted and corruptible.

So, for example, in the latter half of the mid-nineteenth century, one way of performing blackness may have involved blackface burlesque that articulated a nostalgia for antebellum southern life, but in the twenty-first century, new protocols have emerged. The historical instability of the referent "blackness" to which performative practices must conform demands that new cultural spaces be recruited in the dissemination of racial categories, and blackness as a referent has been dissected and distributed in new ways. Both blackness and performative efficacy have adapted to the cultural circumstances of the new millennium. Harry Elam argues for the dynamic nature of this process when he suggests that "the [black] performer repeats, reinscribes, *or even reconfigures* established gestures, behaviors, linguistic patterns, cultural attitudes, and social expectations associated with blackness."[56] Performance becomes a site of change, and blackness becomes a category open for (re)negotiation. These characteristic components of performance and performativity are ones that nonconforming casting and performance practices seek to harness for a concerted transformation of racial signification processes in American culture.

I conclude this section with a terminological clarification of the terms *transcendence* and *transgression.* In including the phrase *Racial Transgression* in the subtitle of this project it was not my intention to take on a larger debate regarding the term *transgression*'s analytical utility. From the vantage point of art criticism, for example, Hal Foster has suggested that stable boundaries no longer exist, and, therefore, neither can transgression: there are no representational limits left to cross. Both in terms of space, specifically the shifting relationship between interior and exterior social environments (or public and private spheres), and in the figurative sense of stability's supplantation by relationality, postmodernity makes it difficult to locate transgression as a cultural practice.[57] However, where race is concerned, these lines remain clear: as Michael Brown and his coauthors suggest in *Whitewashing Race,* material lines continue to racially demarcate desirable neighborhoods, circumscribe underperforming and underfunded school districts, and regulate entire categories of labor, making transgression not only possible, but urgently necessary.[58] Cultural and aesthetic practices that push at these very finite demarcations of the acceptable and the unacceptable, the just and the unjust, enable us to imagine

and then create alternatives for people whose concerns would otherwise be dismissed through the silencing tyranny of color blindness.

Michel Foucault, building upon the work of Georges Bataille, defines transgression as "profanation in a world which no longer realizes any positive meaning in the sacred . . . prescrib[ing] not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence."[59] While Foucault was making interventions into different critical terrain, my investment in racial transgression bears some relation to this model. If we think of race as the sacred truth that simultaneously structures social relations in the United States and that we also try to banish from our consciousness (so as not to contend with the ways that it still informs the allocation of privilege), then racial transgression "recompos[es the] empty form, [the] absence," that allows racial privilege to go unmarked. It exposes the limits placed upon racial discourse in order to violate them and force the possibility of progressive action.[60]

Ultimately, though, I find transgression a useful concept primarily because I place it in etymological as well as political opposition to transcendence, a term that is overinvoked in postethnic, postracial, color-blind, and multicultural discourse. Very often, transcendence of racial issues is framed as both the tactic and the goal of contemporary racial politics. This is an objectionable strategy because, fundamentally, asking (usually nonwhite) people to transcend racial consciousness is usually just a more polite way of demanding that they "get over it." The Oxford English Dictionary notes that while the term *transcend* was once invoked relative to "a physical obstacle or limit," that usage is obsolete, in favor of "a non-physical limit . . . something immaterial."[61] Etymologically, it also implies an improvement over some prior state of being, with "to rise above, surpass, excel, [and] exceed" becoming synonyms within one definition. In spatial, physical, and evaluative terms, racial transcendence exacts disavowal of our racially mediated reality as the price of progress toward resolving American society's racial conflicts. It comes as no surprise that color blindness is the tool through which these admonitions are consistently offered.

On the other hand, transgression remains, for me, more rooted in the material. While it shares the sense of violating boundaries that may or may not be material (the OED includes "To go or pass beyond (any limit or bounds)" as one of its definitions), the moral judgment attached to transgression is more resolutely negative and more resolutely social: to transgress is to "violate," to "offend," to "disobey," even to "sin."[62] The "object" of injury always haunts the

designation of transgressive action, suggesting that transgressive action contains the potential to injure entrenched patterns of racial discourse. In other words, the judgments demanded of a particular discursive system (in this case, race) are read through that system, not over and beyond it. Furthermore, racial transgression and racial transcendence invoke competing valuations of race: if moving beyond the immaterial boundaries of race is to excel, racial boundaries must be flimsy and inconsequential, while racial transgressions are deemed offensive precisely because of the deep investment we have in these boundaries. Therefore, an emphasis on representations that engage in what I consider racial transgression enables us to interrogate what counts as "offensive," requiring an engagement with the norms that are habitually upheld by producers, actors, and audiences alike. Whether trying to understand how black actors performing the works of Shakespeare could violate social norms about race, space, and art or how performance rewrites the African American past to undo gaps in the narrative of black subjectivity, engaging with race as a dynamic sociohistorical formation rather than simply as an irrelevant framework waiting to be overcome can be the difference between finding hope or despair in the social and political potential of cultural practice.

Finally, a deeper turn toward the vernacular might explain the urgency of a move away from transcendence as the framework for racial healing. I have already suggested that to transcend is merely a euphemistic injunction that labels the one needing to transcend as overly sensitive or irrational, but there is another reading of "getting over" that perhaps explains even more precisely the problems of transcendent approaches to race: in colloquial speech, to *get over on* is to perpetrate a hustle, to scheme for unearned rewards. If racial transcendence not only asks people of color to get over the injuries they already have and continue to experience but also provides an opportunity for those privileged within the racial status quo to get over on, to illegitimately triumph over, efforts to restructure racial interaction, then it is even more sinister a platform than we have previously realized. Transgression exposes the moral limitations of transcendence as a viable strategy for social change by acknowledging the histories of social location that people wear on their bodies and that inform all of our interpretive frameworks.

In practice, I advocate for racial transgression as an alternative to transcendent, color-blind politics and performance practices largely through a principle of subtraction. As attentive to the failures of color blindness-as-transcendence in theatrical and cultural performance as to successful instances of racial trans-

gression, this project approaches color blindness and transgression as strategies that operate on a variety of levels. My examination of race, color blindness, pluralism, performativity, and performance relies upon an eclectic assortment of objects, all of which conspire to demonstrate that absolute color blindness does not exist in American society, and that performance practices prove the divide between the rhetoric and the realities of race in our culture today. Each chapter takes the case study approach, attempting to understand the possibilities for and necessity of a transgressive approach to black performance by attending variously to institutional politics and their influence over the types of performances that get normalized as "mainstream American theater;" race-conscious strategies of mass-market appeal and their indebtedness to heteronormative paradigms; the ways that our gendered and raced historical inheritance attempts to dictate performance possibilities in the present; and the dangers of a too-hasty embrace of the postracial. I turn in chapter 2 to the Theatre Communications Group–sponsored fracas between August Wilson and Robert Brustein (et al.) to think about the institutional pressures influencing black performance in America. I question the material consequences of color-blind casting in American theater, asking if the end of race that color blindness claims to offer is really just the threatened end of nonwhiteness, achieved through an erosion of financial support and expressive autonomy for black theater. Rejecting Robert Brustein's strategically innocent devotion to color blindness as the only alternative to a balkanized America as well as August Wilson's uncompromising overdetermination of the differences between black and white culture that color blindness destroys, I attend to the emotional and political nodes of their immediate dispute as well as to the larger dynamics at play in the country when the dispute took place, arguing that cultural institutions are key sites through which, inadvertently or not, race continues to receive material support belying the simple discursive tricks that color-blind politics attempt to enforce.

Leaving behind the realm of institutional politics and their effect upon (and intimate relationship to) aesthetics, chapters 3 and 4 then function as complementary, gendered examinations of, on one hand, the limits of racial transcendence, and on the other, practical strategies for engaging in transgressive representational work. Chapter 3 moves firmly into the arena of popular culture, using a pair of films starring black actor Denzel Washington to identify (interracial) heterosexuality as the social practice that most limits our ability to employ notions of color blindness in performance. While only one of the two films casts Washington "nontraditionally" in a role intended as a white man, Washington's status as a black actor who has allegedly transcended the limita-

tions of race in Hollywood lends him a cultural color-blindness that makes a reading of the ends to which his sexual subjectivity is put to use—particularly opposite a white woman—instructive. If, as Steven Shaviro suggests, in addition to pleasure, film viewing offers "a rising scale of seduction, delirium, fascination, and utter absorption in the image" that is distinctly powerful compared to other forms of representation, what can we learn from the seductions of seeing Denzel Washington in a sometimes sublimated romantic encounter with a white woman?[63] What do these moments of transcendent celebrity teach us, in spite of themselves, about black masculinity?

Chapter 4 engages with a positive example of racially transgressive performance's unabashed engagement with the past. Originally inspired by my desire to conceive of nontraditional casting as both an embodied and a textual practice, I focus on the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, particularly her play *Venus,* and examine the relationship between Parks's constructed Saartjie Baartman / Venus Hottentot and the "actual" historical figure, to interrogate the various discursive constructions of Baartman through time: as criminal, as freak show oddity, as scientific specimen, as fodder for art, as subject of plays and poetry. Additionally, this chapter looks at the competing and complementary processes of visual and textual apprehension of subjects. Asserting that a reconceptualization of blackness in performance can occur not only through the integration of black performing bodies into "white" texts to expand their capacity to reflect a "universal" experience, I advocate Parks's deployment of an "oppositional gaze" that allows for critical interpretation of cultural representations and different mechanisms for employing the black female body in performance.

Chapter 5 moves from the 1990s to a moment at the beginning of the twenty-first century, working to locate the ubiquity of the term *postblack* in relation to other theories of postraciality, the latest critical term to attempt to complete the work of social reconciliation that color blindness and multiculturalism each failed to achieve. Beginning with an analysis of some of the artwork included in the Studio Museum in Harlem's 2001 exhibition "Freestyle," whose catalog ushered the term *postblack* into the lexicon, I work to distinguish postblackness from postraciality, in order to link it more productively and accurately with strategies of transgression that represent blackness in a complex negotiation with the past rather than in disavowal of it. I then move on to look at rapper, actor, and producer Ice Cube, whose transformations in the public sphere have much to teach us about how blackness functions in a postmodern, heavily mediated era in which blackness is being constantly redefined to keep pace with the demands of the marketplace. Beginning with his journey from

gangsta rapper to family movie star, I look at the ways he is able to insist upon yet not seem commercially constrained by his blackness, before moving on to discuss the controversial reality series *Black. White.,* of which he served as an executive producer. *Black. White.,* I argue, exposes the limits of what nonconforming racial performances in mass culture can teach us about blackness and the extent to which they can participate productively in its redefinition on a wide scale. Ultimately, by directing my attention to high culture and low, to print, to stage and screen, to art galleries, to everyday life without a conspicuously aestheticized frame, I aspire to understand how the black performing body can exist in a space that is critically engaged with history and also willing to be disloyal to its inaccuracies.

A NOTE ON BLACK PERFORMANCE IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

January 20, 2009, was the first day of instruction in the spring semester at UC Berkeley. It was also the day that Barack Obama was sworn in as president of the United States of America. The campus hosted a broadcast of the inauguration on a Jumbotron on Sproul Plaza, and while I did not make it to campus in time to watch the ceremony with the masses who gathered there, I was able to walk to my first class in the wake of the collective energy and enthusiasm that hung in the air after its conclusion. I was off to teach a course that both satisfies a requirement within my department's major in theater, dance, and performance studies and also fulfills a university-level American Cultures requirement. As described on the website for the American Cultures Center,

> The American Cultures (AC) curriculum has been recognized as a national model for its integrative and comparative analyses of race, culture and ethnicity in the United States. AC courses represent an unprecedented departure from existing approaches to teaching about diversity in the United States. Instead of focusing on one or two ethnic groups, AC courses explore the complexity of ethnicity, culture, and pluralism, and their influences on the ways that Americans think about themselves and approach the issues and problems that confront our society.[64]

After quickly moving through "first day of class" business, I began a conversation with the students about theater's origins in ritual, ritual's role in producing and solidifying collective identity, and an acknowledgment of the events of the day. "Today's inauguration was a ritual, right? A private citizen became an

official world leader after taking an oath in front of an audience. We had the chance to view this ritual on Sproul Plaza. Why was this special?" Students ventured a variety of answers:

"Because it only happens once every four years."

"Yes," I responded, "but, having been on campus for longer than four years, I can say that I don't recall any other inauguration being broadcast here for public viewing."

"Well, this was the first election that really capitalized on youthful energy to create a grassroots movement that got a candidate elected."

OK.

"There's a lot of international excitement that a new administration will help to repair America's standing in the world community by taking us in a new direction."

Mmhmm.

Things began to peter out.

"Might it have anything to do with the fact that Barack Obama is the first black president of the United States?" I asked, after a pause.

"Well, yes."

It was clear that in several students' eyes, I had indeed violated racial etiquette, I had tainted their good feelings about the day by foregrounding the importance of race to this instantiation of national ritual. One student put this plainly, saying, "It makes me really mad when people say that this is about race, because that's not why I voted for him. I voted for him because I believe in what he stands for." For my students, even the context of having this conversation in a class that was expressly dedicated to "explor[ing] the complexity of ethnicity, culture, and pluralism, and their influences on the ways that Americans think about themselves and approach the issues and problems that confront our society" was not enough to overcome the discursive common sense that says that race is always and only to be discussed as a problem to get over. That Obama's race (or, more precisely, the fact that his race did not preclude his being elected) was one of the things being celebrated at the inauguration was a narrative that some of my students weren't prepared to discuss or to allow to structure their feelings about the day.

Such an attitude is supposed to be the birthright of this generation as citizens of a postracial order, one in which a black person's ability to appeal to and gain the trust and respect of Americans of all races can be taken for granted. Actor Dennis Haysbert believes that he helped to bring about this transformed social landscape by playing a black president on the television series *24*, offering a

character in whose fate audiences were positively invested. According to public reports, he declared, "As far as the public is concerned, it did open up their minds and their hearts a little bit to the notion that if the right man came along . . . that a black man could be president of the United States."[65] However, David Palmer was but the latest in a line of fictional black presidents: Douglas Dilman. Tom Beck. Mays Gilliam. Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho. There was even a slave ship called The Black President.[66] (And let's not forget the fact that Haysbert's character Palmer got assassinated on the series, paving the way for his brother Wayne to become the second black president.) In the realm of the representational, black presidents have functioned much as Barack Obama already has, as a diagnostic symbol of America's ultimate triumph over racial prejudice. Consumption of images of black presidents offers American audiences the opportunity to rehearse acceptance of a black person in perhaps the most improbable role available in America (or to confirm such a turn of events as a dystopic national condition). When Obama received enough electoral votes to secure victory on November 4, 2008, the superlative declarations began in full force, announcing the death of a major barrier faced by African Americans. Tom Brokaw, deeply moved as he presided over NBC's live coverage of election night, called the moment of victory "a profoundly important passage out of the deep shadows of our racist past that began with that first slave ship."[67]

Several important rhetorical and political moves are embedded in Brokaw's poetic language. First, Brokaw locates American racism as our shared historical memory, not merely that of blacks, and as a past practice that has merely a spectral rather than material bearing upon the present. Second, he assigns an originary, metonymic function to "that first slave ship" that invites an easy condensation of all forms of racism into slavery, a strategy that supports the preceding claims of a racist past (vs. post-slavery present). Furthermore, the travel imagery of slave ships and profound passages offers historical breadth to the teleology of racial progress that Brokaw wishes to honor. Transcendent to the core, it goes over and moves beyond the painful intermediate historical markers of Reconstruction, Redemption, and a twentieth century full of activism and contention that separate the inauguration of America's slave-dependent economy from the inauguration of America's first black president. Some of this complicated logic may be attributed to the demands that economy of language places upon improvised eloquence in live broadcast journalism, but Brokaw was by no means alone in marking the outcome of this election as a signal shift in race relations and in America's national character. According to the Pew Research

Center, "immediately after the November 2008 election . . . nearly half of whites (48%) and three-quarters of black voters (74%) said they expected to see race relations improve during Obama's presidency."[68]

Nevertheless, personal and political reactions to Barack Obama during his time as president have certainly laid waste to the idea that his election helped to eradicate race-consciousness in our society. From the allegations of racially licensed disrespect levied against southern Senator Joe Wilson after his outburst during Obama's 2009 health care speech to Congress to the embarrassing destruction of Shirley Sherrod's government career in the wake of disingenuous allegations of governmentally empowered anti-white racism in 2010, people on both sides of the political aisle continued to interpret their adversaries' behavior through a racialized understanding of American culture, its mores and morals.[69] However, it would be a mistake to see this racialized political discourse as a fall from some temporary postracial grace that was achieved during Obama's presidential campaign. Even the efforts to dissociate Barack Obama from predominant definitions of blackness—whether on the grounds of his mixed racial heritage or his access to elite educational and professional spheres—remained invested in the truth and pervasiveness of those other modes of black behavior (why else would he be such an exciting candidate?).[70] Race remained an issue, even in the celebrations of its absence.

The real significance of Obama's campaign, I would argue, lies in the ways that he attempted not to ignore race but to transform our understandings of it. This began with his debut as a national political figure at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, where he delivered a keynote address. In the days leading up to and immediately following this speech, Obama's press coverage eagerly anticipated his import as a harbinger of new (black) politics, black but not distractingly so. While still serving as political consultant for Obama's 2004 U.S. senatorial campaign, David Axelrod deemed Obama the American story incarnate, praising his "ability to walk into any room and connect with anybody . . . [because of] the many different cultural strands that are part of him."[71] His convention speech, "Out of Many, One," offered the same promise, through its primary emphasis on a class-based appeal to the American dream of upward mobility. Though it included subtle references to violations of civil rights in a post-9/11 culture and disagreements over international policy (especially the Iraq War), Obama largely attempted to focus on transcendent, quality-of-life goals that united Americans by going over and moving past regional, racial, religious, and ideological divides.[72]

Obama's emphasis on shared aspirations—already displayed in his own

campaign efforts in Illinois—earned him the prized national speaking engagement, and was so successful that it became necessary for him to formally declare his racial self-identification in the face of enthusiasms for his postracial possibilities. While in his convention speech he chose to focus on what Americans held (or wanted to hold) in common, he did not implicitly mean to suggest the irrelevance of the particularities of race or place. This much was clear when an interview published the day before his convention speech reported,

> Asked how he defined his own racial identity, Mr. Obama said he considered himself African-American.
>
> "The reason that I've always been comfortable with that description is not a denial of my mother's side of the family," Mr. Obama said. "Rather, it's just a belief that the term African-American is by definition a hybrid term. African-Americans are a hybrid people. We're mingled with African culture and native American culture and European culture."
>
> He added later: "If I was arrested for armed robbery and my mug shot was on the television screen, people wouldn't be debating if I was African-American or not. I'd be a black man going to jail. Now if that's true when bad things are happening, there's no reason why I shouldn't be proud of being a black man when good things are happening, too."[73]

But given our long-standing national investments in phenotype as destiny and hypodescent as law, how did Obama's racial identity, much less authenticity, ever come into question at all? One could argue that this is a reflection of the ways in which Obama confounded racialized expectations about black masculinity and its place in the public sphere. Just as Marvin McAllister has described "whiteface" as encompassing not only a stage affectation but also social practices in which black individuals assume behaviors and roles that are presumed to be the privilege of people living in white bodies, Obama's celebrated ability to relate to individuals across the race and class lines that structure most people's everyday lives represented, for some, a usurpation of white social ease that was fundamentally incompatible with current understandings of how blackness is experienced by individuals and engaged by our society at large.[74]

These concerns about his racial identity returned with vigor during U.S. Senator Obama's campaign for the presidency. Then-rival Joe Biden demonstrated this in early 2007 when he inelegantly described Obama's popularity as the result of his being "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy," implicitly denigrating all of

Obama's black political predecessors on one if not all of these criteria.[75] Such a characterization reinforced a transcendent reading of Obama's performance as a candidate for national office by devaluing black political history in order to recontextualize Obama as a figure who could get past the precedents of how black political figures once engaged with the American electorate. Yet Obama borrowed heavily from those earlier politicians, blending the oratorical style of black America's most prominent leaders (many of whom presided over pulpits at some point in their careers) with the Midwestern affability that paid homage to his matrilineal heritage as well. Beyond Obama's general campaign affect, he engaged the issue of blackness and its place in his own political and personal identity through his "More Perfect Union" speech, commonly referred to as his speech about race, which was treated as a major news event. The address was prompted by the controversy that erupted over Obama's former pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose brand of liberation theology offered sharp criticisms of certain aspects of American culture. Taken out of the context of the sermons within which they were contained, clips of Wright's especially incendiary rhetoric threatened to undermine Obama's campaign by proving, in spite of his apparent transcendence of race, his actual, deep-seated loyalties to a mode of blackness that was perceived as being hostile to white interests.

Standing at a podium with multiple American flags behind him, Obama used this speech to try to supply the missing context for Rev. Wright's pulpit critiques, and also to distance himself from them. His remarks were intended as a challenge to both black and white Americans to recognize the effort that would be required to work through our complex racial history, rather than simply to overlook it or to dwell in a static understanding of racial dynamics as insurmountably contenious. To that end, he not only borrowed the well-known language of the founding fathers as the organizing motif in his speech, he also supplied some of the history lesson that would be necessary for Americans to embark on a shared project of transformation. By asserting, "race is an issue that . . . this country cannot afford to ignore right now," Obama resisted the transcendent interpretation of his performance as a candidate and potential president.[76] Instead, he could more productively be understood as a transgressive figure, one who, to borrow Daphne Brooks's concept of afro-alienation, "rehearsed ways to render racial and [to a lesser degree] gender categories 'strange' and thus to 'disturb' cultural perceptions of identity formation."[77] Through his exhortations to engage race in unprecedented ways that were accountable to a material history (and the enduring practices) of a race consciousness that emanates from very specific patterns of social stratification,

Obama's individual behavior and the set of social relations into which he invited his audience worked to disturb the racialized practices that have long limited black personal and social possibilities. Preferring the transgressive to the transcendent interpretation of Barack Obama's success means refusing to participate in the devaluation of blackness and instead foregrounding the possibility of black performance as a transformative practice within American culture, a disposition that I hope permeates the analysis that follows.