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Universalism On The American Stage: Colorblindness As Cultural Imperialism

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Universalism On The American Stage: Colorblindness As Cultural Imperialism

American Culture 302/303: Senior Project

Evan Glenn

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Introduction

Earlier this Fall, I found myself in a discussion regarding colorblind casting with a fellow Vassar student and a working professional director. The director was staunchly in support of the idea that any actor, no matter what the actor's race may be, can play any part. In the midst of the discussion, I mentioned I was reading some texts that disagreed with that notion. I cited August Wilson and his staunch belief that colorblind casting was a form of "cultural imperialism". I summarized a portion of Wilson's speech that he delivered to the Theatre Communications Group National Conference,

To mount an all-black production of a *Death of a Salesman* or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our humanity our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the culture ground on which we stand as black Americans. It is an assault on our presence, our difficult but honorable history in America; it is an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large. (Wilson)

I remember explaining Wilson's desire for a canon of texts specific to African Americans that would describe and investigate in detail the African American experience. Admittedly not as articulate as Wilson himself, I did my best at explaining his point, and, as I recall, stating that I thought his idea compelling.

I immediately felt tension between this director and myself. The conversation, sparked by a chance meeting, ended abruptly and awkwardly, and I left to return to my house. Later that same day, I chanced upon the same student who had witnessed this tiny argument. I asked her if she noticed any tension

between the director and myself. The student that she did in fact notice that the director was getting very worked up. She then proceeded to tell me that after I had left, the director turned to her and with little amusement said, "So, Evan doesn't want black people performing in the theater?"

This little story leads me to believe that a declaration of my motivations are in order. The purpose of this paper is not to argue against the inclusion of racial minorities on the stage. I fully support and endorse the struggle of racial minorities to gain greater rights as actors and as artists. The purpose of this paper is to try and understand the history of racial integration and how racial integration is being achieved today. It is an investigation into the kinds of casting practices that have been set in place, and an analysis of the effectiveness of such practices. This paper is by no means advocating for racial segregation in the theater. It attempts to analyze and critic some of the existing practices that have been set in place, and to theorize some possible alternative solutions. The motivation for writing on this topic is simply to understand this complicated and important practice.

This director's response also clearly demonstrated to me that the continuation of the dialogue is still necessary and relevant. If people are unwilling to discuss changes to such practices, there is no possibility for them to be changed, or critiqued. Continuing to revisit and reexamine the casting process is vital if we wish to change the *satus quo*. As Ayanna Thompson, one of the foremost theorists of colorblind casting practices points out, "questions don't go away, they go unasked" (Thompson 95).

This paper is divided into three parts. Part I describes the problematic history of colorblind casting in the theater. It outlines the various ways in which the ideology of post-racialism, which sprang to popularity at the end of the civil rights movement, attributed to the subjugation of minority identities through casting practices. What was begun as a practice to increase minority inclusion ended up promoting a system in which white was considered the neutral race.

Part II of this paper is an analysis of two interviews that focus upon casting practices today. The interviewees, Carey Perloff and Chris Edwards, are both artistic directors at regional theaters in America. Their viewpoints reveal a continuation of the racial neutrality imposed by post-racial politics and its effects on colorblind casting.

Finally, Part III theorizes a way in which to end this notion of white neutrality. To do so, it proposes to reconstitute the terms used to discuss race in relation to colorblind casting. It argues that a 'colorblind' vocabulary works to locate race as a purely phenotypic difference, when in fact blackness refers to an entirely separate culture. Focusing issues of race around the *performance* of race, rather than the color of race, will serve to acknowledge the cultural specificity of race that the ideology of white universalism has worked to disregard.

The intention of this paper is two-fold: to unearth the inherent racial inequalities within casting practices today and to propose that, in order to improve upon these inequalities a drastic change in casting ideology must occur.

Part I: A History Of Colorblindness

“People of all colors should be allowed to act in any role that they want; it’s 2012, get with it”. This is a common sentiment in regards to colorblind casting, and it is, for the most part, a liberal and good-intentioned one. The logic of the statement is simple; we as a nation have decided it is immoral to discriminate by race, and, therefore, theater should be no exception to the rule. As innocent as this logic may seem, however, it reveals a grave misunderstanding of the way in which the rhetoric of “colorblindness” has been used and co-opted as a tool of racial repression. The theater has a history of controlling, subjugating, and disempowering both the race and culture of African Americans via willful blindness to the difference and inequality that exists between the black minority and the white hegemony.

The roots of what we have come to understand as colorblindness begins with benign intentions. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous ‘March On Washington’ speech was largely an indictment against the United States government for maintaining racial inequality. However, it was narrowly construed by the mainstream public as an optimistic promotion for a kind of post-racial ideology. King spoke of “the unspeakable horrors of police brutality” (King), ghettoization, job discrimination, and the failure of the United States government to break the “manacles of segregation” (King). However, it is the now legendary line, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be

judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King), that has become so emblematic of his speech and has imbedded itself in our social consciousness, eclipsing King’s demands for political change. While King’s speech was certainly optimistic in nature, its reduction to *only* an optimistic sentiment is indicative of a predilection of the American mainstream to focus on post-racialism ideology, rather than to focus on the systemic forms of racism King was calling to our attention. Specifically, colorblind ideology creates a lack in “of any connection between notions of racial disparity and structurally inequality rooted in political economy” (Brater).

In stating that all people are equal, colorblindness overrides any notions of systemic racism. This lack of attention paid to systemic racism by the American mainstream, whether stemming from willful disregard or sheer misunderstanding, helped to lay the groundwork for colorblindness as representative of the end of racism in America. Thus, systemic problems were able to fester and grow as society was allowed to turn a blind eye to the actual problems.

Thus, these racial structures, both physical and psychological, became invisible due to the guise of colorblindness. However, this did not stop white America from noticing various inconsistencies with colorblindness—if race was no longer a sign of cultural significance, what accounted for such discrepancies, as high crime rates, high rates of incarceration, and lack of education? This paradox in the new colorblind logic led to a reality in which white America “didn’t understand” why African Americans were poor, uneducated, and incarcerated. Unable to use biology

as an answer to this difference, they were forced to look elsewhere for their answers. There is a way in which a system based on colorblindness

...invites observers to imagine that those who are trapped in the system were free to avoid second-class status or permanent banishment from society simply by choosing not to commit crimes. It is far more convenient to imagine that a majority of young African American men in urban areas freely chose a life of crime than to accept the real possibility that their lives were structured in a way that virtually guaranteed their early admission into a system from which they can never escape (Alexander 184).

This supposed freedom and ability to choose is still widely prevalent by the privileged classes even today, who still are unaware of the systems of oppression in operation. However, this idea of choice still generated confusion—Why would black people choose to be criminals? Because it is no longer acceptable in public discourse to blame racial difference for the cause of these clear social differences, people turned to a more acceptable, sociological approach in order to solve this confusion.

Unfortunately, an answer was waiting in the form of 'The Negro Family: The Case For National Action', or what has become known as the Moynihan Report. Written in 1965 (only two years after King's 'March On Washington') by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, it paved the way for a new kind of racism, one based on culture rather than on biology. The new ideology of colorblindness provides a safe space for nonracial distinctions to be made between blacks and whites. Moynihan considers himself to be a man who does not believe in biological distinctions between blacks and whites. He writes,

The Negro American revolution holds forth the prospect that the American Republic, which at birth was flawed by the institution of Negro slavery, and which throughout its history has been marred by the unequal treatment of Negro citizens, will at last redeem the full promise of the Declaration of Independence (Moynihan 1)

By referring to the Declaration of Independence, he is of course, referring to the sentiment of 'all men are created equal'; that Americans should be colorblind in the eyes of the government. He also clearly identifies himself as a supporter of the civil rights movement—what he refers to as the 'Negro American Revolution'. He even explicitly states that "there is absolutely no question of genetic differential" (Moynihan 34). And so, Moynihan has the ability to, without fear of being labeled a racist, make claims pathologizing the black family structure as the root of black misfortune.

The Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (Moynihan 75).

It should also be noted that Moynihan refers to this 'matriarchal structure' as 'pathological' (Moynihan 75). Through this sociological study, Moynihan is able to create, define, and locate racial differences without speaking of genetics. He has merely substituted in African American family structure for the outmoded biological argument for such differences. Crime, poverty, and lack of education among black communities is still a problem caused by the black community. There is absolutely no attention given to the fact that American society had structured African Americans lives 'in a way that virtually guaranteed their early admission into a system from which they can never escape'. Not seeing genetic difference merely allows for a space in which one can make ignore systemic racism and make racial claims without fear of being regarded as a racist, *by not using language that explicitly refers to race*. Moynihan's work represents a successful way in which to maintain

racial difference in the era of colorblindness. And, while Moynihan's intentions may have been benevolent, this ability to talk about race without explicitly using a vocabulary that mentions it became a powerful tool of politicians to continue to racialize and pathologize black people.

Michelle Alexander, in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, cites Ronald Reagan's rhetoric during the 1980's as a prime example of how this took place. The book focuses on the ways in which mass black incarceration works to maintain blacks as a subjugated people following in the same footsteps as post civil war Jim Crow laws in the south. She cites the 'era of colorblindness' to blame for the lack of attention given to what she sees as an incredibly visible and obvious phenomenon. She argues that official colorblindness creates a space in which "most Americans know and don't know the truth about mass incarceration" (Alexander 182). This paradox is created "because mass incarceration is officially colorblind, it seems inconceivable that the system could function much like a racial caste system" (Alexander 183). Most Americans are most likely to blame high black "crime rates, black culture, or bad schools" (Alexander 183), for mass black incarceration, but not race. Because, "it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt" (Alexander 2), Americans, find it extremely difficult to believe that the government would be targeting blacks based on race. thus, 'colorblindness' has become a loophole, a clever rhetorical device, that ushers in a more invisible, more illusive form of racial bigotry that enables what Alexander refers to as "The New Jim Crow" (Alexander). Alexander points to Barak Obama's Father's day speech as representative of how out of touch Americans are

with the system of racial profiling that is our incarceration system. Obama urged black men to be better fathers while not acknowledging “the majority of young black men in many large urban areas are currently under the control of the criminal justice system”. (Alexander 180). Obama’s ability to disregard the epidemic of racial profiling in our jail system without any serious reproach is indicative of the way in which Americans disregard systemic problems, and blame the black community itself for its missing fathers.

In this text, Alexander describes how it was during the Reagan years that ‘colorblindness’ rhetoric began to be used to enforce racially targeting policies. Because explicit racism was not considered a viable option anymore, Reagan used conciliatory language such as ‘criminals’, and ‘ghettos’ as proxy words for ‘violent black men’ and ‘violent black spaces’. Alexander describes the way in which Reagan was able to exploit “racial hostility...for political gain without making explicit reference to race”(Alexander 48). One example she sights is as follows,

...when Reagan kicked off his presidential campaign at the annual Neshoba County Fair near Philadelphia, Mississippi—the town where three civil rights activists were murdered in 1964—he assured the crowd ‘I believe in states’ rights,’ and promised to restore to states and local governments the power that properly belonged to them. His critics promptly alleged that he was signaling a racial message to his audience, suggesting allegiance with those who resisted desegregation, but Reagan firmly denied it (Alexander 48).

What allows Reagan to succeed is his successful navigation of the colorblind landscape, which makes racist remarks such as the one above ‘impossible to prove in the absence of explicitly racist language”(Alexander 48).

Another example was Reagan’s ability to take issues of racial inequality and resituate them in terms of a more acceptable nature, perhaps situate the issue as a

'economic issue' or a 'class', or 'social issue'. For example, Reagan's often-repeated damnation of the 'welfare queen' became a not so subtle code for "lazy, greedy, black ghetto mother" (Alexander 49). Again, Reagan was able to propose policies that further weakened the black community without mentioning race explicitly.

In 1986, at the height of Reagan's 'War On Drugs' campaign, the 'First National Symposium on Non-traditional Casting' was held; it was the first forum of that sought to institutionalize the practice of colorblind casting in the theater. As opposed to traditional casting practices (i.e. casting practices that favored only able-bodied white men and women), non-traditional casting practices were intended to open up the casting process to include as many minority actors as possible. The symposium was first proposed after

Actors' Equity completed a survey which showed that during the four years covered, over 90 percent of all professional theatre in the U.S. was performed by all-white casts. In response to those findings, a one-day conference was held from which developed the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting held for two days in November 1986" (Deboo 188)

It was sponsored by the Non-Traditional Casting Project, "an advocacy group formed in 1986...to promote the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities, women, and the disabled in all areas of theatrical activity"(Pao 4). The symposium consisted of a variety of different events; speeches given by prominent individuals; panel discussions composed of actors, writers, directors, artistic directors, and drama professors who debated issues surrounding non-traditional casting policies; and 10 and 15 minute dramatic scenes intended to showcase various non-traditional casting techniques. These different casting techniques were distilled in four

separate categories; these four guidelines have become the most influential manifestations of non-traditional casting and are as follows¹;

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” (Davis)

Of the four above, the dialogue on colorblind casting was the most heated topic for debate; and, while the symposium was intended to address issues regarding all minority groups, issues regarding ethnic and racial minority groups were the most discussed and debated topics by a large margin.

One possible cause for this emphasis on colorblindness is a reaction to a conservative argument against racial integration of the theater. Non-Traditional Casting, which as stated above has a variety of permutations, was attacked for being a social service stemming from a liberal agenda practiced at the expense of artistic freedom. In the forward of *Beyond Traditions*, a published transcript of the symposium, Alan Eisenberg, executive secretary of the Actor’s Equity Association, relates a common argument against casting,

We hear arguments that non-traditional casting is an attempt to draft a social agenda onto the face of artistic enterprise...The real question...in my mind is whether the Actor in the play who I am accepting—in a willing suspension of my disbelief—as for example, a Danish prince, an Irishman, an upperclass Yankee, an Italian nobleman...has at his or her disposal the requisite skill to make me empathize and believe in his/her imaginary world...I submit that the Actor’s skin color...have relatively little importance to such an empirical examination” (Davis 4)

¹ However, it should be noted that the term “non-traditional casting” is no longer in use.. Instead, a theater company or a director would descr

In an attempt to push back against the argument that non-traditional casting is no more than a social service, a handout given to minority actors regardless of skill, Eisenberg is pressured to assert that he is blind to color, but not to talent. Instead of focusing on cross-cultural casting or conceptual casting as examples of creative and artistic ways in which to integrate minority actors, Eisenberg focuses on the fact that colorblind casting is not done at the expense of talent. By doing so, he asserts his commitment to the colorblind approach and denies differences between racial groups. This insistence on colorblindness points to a larger dialogue of racial neutrality. Rather than focusing on political ways to utilize race as a story telling tool, the symposium focuses on colorblindness as the ultimate way in which to racially integrate. In response to conservative backlash, liberals are forced to say they don't see color.

One can begin to see a rhetoric emerge out of this symposium that shares a close resemblance to how we have seen colorblindness manifest itself so far. The Non-Traditional Casting Project defines non-traditional casting as follows, "...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" (Davis²). Instead of a casting process that would allow for the identities of minority actors to be included and regarded as significant, this definition reveals a desire to neutralize difference, rather than grapple with it. While there are alternative casting techniques available, the Non-Traditional Casting Project seems most interested in a

² no page number specified

colorblind approach. Rather than pointing toward a sort of equal integration, this definition suggests a successful production can be mounted despite the actor's ethnicity.

Raul Julia, a Puerto Rican actor and keynote speaker at the symposium, expressed a very similar sentiment. He recalls a story that was intended to promote this same colorblind ideology. Rather than arguing that racial identity and talent are both facets of an actor's identity, he asserts that talent transcends race. He writes,

A friend of mine is a brilliant opera singer and she's black. She was invited to sing at Covent Garden, but then they changed directors for the production. The new director said that he just could not have a black singer sing that role...She has this unbelievable voice that surpasses whatever color she is (Davis 34)

This story is clearly influenced by a post racial rhetoric. While it narrates an instance of racial discrimination, Julia does not believe that racial difference is an important aspect of an artist's identity. He asserts that her voice 'surpasses' her color; that real talent is something universal and raceless. Julio's story is this not one promoting racial integration, this is an example of colorblind ideology. Julia goes on to discuss his own experience as a Puerto Rican actor. He attributes one of his earliest acting jobs, the role, "an English middle class person from London in Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*" to his director's ability to see beyond race.

Robert Whitehead didn't see Raul Julia, the Puerto Rican for that role. He didn't hear my accent. He saw something beyond all that, something I could bring to the role. (Davis 34)

Again, the language describes his director as seeing through his race to who he 'really was'. This language is problematic because talent is understood to be hiding under race, waiting to be found. Race obscures casting directors' vision from the real

talent that is hiding behind race. Julia praises this director for not seeing his race, and offering him the role.

This colorblind ideology is not free from ridicule, however. Throughout the symposium were individuals trying to remind individuals that race matters in the formation of a play. One of the plays being showcased at the symposium was 'The Philadelphia Story', a play focusing on the complicated love life of an upperclass white Philadelphia woman. The play was cast colorblind, in an attempt to show those at the symposium the benefits of colorblind casting. Ellen Stewart, founder and artistic director at LA MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, expressed her disapproval of the practice. She said,

I personally don't believe that a Philadelphia Biddle should be cast as anything but that WASP person that the Philadelphia Biddle is...I don't particularly believe at all that *The Philadelphia Story* should be presented with me, Ellen Stewart, playing the Biddle. I cannot see that. So as usual, I make the appeal that...all of us make a concerted effort to try to educate the mainstream by giving them something beyond the so-called *Philadelphia Story* in which only the white WASP person should be there" (Davis 23)

Ellen Stewart does not believe that, a black woman, she should be cast in a play about white upper class WASP society. She believes race to be an important aspect of identity, in particular she seems to be aware that racial identities have different stories to tell. She is more concerned with the plays themselves as a way in which to increase minority participation in the theater, rather than colorblind casting. She believes that black people should not be cast in white narratives, and that the race of the actor should certainly reflect the race of the character being portrayed.

While this viewpoint was certainly expressed at the Symposium, the ideology of colorblindness continued will into the '90's. Ten years after the symposium, in

1996 and 1997, August Wilson and Robert Brustein, two titans of the theater world, were engaged in a very public debate over the philosophy of colorblindness. The debate represents an even more extreme manifestation of colorblind ideology.

August Wilson, the most influential African American playwright in history, was born in 1945 and points towards the 1960's as the defining moment of his life. He writes, "It was this ground as a young man coming into manhood searching for something to which dedicate my life that I discovered the Black Power movement of the '60s" (Wilson), and it is from this vantage point that he approaches the subject of colorblindness. Robert Brustein was born in 1927 and founded both the Yale Repertory Theatre and the American Repertory Theatre. He was a prominent educator of drama teaching at Cornell, Vassar, Columbia, and Yale, and is considered to one of the most influential people in American theater.

The debate was composed of a series of journal articles written back and forth in response to one another. Robert Brustein was in favor of "a transcendent unifying theater that will recognize that 'the greatest art embraces a common humanity" (Pao 44). He subscribes to the same ideology that people like Raul Julia and Alan Eisenberg expressed a decade earlier; that talent, art, humanity, are things divorced from race. That colorblindness provides an opportunity to understand people of different races as raceless people. August Wilson was extremely opposed to this sort of sentiment. He believed that colorblind casting was an act of western cultural imperialism that denied blacks a culture and a history of their own. Wilson speaks directly against colorblindness, in a speech he delivered to the Theater Communications Group National Conference,

In an effort to spare us the burden of being 'affected by an undesirable condition' and as a gesture of benevolence, many whites (like the proponents of colorblind casting) say, 'Oh, I don't see color.' We want you to see us. We are black and beautiful...We are not a menace to society. We are not ashamed. We have an honorable history in the world of men. We come from a long line of honorable people with complex codes of ethnics and social discourse, people who devised myths and systems of cosmology and...of economics. We are not ashamed, and do not need you to be ashamed for us. Nor do we need the recognition of our blackness to be couched in abstract phases like 'artist of color.' (Wilson)

Colorblindness in the theater, Wilson argues, is a white 'gesture of benevolence' that purposefully avoids race as to not draw attention to the negative associations blackness connotes. He exposes the idea that one would not have to be blind to race if blackness had positive connotations. He therefore asserts that blackness is not something to be ashamed of or apologized for, and thus does not need to be imagined away by colorblindness. He understands that colorblindness is not only relegated to the casting process either, but that colorblindness pervades the entire theatrical system, beginning with the playwrights. And so, as an alternative to colorblind casting as a solution to the unequal representation of black people in the theater, Wilson proposed for the funding of black theaters. Wilson asserts, "We do not need colorblind casting; we need some theatres to develop our playwrights" (Wilson). By generating works that spring out of the black tradition, blacks can then reassert their history, culture, and ideologies onto the American theatrical landscape. He points to the 1960's as a time when African American theater was a place of serious political activism. Wilson highlights a few playwrights from that era "Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Philip Hayes Dean, Richard Wesley, Lonnie Elder III, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Ann Teer and Amiri Baraka [who] were among those playwrights

who were particularly vocal (Wilson). He believes that the black theatrical tradition is still just as vibrant in 1996, however there is a lack of interest in funding due to the rise of colorblind casting. He attributes the lack of black theater in the mid 1990's to a lack of funding, not a lack of black talent,

Black theatre doesn't share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists and supply them with meaningful avenues to develop their talent and broadcast and disseminate ideas crucial to its growth. The economics are reserved as privilege to the overwhelming abundance of institutions that preserve, promote and perpetuate white culture.

For this belief, Wilson is labeled as a segregationist. In one of Robert Brustein's responses to Wilson, he "replied by denouncing institutional separatism along racial lines as a throwback to the pre-civil rights era and by decrying the politicization of arts funding" (Pao 9-10). The New York Times writer William Grimes, reporting on the event even recalls, an instance when the epithet "fascist" made a cameo appearance. "It was hurled, surprisingly enough, at Mr. Wilson by a black man (Grimes)". Wilson's call for a black theater was seen as segregationist.

Peter Erickson, in an afterward he wrote for Ayanna Thompson's book, *Colorblind Shakespeare*, attributes this mischaracterization of Wilson's argument to a misunderstanding of the concept of universalism. Erickson writes,

Wilson negotiates the narrow gap between separatism and conventional universalism by distinguishing two kinds of universalism: one monolithic, the other genuinely plural. Wilson finds that the standard version is effectively a white Universalism that cannot serve as 'common ground'. Instead Wilson insists on an alternate definition that draws on multiple cultural strands—"a value system that is inclusive of all Americans and recognizes their unique and valuable contributions. (245 Thompson)

Wilson was not arguing for a separate black theater in order to create separate “black only” and “white only” spheres. Rather, he merely believed that African Americans have a specific culture that is their own, and that this culture has *universal artistic value* that can be reached through a culturally specific space of artistic expression. Brustein was unwilling to appreciate that different cultural subjectivities could add to the cannon of American theater. He was unable to accept that what he believed to be a genuine universalism was in fact a ‘monolithic’ ‘white Universalism’. Thus the ideology of colorblindness led to what Brustein might paradoxically refer to as a false ‘white universalism’, in which a black cultural specificity is ignored on the grounds of equality. In an interview with the Paris Review, August Wilson is asked, “Can you speak about Romare Bearden and what drew you to his work?” (Lyons) To which Wilson responds,

The life I know best is black American life and through Bearden I realized that you could arrive at the universal through the specific. Every artist worth his salt has a painting of a woman bathing. So Bearden’s *Harlem Woman Bathing in Her Kitchen* is no different as a subject than you would find in Degas, but it is informed by African-American culture and aesthetics (Lyons).

Wilson clearly actualizes Erickson’s assertion. Wilson is not writing for a black audience, about innately black things, he is writing about the universal through what he believes to be the black experience. When asked if he thinks white people could appreciate his plays, he says, “Can I appreciate the work of Ibsen, Chekhov, Miller, Mamet? The answer, of course, is yes, because the plays ultimately are about things I am familiar with—love, honor, duty, betrayal” (Lyons)

Finally, Erickson points out Brustein’s misinterpretation of Martin Luther King’s “March On Washington” speech. He notes how Brustein actually quotes King

in one of his essays in support of colorblindness, "I am among those who long for a time when, as King so majestically said, "African-Americans—indeed all Americans—will be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin" (Thompson 245). Erickson analyzes this use of King's speech, both labeling Brustein as a "1980's neoconservative" (Thompson 245) and charging him with "decontextualizing King's language by removing King's accompanying sense of ongoing political struggle against entrenched institutional forces" (Thompson 245). Erickson's accusation that Brustein is a 1980's neoconservative may be misguided. While Brustein has certainly fallen victim to the ideology of colorblindness, labeling him a 1980's neoconservative is misrepresentative of his intentions, as we were indeed seeking for a way in which to increase the minority presence in theater. Erickson's assertion that colorblind politics are only practiced by conservatives is misinformed.

Angela C. Pao, in her book *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality*, points out the way in which liberals also engaged with and promoted a colorblind ideology. She describes the way in which neoliberalism in the 1990's was created in response to neoconservatives who championed the 'reverse discrimination' argument. Pao writes how neoconservatives "maintain that affirmative action and other programs designed to insure equal opportunity perpetuate racial divisions and institute reverse discrimination against whites" (Pao 54-5). In response, the concept that there is a raceless universal human underneath our skin color (an idea championed by such people like Raul Julia and Alan Eisenberg during the Non-Traditional Casting Project in 1986), was "introduced during the

1992 Clinton campaign as part of a strategy to acknowledge minority groups constituents of the campaign while at the same time avoiding racially specific issues that risked alienating white voters" (Pao 55). In this way, both liberals and conservatives in the 90's were engaged in colorblind rhetoric in order to assert control and power over America's minority populations. The rhetoric of colorblindness is not party specific, and is manipulated and used by people on the left and on the right.

In opposition to the universalist claims that colorblindness promoted, a new form of casting took root in the 1990's called multiculturalism. The ideology of multiculturalism is largely in response to the attempt at racial and cultural homogenization that colorblind casting had come to represent. multiculturalism is a term that is "at once one of deconstructing Eurocentric and racist norms and of constructing and promoting multicultural alternatives" (Pao 6). Rather than attempting to see all Americans as neutral, the ideology of multiculturalism "asserts that a diversity of stories, actors, and audiences will necessarily enrich American drama" (Thompson 70). Rather than trying unite intergrate through blindness to racial difference, the multicultural approach sought to integrate through understanding of racial difference.

However Pao points out ways in which multiculturalism can still be used to disregard or make little of race. definition refers to differences in cultural perspectives "rather than differences in race" (Pao 6). This still expresses a squeamishness on the part of the theater to directly address race. Race is associated with such things as segregation, discrimination, phenotypes, and stereotypes, issues

that remind of us of our pre-colorblind past. Culture is Kanye West, Obama, basketball, Chris Rock, jazz. Culture as a term much more palatable to white Americans. This predilection for culture, over race, signals a colorblindness still present even within the more diversity-conscious forum of multiculturalism.

In a journal article entitled 'Let Our Freak Flags Fly' (an article "developed out of a...Sociology of Theatre seminar at the CUNY Graduate Center in the spring of 2009, in which doctoral students attempted to construct a comprehensive socioeconomic analysis of a single Broadway production"(Brater)), The authors propose a way in which multiculturalism can be used to promote the same disregard for other cultures that it is allegedly supposed to contest. They look at *Shrek the musical* as an production that espouse multiculturalism (to the extent of turning it into a commodity), while at the same time perpetuating racial stereotypes. They write,

"DreamWorks used *Shrek the Musical* to exploit a generic theme of multiculturalism to extend the reach of the *Shrek* franchise and challenge Disney's domination of the Broadway market... DreamWorks's marketing strategy—diversification—provided the theme—diversity—for the product...Yet because *Shrek's* multicultural message is contradicted by the blatant racial stereotyping of Donkey, *Shrek's* "jive-spouting sidekick," the musical in fact epitomizes the contradictions that inform multiculturalism in the early twenty-first-century marketplace (Brater).

Shrek The Musical used multiculturalism merely as a marketing tool. The article describes the ways in which the production team behind the musical attempted to commodify diversity and sell it as part of the theatergoing experience. The title of the article, 'Let Our Freak Flags Fly', is a reference the biggest number in the show. One of the songs lyrics, sung by all of the fairytale creatures who have been

banished from their homes, is "All the things that make us special / are the things that make us strong!" (Brater). The article accuses DreamWorks of reducing multiculturalism to a simple and trite concept of appreciation, rather than supporting any actual change. It argues that the play located "the opposition to discrimination as the *appreciation* of difference" (Brater), rather than subverting white cultural hegemony, it merely asserts that being different has benefits. Their argument is bolstered by the presence of one of the characters clearly portraying a racial stereotype. Donkey, voiced by Eddy Murphy in the film version, speaks jive and "takes up the traditional role subordinated in social (and, in this case, species) status to his master" (Brater). He is described as a modern manifestation of blackface. The presence of this character then delegitimizes any multiculturalism that the play itself was allegedly trying to promote. It reveals the way in which multiculturalism, like colorblindness, is merely a way in which to avoid issues of race by pretending to address them. *Shrek The Musical*, an appendage of the body is a political space.

As seen again and again, colorblindness in all of its forms is a way in which whites have been able to maintain power over blacks. White Americans have been able to turn a blind eye to the race system of incarceration due to the alleged colorblindness of our government; politicians have been able to maintain and promote racist policies under the guise of race neutral language; the notion of a universal humanity beneath race strips minorities of their identities; the desire for theaters promoting black playwrights is deemed 'segregationist'; and attempts at true multicultural reform are subverted and have proven to be yet another tool of

the dominant culture to exercise its power; the theater is which perpetuates a system of racial hierarchy.

Part II: Interviews And Analysis

Two separate interviews were conducted for this paper. Both interviews took place over the phone and were conducted by Evan Glenn. The interview subjects were Christopher Edwards and Carey Perloff.

Edwards received his Bachelors degree from the University of Nevada Las Vegas and received his master of fine arts in theater at the University of Minnesota. He is both a working actor and director, and a teacher. His extensive acting career includes performances in London's West End, Ireland, Scotland, Off-Broadway, Ubu Rep, John Houseman's The Acting Company, the Guthrie Theater, Chicago Shakespeare Theater, American Stage, Stamford Theater Works, Vermont Stage Co., Penumbra Theatre, and the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival. As a teacher, he has taught at such institutions as Bennington College, University of Nevada Las Vegas, University of Minnesota, St. Michaels' College, John Houseman's the Acting Company, Weston Playhouse, and the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's Acting Apprenticeship Program. Currently, he is the associate Artistic Director and Director of Education at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival (hvshakespeare.org).

The second interview was also conducted over the phone with Carey Perloff. Perloff received her B.A. Phi Beta Kappa in classics and comparative literature from Stanford University and was a Fulbright Fellow at Oxford. She was on the faculty of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University for seven years and teaches and directs in the A.C.T. Master of Fine Arts Program. For the past twenty years, she has served as

the Artistic Director for the American Conservatory Theater, a prominent non-profit theater company in San Francisco (act-sf.org).

The argument put forth in the preceding section points to a pattern of control, subjugation, and disempowerment of minority identity facilitated by the rhetoric of colorblindness. This argument is complicated by the two interviews conducted for this paper. Both Edwards and Perloff believe that all texts, no matter what race, culture, or ethnicity they focus upon, are universal (save for plays specifically about racial issues), and can be appreciated by people of all races. However, despite this universality, both agree that black specific plays should not be cast with, or directed by, white people. Their reasoning is based on an assumption of cultural knowledge. Both argue that African American experience is innately bicultural, while the white experience has been historically insular and homogenous. Thus, due their equal knowledge of both black and white culture, blacks can perform in plays written about the "white experience". For this same reason, whites cannot perform in plays specific to the black experience. Edwards and Perloff argue this point with the intention of maximizing the amount of roles available for black actors, and as Perloff puts it honestly representing "the multicultural society that American is" (Perloff). However, there is a way in which this double standard can also be seen as perpetuating the pattern of white plays as universal texts. If minorities are constantly cast in traditionally white plays due to their knowledge of white culture, is that not merely 'white universalism' packaged in a new form? Or is it a truly innovative theory that calls into question the very notion of universality?

When asked about colorblind casting, Edwards responded as follows, “colorblind casting says ‘I don’t see color. I’m blind to color.’ And that’s cool, but it would be interesting to *see* race and color and have it not matter”. Edwards, in his characterization of race-blind casting as ‘cool’, but not particularly ideal, displays a lack of concern surrounding colorblind practices. Edwards went on to say, “unless a playwright stipulates [race specific roles], anything is a possibility. America is hung up on race. We are more similar than we are different” (Edwards). By asserting that we are ‘more similar than different’, he is arguing that all humans, no matter what race, share similar experiences and can thus play a variety of races. What is problematic with this argument is that these notions of humanism and universalism have been used historically to legitimize the white universalism; black playwrights who write for black specific casts are not needed if blacks can play themselves in white plays. His assertion that ‘America is hung up on race’ is also troubling, as it characterizes issues regarding race as passé and outmoded. This is indicative of a post racial ideology, in which race is no longer tied to inequality.

His description of multiculturalism is also problematic. When asked to describe multiculturalism, Edwards responded with a metaphor, “Colorblind Casting is being invited to a dinner, leaving your cultural garb at the door, and putting on a suit to sit down at the table. Multiculturalism is wearing your garb as you sit down at the table” (Edwards). While Edwards is trying to paint a positive picture of multiculturalism, he actually describes quite clearly the racial power dynamics at work in the theater. Who is inviting who to the table? Who is *allowing* cultural garb to be worn at the table? The answer of course is an ideology stemming from white

cultural hegemony. Edwards articulates correctly a situation in which white people are the hosts of the dinner, while minorities, the people wearing 'cultural garb', are merely guests. Edwards assertion that America is 'hung up on race', coupled with this clear imbalance of power is disconcerting. It reveals a disconnect between the reality of unequal representation of African Americans, and his belief that theater should be less concerned with issues of racial equality.

This disconnect is further articulated via an imagined scenario Edwards describes. He creates a possible scenario in which he is acting in a traditionally white play. Edwards says,

I'm biracial. Let's say I am playing a character. The director stops me and says, 'this particular character doesn't understand duality. He doesn't know what it means to be African American. Explore more what it means to be non African American' (Edwards)

Edwards was then asked if that note is a legitimate note to give. His answer is as follows.

A totally appropriate note, it's about the work. That's a note anyone could give for a character. You're from Los Angeles. Ok, lets say you are playing a student...who is from Manhattan. Your director says, "Evan, your bringing too much of that laid back, west coast thing. Explore a more edgy urban thing (Edwards).

The analogy he presents is problematic because in this situation, Evan is not asked to change or alter his race. Whether he hails from the east or the west coast is not a question of race. In the example featuring himself as the actor, the note is aimed directly at Edwards's blackness. Edward points out that the note, is 'about the work'. He sees the director's choice to scale down his blackness as possibly due to the artistic integrity of the play, and is therefore, a legitimate note to give. He does not concede that an actor's whiteness is never called into question, paired down, or

disregarded. This is only something asked of minorities. While Edwards himself would probably not agree with this notion, his example above is based on the conceit that white is the neutral race, and blackness is something to be changed and manipulated in reference to it.

However, Edwards considers non-white plays universal as well, unless they 'specifically have to do with race' (Edwards). He describes how "August Wilson is universal. Issues between a husband and his wife are universal. Father and son relationships are universal, what it means to be a man...its universal themes" (Edwards). Edwards, probably referring specifically the Wilson's play *Fences*, asserts that people of all races can identify with the themes. The issues he lists above are universal issues experienced by people all over the world. For example, a white man who sees Wilson's *Fences* can identify with Troy, as Troy's issues are not black specific, they are *universal*. Edwards even cited a production of *Fences* performed in Tokyo with a "Japanese cast. It worked because [the play] is universal" (Edwards). In his point of view, a group of non-black actors could make sense of the text due to its universalism. However, when Edwards was then asked if it could potentially be cast with white people, he was not as readily optimistic, "it would be very difficult. White people are not used to understanding other cultures" (Edwards). Edwards explains how the African American experience has been one that is historically of two cultures. Edwards says, "the history of African Americans in our society is a history of plurality. White people are more contained" (Edwards). He pointed to his own racial makeup as an example, "I am biracial. I grew up as an African male in mostly black spaces, but I am both black and European" (Edwards).

Being a minority culture in a white-dominated country, blacks have had to learn to be literate in both black and white culture. In contrast, it has not been necessary for whites to become literate in black culture in order to survive in America. In addition to that, many blacks are biologically biracial as well. Identifying himself as biracial, Edwards points to the fact that large portions of African Americans are of mixed racial heritage. He sees this innate plurality of the African American experience as reason for their ability to participate in white plays.

Perloff also ascribes to this notion of African American 'biculturalism'. When asked what her opinion of colorblind casting was, she responded as follows, "Ridiculous. It's negating. Everyone brings their gender, race, everything...physical scale...That's ridiculous. What's colorblind casting? (Perloff). She rejects the old colorblind model seeking to look beyond race to the universal, and describes how race as an integral part of a person's identity. In addition, she asserts that colorblind casting is a term that is disappearing from the theatrical vocabulary. She cited "American Casting" as the way in which she herself refers to the casting of a racially integrated cast. She describes American casting as a simple "process in which one casts the best actor, as long as race is not germane to the role"(Perloff). Perloff's opinion is very similar to the opinion held by Edwards. As long as race is not specific to the text, anyone can play any part. In addition to that, she points out the same difference between white and black Americans, "White people—men—are used to being the dominant discourse. [White Americans] don't learn another language. Black actors are used to speaking two languages. Black actors are used to speaking Shakespeare" (Perloff). Again, this is the same logic employed by Edwards. Because

blacks have learned to maneuver within two distinct cultures, they are able to perform in plays written by white people. There is a way in which this logic simply perpetuates white culture as the dominant culture. It suggests that because black Americans have had to be culturally 'bilingual' to survive in America, they should continue to do so. Similarly, White people, who have never had to learn, understand, and negotiate black culture will continue to act in only white plays.

Perloff then suggested taking a look at a blog post posted by Timothy Douglas, former artistic director of Chicago's Remy Bumppo Theatre Company, on January 29th, 2012. Perloff said, "[the blog post] articulates what I am trying to say better than I have ever heard it" (Perloff). The article, entitled "The Benefits Of Slavery", echoes what Perloff and Edwards believe about the bilingualism of African Americans. Douglas recently resigned from his position due to "artistic differences" that stemmed from differing "perspectives on race and culture" (Douglas). The blog post largely reiterates what Edwards and Perloff have already described. At first Douglass, who received his actor training at Yale school of drama, laments the fact that "of the thirty-three productions I performed in during my three years at Yale, only once was I cast in a leading role actually designated for a black man" (Douglas). However, the majority of the blog is then used to articulate a realization he had in regards to playing a non-black role. A portion of his blog post is as follows,

I'll confess that I used to hold racial resentment about this until I had a revelation a few years back. It struck me that the most influential aspect of my training was in getting to deeply explore—by default—what it is to be "other," while at the same time having to convey a genuine authenticity in each role. My white counterparts always got to "be white" without ever having to bring the concept of whiteness to conscious mind. They were allowed to simply build a character as part, and on top of who they innately were. In my acting I wasn't

playing "white" per se, but in each case I was most definitely (subliminally, but not subtlety) asked to suspend my innate "blackness" in order to accomplish the task at hand, and it was expected that I appear as authentic in my characterizations as my fellow actors who were melanin-challenged. My latent revelation lay in the fact that I actually received a phenomenally comprehensive exploration of cultural-craft at a depth far beyond those of my classmates, who rarely, if ever, were asked to explore outside of race and/or culture. Further...it actually makes me a more accomplished theater practitioner than my classmates because I succeeded in being able to authentically bring forth a living, breathing cultural-equivalence through craft. It's why today I feel as confident in my approach to William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Beth Henley as I do when approaching Alice Childress, August Wilson, and Robert O'Hara ... I know both creative worlds intimately and equally (Douglas)

Douglas's statement, "In my acting I wasn't playing "white" per se, but in each case I was most definitely (subliminally, but not subtlety) asked to suspend my innate "blackness" in order to accomplish the task at hand', is confusing. It is hard to get a good grasp on how exactly Douglas's blackness was affected on stage from reading this description. While Douglas asserts he was not playing white, he also asserts that he was asked to suspend his blackness. What that would look like on stage? It should also be noted that this experience is very similar to Edwards's imagined scenario in which he is also asked to tone down his blackness. Whatever shape either Edwards's or Douglas's blackness would take, The notion of turning down ones blackness raises a major question regarding the true universality of these texts. If these texts are truly universal, an actor's racial identity would be able to be fully expressed on stage. Asking a black actor to tone down his 'innate 'blackness' does not correspond well with what Edwards and Perloff assertion that all plays are universal. If black actors must tone down their blackness in order to perform in 'universal plays', these plays are indeed not universal; they are white.

Douglass also rearticulates the notion of biculturalism discussed by both Edwards and Perloff. He describes how, do to being allowed to play almost exclusively white parts, he 'feels as confident in [his] approach to William Shakespeare...as [he does] when approaching...August Wilson...Having been made to play only non-black parts, he has become proficient in the extensive cannon of white plays. However, what has been his experience with being able to explore his own race, his own culture, through acting? While claiming proficiency in 'August Wilson' can be seen as evidence of his being a product of both races, what does it mean to be truly exposed to both cultures so intimately?

This double standard of cultural literacy is not a new idea. Rather, African American 'bilingualism' is a concept that has been touched upon by prominent by a variety of African American thinkers. This tradition begins, perhaps, in 1903 with W. E. B. Du Bois book *The Souls Of Black Folk*. In this text, Du Bois in articulates his concept of double-consciousness. Du Bois writes,

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 12)

While Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness is not completely analogous to the cultural bilingualism described by Douglas, Perloff, and Edwards, it still refers to a dual knowledge inherent in African Americans that can perhaps shed some light

upon Douglas's ideas. What is most striking about Douglas's claim is that he understands the forced nature of his theatrical education as a benefit. His blog post, entitled 'The Benefits Of Slavery' seeks to understand the positive effects of the early history of blacks in America. In the quote above, Du Bois describes double-consciousness as a burden, not as a benefit. Blacks have an intimate knowledge of white culture by necessity, not by choice. And, this intimate knowledge is not beneficial; rather it causes the psychological phenomenon of seeing oneself through the lens of whiteness at all times. The effect of this is negative 'yields [the black subject] no true self-consciousness'. (Du Bois) Rather than creating a more artistic, nuanced, wordly individual, as Douglas describes, Du Bois' double consciousness confuses the understanding of the self. The black subjects self-consciousness, self awareness, is muddled do to the dualing nature of his being. Thus, his understanding of himself is unclear.

These psychological effects are expanded upon by Franz Fanon, psychologist, and post-colonial theorist. Fanon writes in 1952 *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he asserts the duality of the black man, "The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro." (Fanon 17). Again, Fanon focuses on the negative effects of the colonized subject. In particular, Fanon addresses the internalized inferiority that occurs within colonized subjects. He describes how a black Martinican reacts after having returned from France,

...There is the newcomer, then. He no longer understands the dialect, he talks about Opera, which he may never have seen except from a distance, but above all he develops a critical attitude toward his compatriots" (Fanon 24).

The colonized subject, after having been exposed to white culture, attempts to reject his old culture on favor for his new one. Rather than becoming a 'culturally bilingual subject', as Edwards and Perloff point out, Fanon describes a subject who attempts to completely adopt white culture for himself.

Again, Du Bois and Fanon articulate two very specific, very detailed arguments that this paper does not seek to analogize to Douglas's claims. However, they do reveal a trend in the literature surrounding African "dual-ness" (for lack of a better word). They reveal that duality is problematic and complicated. What is most problematic about the arguments put forth by Edwards, Perloff, and Douglass is that they are strikingly uncomplicated and unproblematic. Perhaps it is their proximity to the world of casting itself that causes them to be so pragmatic in their conclusions. Especially in the cases of Perloff and Edwards, both seemed more interested in proving that blacks should be able to act in any play they wanted, rather than question the implications of such a concept. There is something problematic and complicated about a black actor feeling it ok for a director to ask him to be less black. There is something problematic and complicated about believing that plays written for white casts are universal.

This propensity to uncomplicate matters of race can also be found in the particular *genre* of plays that both Edwards and Perloff prefer. In their interviews, both individuals expressed a specific interest in the western classics. One of the questions asked of Edwards was in regards to the special relationship that seems to exist between Shakespeare and colorblind casting. Edwards responded,

"It's because Shakespeare is timeless, with epic scope, to do Shakespeare you look into your soul. In acting it our hang up with race goes away when faced with Shakespeare (Edwards). Perloff expressed a similar sentiment. She expressed how she "[likes] the epic scale of Greek tragedies. Realism imposes certain limitations that exist in a very particular way" (Perloff). Both Shakespeare and the Greek Classics. A Shakespearian production provides a space in which a black actor can portray a character that is 'de-raced'. Meaning that in his portrayal of the role, the actor is neither understood as a black man portraying a white European man, nor is the character understood as a black man. The actor is seen as merely a 'man'. Of course the audience will notice that the actor is black, but in the world of the play, the audience knows to read the character as racially neutral, or perhaps more accurately, as a person whose skin is inconsequential to the character and to the play.

The American audience has learned this behavior due to a variety of factors. The first being that the Shakespearean cannon is considered to be one of the crowning achievements of theater in the English language and thus *transcends cultural specificity*; the plays Shakespeare wrote are considered to be universal, and can and should be enjoyed by all peoples. His works have taken on a special, dehistoricized role in western society, which, as problematic as it may seem, provides a space in which race can be disregarded. While Shakespeare did write a number of 'histories' which focused on a number of historical figures, (the royal families of England for example), they are not taken as historical truth in the western imagination. These texts are largely understood to be fantastical

misrepresentations of historical people and events. And of course, Shakespeare's works are also rife with completely unrealistic events and characters, including witches, fairies, fauns, and ghosts. It is this fantastic quality that adds to its universality, and which situates Shakespeare in the realm of fantasy rather than history. Shakespeare is not realistic at all, it is in fact unrealistic in many ways. And it is this lack of mimetic qualities that allows for a space in which race does not have to follow the appropriate social codes. Rather, Shakespeare's unrealistic nature primes audiences to accept unrealistic conventions; colorblindness being one of them.

Another aspect of Shakespeare that provides for this space is its physical and temporal distance from present America. Because Shakespeare wrote his plays at the turn of the 17th Century in England, an audience is aware that the complex racial structures in America did not exist in Elizabethan England. England was, by and large, a racially homogenous society. Therefore, the audience does not read into the text as imbued with racial undertones. In this way, a black actor can play Richard III or Henry VII and not have his blackness interfere with the storytelling.

'America has a hang up with race'. This sentiment is disturbing. It reflects complacency with the status quo and ignorance in regards to the very real and lasting effects that racial inequality has on our country today. Rather than encouraging or promoting change, it suggests that by ignoring race we can stop its effects. It resonates with a post racial ideology. As Ayanna Thompson points out, "questions don't go away, they go unasked" (Thompson 95).

'Cultural bilingualism' is not an acceptable answer to the problems of racial inequality in the theater. It plays into the preexisting ideology of white universalism historically present in American theater. In the age of colorblindness, this 'cultural bilingualism' serves as a politically correct excuse to allow for the continuation of white cultural domination. Universalism is a dangerous word, and even in the mouths of very learned and progressive people, can be used to marginalize the racial minority presence in the theater. Rather than promoting race specific theaters, and race specific plays, it instead promotes the kind of 'race-neutralizing' practices that ask of its actors of color to 'suspend their blackness'. This is not universalism, this is white-centric theater. When one hears phrases like 'America is hung up on race', Wilson's indictment of mainstream theater seems even more pertinent. Wilson states, "They refuse to recognize black conduct and manners as part of a system that is fueled by its own philosophy, mythology, history, creative motif, social organization, and ethos"(Thompson 70).

Part III: The Black Body Re-Specified Through Motion

No matter what the prevailing ideology at the moment is—be it colorblindness, multiculturalism, or ‘american casting’—‘white universalism’ seems to be able to persist in its various forms and incarnations. Blackness is still considered as the ‘other’ race, something to be controlled, managed, and subdued. Is there a way in which this ongoing trend can be stopped? What allows us to think blackness is mutable, and changeable, while whiteness remains the neutral normativity?

Perhaps part of the problem resides in the language we use to describe race. The notion that one can be ‘blind to race’ under the ideology of colorblind casting is a good example of this. As previous sections of this paper point out, the theater prefers to equate race with skin color, rather than with a unique culture. If the concept of race was understood to encompass a culture, an ideology, and a history, the notion of ‘color blindness’ would no longer encompass the full scale of race. There is a way in which the distillation of race as color is a vast simplification of the way in which race functions.

Therefore, by imagining race as synonymous with skin color, it becomes more plausible for an audience to imagine away race. Audience members are trained to imagine certain things all the time. When we see a character die on stage, we know they are not dead; yet, within the context of the story, we suspend our disbelief. When an actor plays a character markedly older than himself, the audience concedes to the illusion. When an audience sees a few chairs, and a table onstage, it

is able to imagine a living room. In the same way, the audience can 'imagine away' something like skin color. As in Shakespeare, if Richard the third is being played by a black character, we can imagine this his race has no significance; that his race is neutral.

However, in reality we understand that phenotype is not the *meaning* of blackness. Phenotype is rather a signifier of the various stereotypes that makes up our understanding of blackness. In the words of Stuart Hall, skins

...can carry meaning because they signify, through a process of displacement, further along the chain of equivalencies—*metonymically* (black skin—big penis—small brain—poor and backward—its all in the genes—end the poverty programme—send them home!). That is, because their arrangement within a discursive chain enables physiological signs to function as signifiers, to stand for and be 'read' further up the chain; socially, psychically, cognitively, politically, culturally, and civilisationally (Thompson 93).

By constantly referring to color as the issue, the discourse is allows proponents of colorblindness to ignore what is actually the *stuff* of race, what Hall characterizes as this 'discursive chain'. In this way, the focus on color divorces the meaning of blackness from the phenotype.

Therefore, if one expands the notion of race beyond phenotype, one can complicate the conceit of colorblindness. One way in which to do this is to understand that race is acted out by the body in motion. By acknowledging that people of different races *perform* their racial identity, there is a way in which their culture is reified as the actor of color moves through space. If performance is race specific, an actors culture is reified in every move and every gesture he makes.

Anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell's work on kinemes offers a way in which to understand the cultural specificity of movement. Birdwhistell's theories are "based

on the conviction that body motion is a learned form of communication, which is patterned within a culture and which can be broken down into an ordered system of isolable elements" (Birdwhistell xi). The smallest isolable element that Birdwhistell theorized was the kineme. The kineme is an isolated muscle movement that has no cultural meaning in isolation. Often compared to the way in which phonemes are understood in linguistics, kinemes are the smallest unit of movement available, and as the quote above indicates, they are, when grouped together into more complex structures called kinemorphs, "culture-specific. There is an American way of flashing the eyebrows-or perhaps it is more accurate to say, there is an American Cultural Context within which brow flashes communicate culture specific meanings"(Schechner 261). In an article entitled "Toward Analyzing American Movement" Birdwhistell writes,

Physiologists have estimated that the facial musculature is such that over twenty thousand different facial expressions are somatically possible. At the present stage of investigation, we have been able to isolate thirty-two kinemes in the face and head area (Birdwhistell 99-100)

Let us break down these numbers. Physiologists, Birdwhistell claims, have taken into account the movement of each individual muscle in the human face, and have calculated, that the number of all muscle movement combinations would be over twenty thousand; this number is not culturally determined, it is anatomical. Then, he says in the American kinemic vocabulary, meaning the particular muscle movements that Americans use, there are thirty-two kinemes. Those thirty-two kinemes can then be combined with each other into all of the various combinations mathematically possible into what Birdwhistell calls "kinemorphs, which are further

analyzable into kinemorphemic classes which behave like linguistic morphemes”(Birdwhistell 101). A Kinemorph is a combination of kinemes that have meaning. To give an example, Birdwhistell’s catalogued of kinemes looks like this (taken from the same article “Analyzing American Movement”):

We have thus far isolated four kinemes of brow behavior: ‘lifted brow,’ ‘lowered brows,’ ‘ knit brow’, and, finally, ‘single brow movement.’...there are four significant degrees of lid closure: ‘overopen,’ ‘slit,’ ‘closed’, and ‘squeezed’...The nose is the anatomic locus for four significant behaviors: ‘wrinkle nose,’ ‘compressed nostrils’, ‘bilateral nostril flare,’ and ‘unilateral nostril flare or closure’ (Birdwhistell 100).

Again, these muscle movements are the basic muscle movements that Americans perform; however, they must first be combined into a kinemorph and placed into a social context to generate meaning. These kinemorphs “can be combined with each other in various social contexts to yield the full range of ‘American’ body languages”(Schechner 263). The way in which Birdwhistell studied kinemes was by using “tapes as devices to record kinesic communication” (Birdwhistell 149), which he would watch repeatedly, over and over again, recording what he saw to eventually theorize the various isolated kinemes common in American culture. After decades of kinemic research, Birdwhistell was able to perform much of the kinemes consciously. In fact, “Birdwhistell [was] a dynamic lecturer precisely because he can demonstrate in terms of facial displays a Midwestern teenage female’s mode of greeting as distinct from that of a teenager from the deep south”(Schechner 263). It is important to note, however, that for normal Americans, these muscle movements are an unconscious behavior. This conscious ability to recreate other cultural

gestures is only attained after years and years of research; to gain this ability, one must study these kinemes via tape for an extended amount of time.

One note should be taken into account however. There is one aspect of Birdwhistell's work that has proven to be incorrect by the work of a psychologist named Paul Ekman. Birdwhistell firmly asserted that "only the most ethnocentric can believe theirs is a natural language while other societies speak some distortion of it...That is, we have been unable to discover any single facial expression, stance or body position which conveys an identical meaning in all societies" (Birdwhistell 100). However, Ekman was able to prove that in various societies, there are similar facial expressions that are derived from "six target emotions" of surprise, disgust, sadness, anger, fear, and happiness" (Schechner 263). However, despite this inaccuracy in his work, Birdwhistell's account of culturally specific kinemes is still extremely valuable. This belief is shared with renowned performance theorist, Richard Schechner, who argues that "Ekman's findings do not invalidate what Birdwhistell [has] been saying, that each culture has its own way of encoding, using, contexting, and making into art the multi-channeled systems of non-verbal...expressions" (Schechner 265). Rather, that "The culture-specific kinemes are build *on top of and out of* the "universal language of emotions" (Schechner 265).

Richard Schechner, renowned performance theorist, uses Birdwhistell's theories but expands upon the implications of cultural specific kinemes. He postulates that "each human group—family, circle of friends, work group,

ensemble—develops its own dialect of movement” (Schechner 265)³. This is a profound statement in terms of the performance of race. From this model, we can postulate, in the same manner as Birdwhistell himself has done, by his ability to recreate the facial displays a Midwestern teenage female’s mode of greeting as distinct from that of a teenager from the deep south, that within America, there are separate communities that create their own physical modes of expression. From here, we can speculate that there are kinemes can be defined within racial groups as well.

Using a quote from one of August Wilson’s speeches, one can clearly see how performance theory fits neatly into his call for racial specificity,

Growing up in my mothers house...I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures,...the responses to pleasure and pain, that my mother learned from her mother, and which you could trace back to the first African who set foot on this continent. It is this culture that stands solidly on these shores today as a testament to the resiliency of the African-American spirit (Pao 53).

³ It should be noted that Schechner does not mention race, gender, or sexuality as meaning making groups. Judith Butler, however, drawing on performance theory, among other theories, does indeed postulate that gender is a performed identity. Butler’s theories regarding performativity may seem, perhaps, like a more germane, more developed theory to understand notions of performance. Butler writes, “in embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies or what Sartre would perhaps have called a style of being or Foucault, “a stylistics of existence” (Butler 521). I believe this stylistics could be analogous to the way in which Schechner describes ‘a dialectic of movement’. However, it is clear that Schechner does not take into account that a “stylistics of existence” or “dialect of movement’ are shaped by “punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied” (Butler 522). While this is perhaps problematic to ignore, as race is, like gender, shaped out of those same ‘punitively regulated cultural fictions’, I appreciate Schechner’s use of Birdwhistell’s theories in that they explain physical and bodily expression in an understandable and digestible way in regards to performance on stage. For this paper that deals with theater, the specificity that there can be a culturally ingrained difference in the way in which, for example, an eyebrow raise is used to connote culture specific meanings.

By using Birdwhistell's concept, there is a way in which race cannot be disengaged from the individual. Because blackness is inherent in every motion, gesture, and action that the character performs onstage, it would be theoretically impossible to imagine race away.

Conclusion

One major theatrical movement not yet touched upon is the post-structuralist, post-modern movement. As many post-modern movements do, post-modern theater seeks to challenge our assumptions regarding identities of race, gender, class, and sexuality. People like Anne Deavere Smith have been challenging notions of racial identity in the theater for decades. However, despite Smith's celebrity, her practices are not widely used around the country. The post-modern movement is mostly relegated to more intimate, avant garde circles. Nonetheless, it would be improper to not describe some of this work as it pertains directly to the themes in this paper.

Smith's two most famous works were originally performed by her as one woman shows. The two texts are called *Fires In The Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*. These texts are made up of a series of monologues created out of real interviews Smith conducted in the wake of the Crown Heights Riots and the Rodney King Riots, respectfully. In each performance, Smith performs as each of these people, whose identities are often not her own. She performs as black people, white people, Asian people, Hispanic people, men, women, older people, younger, people, etc. In doing so, she challenges notions of identity. In an article written by Debby Thompson entitled 'Is Race A Trope: Anne Deavere Smith And The Question Of Racial Performativity', Debby describes the way in which Smith subverts notions of identity,

while one character might assert his or her "true" racial identity, other characters radically question the "truth" of identity categories,

particularly based on race. While some individual characters may try to fit their senses of self-identity (particularly racial/ethnic identity) into essentialist models, the very format of the performance pieces itself resists such models--an African American woman playing African American men, Hasidic Jewish men and women, a Korean grocer, Jamaican immigrants, hip hop artists, and many other identities quite different from her own. If Brecht implicitly, and Judith Butler explicitly, argues that identities are not fixed things that you have, but things that you do, Anna Deavere Smith's acting approach incarnates this model by making identities not nouns but verbs, actions, self-activations. (Thompson)

Through the concept of identity performance, Smith reveals the fluidity, the mutability, the variable nature of identity. One might say that her work is in opposition to the themes discussed in this paper. Rather than defining racial or cultural specificity, as this paper seeks to do, Smith's performance reveals identities to be fragmented. If her work is to be taken seriously, why then, does this paper seek to affirm the importance and relevance of a particular African Americanness?

The answer can be found in an interview between Smith and Carol Smith-Rosenberg. Smith-Rosenberg posits the question, "So how can you hang onto the concept of a social construction and still maintain the reality of gender and race as political...forces?" (Thompson). While no answer is given, this question speaks to a paradox in postmodern discourse of racial identity in general. Is it regressive for August Wilson to cling so hard to an African American specific identity? Critics of Wilson said he was a segregationist.

As, this paper has hopefully made clear, attempts at universalism have resulted in the subjugation of minority populations. However, is there a way in which a universal argument could be made based on post-structural notions of identity? It would be a mistake to understand the fact that racial identity is performed

as a reason to assume it is either unimportant, or that it merely 'masks' the true human inside. While this warning may seem silly, or obvious, this paper has revealed the ability for liberal-minded, progressive individuals to still fall into the same trap of promoting a kind of white universalism. While the theory of racial identity lies firmly within the dialogue of an academic postmodern, poststructuralist political theory, the possibility of it being co-opted by the hegemonic culture is not out of the question. Therefore, if identity performance enters the mainstream American discourse, while very unlikely, let us hope it is not co-opted in the name of racial equality. Cultures and races must always be afforded the rights to their own identities. Deriving a Universalist claim would be counterproductive as there are still real inequalities that still exist due to the racial cast system at work in America.

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