Editor

Mark Nowak

Contributing Editors

Lila Abu-Lughod
Kamau Brathwaite
Maria Damon
Larry Evers
C. S. Giscombe
Diane Glancy
Juan Felipe Herrera
May Joseph
Walter K. Lew
Kirin Narayan
Nathaniel Tarn
Shamoon Zamir
Poets’ Theater / People’s Theater

People’s Theatre, People’s Army: Masculinism, Agitprop, Reenactment
Alan Filewod [7]

Break
Beth Cleary [21]

Skin Trouble: A Play in One Act
Amiri Baraka [39]

Taking the Stage:
Theatre by and for the Working Class during the Depression Era
Beth Chorne [58]

At War
Sparrow [67]

Infestation of Gnats
Gabrielle Civil [82]

Racial Actors, Liberal Myths
Josephine Lee [88]

Afrofuturistic
Tracie Morris [111]

Apocalypse Eternity
Bob Holman [126]

Reviews

Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity
Chandra Talpade Mohanty
[a review by Anjali Nerlaker, 129]
Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre
Kevin Wetmore, Jr.
[review May Mahala, 133]

Silencing Political Dissent:
How Post-September 11 Anti-Terrorism Measures Threaten Our Civil Liberties
Nancy Chang and the Center for Constitutional Rights

Terrorism and the Constitution:
Sacrificing Civil Liberties in the Name of National Security
David Cole and James X. Dempsey
[review Jules Boykoff, 138]

Race and Revolution
Max Shachtman
[review Yuichiro Onishi, 146]

Demonology
Kelly Stuart
The Masses are Asses
Pedro Pietri
[review Sun Yung Shin, 151]

Quiet Rumours: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader
Texts collected by Dark Star
[review Yedda Morrison, 155]

The Write Way Home: A Cuban-American Story
Emilio Bejel
[review Frederick Luis Aldama, 159]

World Bank Literature
Amitava Kumar, editor
[review David Buuck, 152]

The Future Is a Wish: Emily Jacir Travels Tight Spaces
Alan Gilbert [158]
Racial Actors, Liberal Myths
Josephine Lee

Some years ago at the University of Minnesota, in a class on contemporary American drama by playwrights of color, my students and I discussed a set of debates that took place in 1996 between playwright August Wilson and Robert Brustein. In this debate (transcribed on the pages of American Theatre magazine and continued in other venues1) Wilson differentiated between "art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity" ("Ground," 16). What Wilson promoted was the continuing development of black theater for black audiences, theater that would rally supporters in the vision of radical social change: "We can make a difference. Artists, playwrights, actors—we can be the spearhead of a movement to reignite and reanimate our people's positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truths rather than economic fallacies" ("Ground," 73).

Brustein, on the other hand, used the debate to voice once again his longstanding criticism of what he has called "racial exclusionism" in the theater, and to differentiate between what he in an earlier essay called two versions of "cultural diversity":

The first category, inspired by Martin Luther King's dream of integration, believes in open opportunity according to merit rather than color—as reflected, for example, in the "nontraditional" casting of roles on the basis of talent rather than racial or ethnic background. The second, which is driven by such divisive energies as the black-power fires ignited after King's assassination by figures like Malcolm X, is committed to strict racial and ethnic orthodoxy, and the empowerment of disadvantaged people through the agency of culture. The first category tries to unify, the second to separate."2

For Brustein, "minority theaters" had outlived their usefulness, and serve only to perpetuate an outmoded separatism. In his heated reply to Wilson's criticism, Brustein warns: "Must history be rolled back to the days of segregated theatres? ("Subsidized Separatism," 27). Instead, he advocated the well-worn idea of great theater as "universal": "I was talking about transcendence, about recognizing that the greatest art embraces a common humanity" ("Subsidized Separatism," 27).

My students' responses to this debate proved to be quite different from what I expected, given the general tone and politics of the class. They had responded to the plays we read (many of which were overtly "separatist" in their politics) with enthusiasm. Some told me how particular plays had radically changed the ways they thought about race. So I was confused and disturbed when many of these students sided with Brustein. Even students who were somewhat sympathetic to Wilson's cause (the siphoning away of money and support for black theaters, particularly in light of the multicultural initiatives for already well-funded white-dominated regional theaters), ultimately found Brustein's arguments to be more persuasive. In particular, they felt that Wilson's resistance to principles of "color-blind casting" and "multicultural theaters" was outmoded, even racist. A number of students openly praised Brustein's arguments in favor of casting for "talent" rather than "race," agreeing with his point that "universal" art "transcends racial difference." These students loudly proclaimed their excitement over writers who had been nurtured and fostered by the existence of "minority theaters" and cultural nationalism. Yet they saw no apparent contradiction between their support of Brustein's views and their embrace of works by writers such as Amiri Baraka, Luis Valdez, Frank Chin, Ntozake Shange, and yes, August Wilson. Much to my chagrin, Brustein emerged victorious in my classroom's rehashing of this debate, and I was left wondering what had happened.

As far as teaching horror stories go, this particular incident is fairly tame. At the same time, it made me realize that simply teaching more works by writers of color isn't enough, when students lack not only a historical, but also an ideological context for these works. I had assumed that I could concentrate on setting the stage for works that for me exemplified the radical legacies of civil rights and cultural nationalist activism. Because so few students remembered this time, I rationalized, the plays could perhaps bring these powerful forces for change back to life. But while the spirit of those revolutionary, dangerous, and hopeful times might have been resurrected through the plays we read, it remained detached from my students' experiences. When asked to speak about racism in its most blatant forms, they rose to the occasion; when confronted with the more hidden racisms embedded in neoconservative arguments over meritocracy, white privilege, and affirmative action, they covered their own confusion with polite assertions of color-blindness. And while teaching liberal-minded students to be very critical of clear instances of racism is fairly straightforward, teaching them to be critical of the fault-lines of their own liberalism is not.

That experience reinforced both what for me has long been a complex and ambivalent attitude toward the "official" post-civil rights discourse of race in this country, and, ultimately, the value of studying theater in the hopes of better understanding this attitude. Theater, of course, has served many a scholar as a metaphor for racial performance in everyday life. But studying the theater not only as metaphor, but as actual practice, can even further illuminate the complexities of contemporary racial politics. Theatrical performance focuses attention on the human body in action; constructions of race, of course, rely on the perception and interpretation of live bodies. Studying the theater thus brings to the forefront—makes visible in a particular direct and immediate way—how our contemporary lives are in fact shaped by race. And studying the theater can.

XCP 88

XCP 89
in fact, also highlight the contradictions that so many Americans experience over the terms of racial progress in the post-civil rights era.

How is the liberal emphasis on transcending racial categories, which might seem like such a promising foundation for anti-racist action, ultimately insufficient? Broadly, several critiques might well be made here: among them, how the partial success of civil rights reforms created a false sense of “progress” and “safety” in the past few decades; how neoconservative appropriations of terms such as “color-blindness” have been made that in fact maintain and perpetuate exclusionary practices and racist ways of thinking; and finally, how the liberal management of racial difference might lend itself to a “multiculturalism” that carefully displays racial visibility in order to “sell itself” as progress. More thorough philosophical discussions of liberal humanism might be found in a variety of sources. However, theater might remind us that the need for these critiques emerges in a much less concerted and sustained way, less through rigorous philosophical or political argument than through the confusion of experience.

The remainder of this essay will examine several instances of what we might call the “racial actor,” both metaphorical and literal: as stereotypical body; as a seemingly more flexible incarnation, the “liberal” actor; and finally, in the new versions of racial performance that emerged with cultural nationalism. I use various examples at turns tragic, theatrical, and whimsical; in each case, these examples suggest the power that such concepts of racial acting have over our imaginations today.

**TWO TRAGEDIES**

In 2000, two tragic stories of racial actors garnered widespread media attention. The more famous story was that of 61-year-old Taiwan-born scientist Wen Ho Lee. Lee was working at a bomb-design unit of Los Alamos Laboratory, specializing in hydrodynamics and computer modeling. He was dismissed from his job and jailed for nine months on charges of acting with “intent to injure the United States, and with the intent to secure an advantage to a foreign nation” (Purdy, 5 February 2001: 7). In prison, he was kept in solitary confinement in his cell 23 hours a day, shackled when he left his cell for exercise or meetings with lawyers, and only allowed to see his family one hour a week for English-only conversations supervised by the FBI. The case became highly polarized, with prosecutors accusing Lee of giving China and other countries access to information on nuclear weapons that could “in the wrong hands, change the global strategic balance” and Lee’s defenders accusing the FBI and prosecution of overzealous exaggeration and racial profiling. Wen Ho Lee was finally released on August 24, 2000 after pleading guilty to one felony count of illegally gathering and retaining national security data, with a sentence of time served and an agreement to undergo 60 hours of debriefing under oath by the government. At the time of his release, Judge James A. Parker apologized to Dr. Lee “for the unfair manner you were held in custody by the executive branch” (Purdy, 5 February 2001: 14).

From investigator’s charges, Wen Ho Lee was typecast as a spy, a man who disguised his “true” face underneath the otherwise assimilated mask of quiet civilian and family man. Lee “had always left investigators feeling that he was hiding something” (Purdy, 5 February 2001: 3). Prosecutors based their case on his “secretive manner” which to them indicated proof of intentional wrongdoing (Purdy, 5 February 2001: 7). “We may not be able to show he was a spy,” said one F.B.I. official, “but we can show he was not just a wayward scientist” (Purdy, 5 February 2001: 6). The bureau’s final conclusion was ultimately voiced by a top official: “I don’t think anyone fully understands Wen Ho Lee” (Purdy, 5 February 2001: 3). This image was furthered by its extensive coverage in the New York Times; even after Lee was acquitted of the most serious charges of espionage, the Times reported that: “In a tale laced with cross-cultural subtleties, the arcana of atomic science and the feints of the intelligence world, the most indecipherable character is the man at the center” (Purdy, 4 February 2001: 4).

Another story also got wide media coverage, although for a much shorter period of time. Anthony Dyain Lee was a 36-year-old actor who was just beginning to receive more widespread recognition for his supporting work on television (**NYCD Blue, Brooklyn South, E.R.**) and film (**Liar, Liar**). Lee had also had extensive work in regional theatre: *The Kentucky Cycle* at the Intiman Theatre, *Spunk* and *The Cider House Rules* at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, *A Raisin in the Sun* at the Seattle Group Theatre, and the title role of *Othello* at the Seattle Shakespeare Festival. Police officers were responding to a complaint about noise at a Halloween Party in the exclusive Benedict Canyon area of Los Angeles at about 1 a.m. on October 28 when one of the officers fired nine shots at guest Lee, hitting him four times in the back and head. The LAPD said Hopper fired after he shone his flashlight into a room from outside and Lee pointed a gun at him. The gun turned out to be a rubber replica of a .357 magnum Desert Eagle. The case became more controversial after Lee’s family decided to sue the LAPD for a $100 million dollars. Attorney Johnnie L. Cochran represented the family; Cochran commented that the Los Angeles Police Department “has never seen a shooting they didn’t think they could justify.”

In the circumstances behind this tragedy, false appearances also seemed important. News accounts stated that Lee, a 6-foot, 4-inch African American, was dressed in a devil mask and long black cape. The policeman, Tarriel Hopper, claimed that he “fearred for his life because he believed Lee was pointing a pistol at him.” It wasn’t clear if Lee knew that Hopper, who is also African American, was a real policeman and not just another party guest. Some at the party said other guests were wearing LAPD uniforms as Halloween costumes. It is not clear whether Officer Hopper gave Lee any warning before he killed him. However, Rick Hull, one of the party hosts, said that the officers did not identify themselves.

---

XCP 90
Both the tragedies of Wen Ho Lee and Anthony Dwin Lee suggest judgments and misjudgments based on a highly racialized perception of bodies and actions. The contradictions involved here, however, also make us aware that racial actors are currently subject to a far more complex script than might at first be imagined. In one interpretation, both men are the victims of racial profiling, singled out, cast, and judged by certain familiar racial stereotypes. Hopper might well have reacted to the vision of Anthony Dwin Lee as the devil incarnate; the menacing black man with the gun standing in a darkened room. Those who accused Wen Ho Lee of spying saw him as the “inscrutable” and untrustworthy alien, who despite his American citizenship remained loyal to the enemy state. Ironically, in Lee’s case that the prosecution’s case broke down in court in part because it could not determine the enemy with any certainty. China, Taiwan, and even Australia and Switzerland were all countries that Lee was accused of trying to aid.

But there is another aspect of these stories, one that complicates this straightforward interpretation. A different vision of the racial actor emerges through the news accounts of these tragedies: a contrast between the stereotype and the other roles that were presumably available to both Wen Ho Lee and Anthony Dwin Lee. News stories stressed that both were successful professionals, whose mobility might be held in stark contrast to the typecasting to which both were subjected. In other words, these two stories seem all the more tragic because both Wen Ho Lee and Anthony Dwin Lee were also presented as racial actors who presumably had many more choices than those usually held in thrall by limited and exaggerated stereotypes. This leads to the charge—implicit in various accounts of both situations—that while these men may have been indeed “mislabeled,” perhaps they themselves invited their own misjudgment by inadvertently “acting” in a misleading manner. Perhaps they played their “dark” selves in front of audiences all too willing to believe that that role revealed the entire man. If not a spy, why did Wen Ho Lee copy classified information and then destroy a series of tapes? Why did he take trips to China and Taiwan that allowed him to sustain scientific exchange? Why did he write job letters that suggested that he might in fact be willing to work for anyone other than the United States government? Why did Anthony Dwin Lee dress up in a devil costume and invite violence by pointing a rubber gun?

Why they did so is a matter of speculation, but perhaps the easiest explanation has to do with the illusion of safety and the easing of cautiousness—tipped sometimes as racial paranoia—in a supposedly more progressive society. This fantasy of safety is fostered by a official discourse that celebrates its post-civil rights status, outing the elimination many of the most easily-identified legal forms of racism and relegating racism in general to the evils of the past. It is also encouraged by the particular spaces in which both men lived and worked, communities where scientific collaboration and artistic expression could take place apparently safe from the intrusion of racial violence. The contradiction between this myth of racial safety and the continued presence of racism is particularly painful in Anthony Dwin Lee’s story. One friend told the *Los Angeles Times*, “His biggest fear was getting killed by cops, because he’s a tall Black man.” But Lee also inhabited a seemingly much more liberal world. Of a recent Seattle production of *Uncle Vanya* (in which he played Astrov) under Russian director Leonid Anisimov, he is quoted as saying, “The thing about Chekhov’s work is that it’s really about playing scenes with great integrity. Being black or white or anything else is irrelevant. It’s about the truth of the words and the feelings” (Misha Berson, *American Theatre* Jan. 2001).

**THE LIBERAL ACTOR: MAKE-UP BOOKS AND RACIAL PASSING**

American and European theaters have long made race the dividing line between bodies that can act and bodies that can not. Historically the white male body has been privileged as the neutral body par excellence, the blank slate upon which an entire range of characters could be enacted. Richard Dyer has suggested, “[W]hite power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular”4; this form of power and privilege is given to white actors lauded for their ability to play characters of other races. “Colored” bodies, on the other hand, were valued far differently, as natural bodies that were incapable of being anything other than themselves. Thus while the white male body was thought of in terms of its art, the “colored” body was noted for its artlessness, its “authenticity.” If the white male actor is privileged as the “neutral body”—able to play roles from minstrelsy to realism—performers of color were for centuries marked in ways that made their racial characteristics incompatible with any idea of “talent.” From Ira Aldridge to Sessue Hayakawa, performers of color clearly demonstrated their prowess on the stage and in film, but unfortunately, only a few had opportunities to demonstrate their talents in playing anything other than stereotypical roles.

In many ways, this situation changed for the better in the civil rights period, with the encouragement of new productions of plays by writers of color, the establishment of “minority” theaters, and the beginnings of a push for “non-traditional” casting in commercial theaters. The ideal of “color-blind” casting was particularly well suited to the liberal ethos of the time, and promised a radical challenge not only to the dominance of white body as the ideal actor. Liberal integrationism’s strategy was to emphasize the assimilative potential of those who had been racially excluded; it responded to the material reality of racial difference and its effects through a framework based on Enlightenment ideas of individualism, rationality, and progress. As Gary Peller suggests, much of conventional law and legal scholarship adheres to this ideology, that “which locates racial oppression in the social structure of prejudice and stereotype based on skin color, and which identifies progress with the transcendence of a racial consciousness about the world.”4 Once legal barriers toward equal rights for individuals had been dissolved,
it would become clear over time that the “Others” would be in essence just like those who had excluded them. Racism must be blamed on prejudice and ignorance; once people could be made to see the true sides of one another, to “see past” race, then an enlightened populace would live in harmony. Though a concerted effort to educate people to emphasize their common, more “universal” characteristics rather than their superficial differences, “ethnic identity” would “become a thing of the past.”15

What liberal integrationism suggested was a particular notion of the racial actor that imagined race as simply a surface or “false mask” over a “true self,” a mask that ultimately must be disregarded if the society were to progress towards its color-blind ideal. Color-blind casting seemed to embody this in the most immediate ways. The 1964 casting of African American actress Diana Sands opposite Alan Alda in Broadway’s The Owl and the Pussycat was deemed a great success by critic Otis Guernsey; this is not just “a sample of casual integration outrage” because “Miss Sands is a charming and abundantly talented actress.” Where “integrated” productions did not work, according to Guernsey, were instances in which racial concerns got in the way of the “true” play. He writes of the 1974 staging of Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, in which the role of Lennie was played by James Earl Jones, that “the added interracial tensions gave little to the drama and actually blurred it in some scenes.”16

Thus the paradox of color-blind casting is also the paradox of the ideology of liberal integrationism. On the one hand, since integrationism honed its racial philosophy in response to open demonstrations of racial inequality, it had to acknowledge and disprove the significance of existing differences and group affinities. On the other hand, integrationism saw these traits simply as exterior “masks” over an integral self, which must ultimately be rejected or at least relegated to secondary importance in order to achieve its ideal of color-blindness. Any emphasis on racial identity that would complicate the individual’s entry into an unqualified “American” identity had to be discarded. Race thus became the actor’s false mask over a more “universal” humanness; nonetheless it was a mask that maintained its stubborn presence no matter how hard one worked to eradicate it.

Two types of racial actors emerge in the post-civil rights period: the liberal ideal of the self free from its racial mask, and the egregiously racial stereotype that such a construction was designed to counter. Make-up books from the twentieth century provide a particularly striking set of examples by which to illustrate this contrast. If we look at how racial performance was constructed through the art of stage make-up, we see clear evidence of the racial actor as envisioned through stereotype; we also see, in much more recent make-up manuals the beginning of a much more liberal incarnation.

Significant sections in a variety of theatrical make-up books are devoted to the details of how white actors might be most convincingly transformed into other racial types, using various cosmetics, tape, and (later) latex appliances. For the most part, such a charge remains consistent even in books written relatively recently; in particular, playing “Oriental” characters is still seen to be the province of white actors.17 [Fig 2] These illustrations suggest the persistence of yellowface’s popularity, despite the challenge; as Yoji Lane’s Stage Make-up claims, “Of all make-up the transformation of Europeans into Orientals is one of the most difficult.”18

However, another vision of the racial actor might indeed be seen in more recent theatrical make-up books. A 1975 edition of Richard Corson’s Stage Makeup (called “the Bible of stage make-up”) includes a section which at first focuses on the problem of creating “Oriental Eyes” for the non-Asian actor. But Corson also includes a section on advice for eyes for “Orientals who wish to play Caucasians,” these actors, he suggests, can also alter their eyes: “Slanting eyes, unless they are very pronounced, are not always a problem, since Caucasian eyes are sometimes slanted. But if they are a problem, the slant can be counteracted to some extent by bringing the shadow at the outer corner of the eye downward instead of upward.”19 To illustrate, he includes a striking set of photographs of the actor Randall Kim as Titus Andronicus. [Fig. 3]

The example of Kim’s transformation seems to indicate, again, that racial difference is a mask that can be, with some careful makeup, removed in order to show the “true” merit of the actor underneath. Yet though the main impulse—to insist that Kim is a meritorious actor, worthy of any role regardless of his racial exterior—is a laudable one, such transformations remain complex. The example of Kim playing Titus, transforming through the magic of stage makeup the “Oriental” into the “Caucasian” does offer a challenge to the primacy of the white actor, but it is a challenge that can easily co-exist with a more basic assumption of the book: that the book’s consumers will primarily be white character actors called upon to play a host of “others.” Clearly this illustrates, to some measure, the desire to extend the privilege of the “neutral body”—so long confined to whiteness—to the actor of color, but such an inclusion raises rather than answers a host of questions. To what has Kim been transformed? Why is the Shakespearean fantasy of the character Titus typed as “Caucasian” rather than “Asian”? Why include this example, rather than Kim in a role such as Tam Lum in Chin’s The Chickencoop Chinaman (a role he originated in New York)? And does Kim really look “Caucasian”? Does he look “Asian” or rather like the stereotypical stage “Oriental”?

My point here is that 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 by first by de-politicizing 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—where visible difference is important only to suggest that ultimately “color doesn’t really matter”—in a sense
ZULU PIERCED NOSE AND SAW EDGED TEETH

SLANTING EYES MADE WITH ADHESIVE TAPE

TO SLANT THE EYE FOR CHINESE AND JAPANESE CHARACTERS, APPLY ADHESIVE TAPE AT THE LOWER EDGE FIRST, THEN PULL UP AND SMOOTHEN ON THE SKIN. THIS GIVES A NATURAL "ALMOND EYE". TAPE IS GREASE PAINTED ALL OVER.

TO WIDEN THE FACE

OTHER MONGOLIAN TYPES

LAYERS OF ABSORBENT COTTON ARE HELD IN PLACE WITH FLEXIBLE COLLODIUM UNTIL THE DESIRED SHAPE IS ATTAINED. FLEXIBLE COLLODIUM IS FINALLY PAINTED ALL OVER THE COTTON THEN COVERED WITH FOUNDATION GEL.

FIG. 55: Note: In the lower part of square No. 55 (teeth) The white section is reversed by the application of black ink.

Dotted lines show eyebrow and eye lining.

FIG. 32. MANDARIN

The Author in his own make-up of a Chinese character so often misinterpreted.

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2
allows this liberal thought to co-exist with the very racism that it had tried to eradicate.

The sad irony is, of course, that this rhetoric of liberalism on the one hand promises inclusion and racial equality, but on the other hand not only fails to counter, but perhaps even serves to disguise racism. It does so by suppressing or erasing reminders of racial and social difference, promoting instead stories of racial success that assure us that we shall, if not have, overcome. There might be gentle reminders of the “work that still has to be done,” but without any indication that institutionalized racism is still really present. Thus, to return to my opening example, Robert Brustein can tout a “color-blind” notion of theater as an art that ought to transcend race and “embraces a common humanity,” no matter what the color of the playwright or actor; and, in the next breath, accuse those artists who point to the political and social nature of racial inequality of disqualifying themselves from greatness. Thus Brustein comments on Wilson’s plays that “by choosing to chronicle the oppression of black people through each of the decades, Wilson has fallen into a monotonous tone of victimization which happens to be the leitmotif of his TCG [Theatre Communications Group] speech” (Brustein 27).

Ultimately, this paradox provides not only a convenient way of silencing discussions of racism (“Why can’t you people stop talking about race?”), but also allows a deeper conservative stance. Race is seen as a “choice” of the actor now presumably allowed many possible roles. Those inclined towards a more radical politics are faulted for being self-segregating, choosing to “play the race card.” Race should only be allowed as a statement of its own obsolescence, its ultimate lack of importance; racial visibility should only declare itself in terms of its desired invisibility. The problem of race lies not with the perpetuation of racist institutions and systems of thinking, but with individuals who somehow get “stuck in the past,” whether they are white supremacists or nostalgic cultural nationalists.

If the myth of the model minority is any indication, this is particularly felicitous fantasy by which to mark Asian Americans. For some, Asian Americans have entered the realm of white privilege; they no longer qualify as disadvantaged minorities and thus presumably no longer have to worry about racial discrimination, at least not in the way that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans do. If racism and adversity can be mentioned, it is only in the context of success stories that demonstrate how persistence and hard work overcome such obstacles. Examples of famous Asian Americans are inevitably accompanied by familiar narratives demonstrating immigrant “success” and the American way. At the same time, these Asian Americans “count”—as long as their numbers remain modest—as proof of diversity. In this way, Asian Americans too have become managed and manageable bodies of color, whose inclusion can easily be touted as proof of racial progress. With this in mind, we might well be cautious about seeing how the bodies of professional Asian American actors are transformed into privileged, “white” bodies, or less drastically, impressed into the service of touting a “multicultural” look that suggests that civil rights has really put an end to racism in this country.

Liberalism not only weakens the initiative to address racial tension and social inequality; it also makes possible the appropriation of its terms by neoconservatives, who use terms such as “color-blindness” and “meritocracy” in order to wage war against affirmative action and other inclusive measures. In the next section, we will explore how this might be revealed through some of the contemporary discourse of cross-racial casting.

DISAPPOINTING OTHELLOS: CROSS-RACIAL CASTING AND THE BAGGAGE OF RACE

In a review entitled “New Clarity From a Colorblind ‘Othello,’” the New York Times reviewer D. J. R. Bruckner praises a production of Othello by the National Asian American Theater Company, based in New York:

Remove the appearance of sharp racial differences from “Othello” and the difference in the play is so striking that it makes you wonder how many other stories have been distorted in our imaginations by our historical obsession with race.

In the National Asian-American Theater Company’s production at the Connelly Theater, all the actors are Americans of Asian descent—Korea, China, Japan or the Philippines—and the references to Othello as “black” or “dark” quickly become nothing more than mutters in the
catalog of slanders hurled at him by Iago and Roderigo. That Othello is different from the Venetians is hardly remarkable on a stage filled with actors so strikingly different from one another.

What happens is that the tragedy becomes much more insistently a contest between a great warrior who is largely innocent of the manipulative malice of the world around him and a subordinate of quick imagination and boundless evil who acknowledges to a confederate too stupid to understand him that "I am not what I am."

... after three hours one still leaves this performance thinking mostly about how clear the plot is and how swift its development if all the baggage of race we tend to bring to it is simply left at the door.21

To those of us familiar with the directives of contemporary Asian American theater companies, the ironies and contradictions of such praise are hard to miss. In one respect, the very establishment of an Asian American theater company is of course all about racial politics in their most overt form. Asian American theater companies were founded, beginning in 1965 with East West Players in Los Angeles, as a means of providing training, employment, and visibility for Asian American actors, directors, and playwrights who had been traditionally excluded from appearing in American theaters. Even a company such as the National Asian American Theater Company, founded with the purpose of playing European and American "classics" by authors such as Chekhov, Brecht, Molliere, O'Neill, and Lorca, sees this racially-defined "promotion" as part of its mission.22 So what is the mechanism by which these performances by actors of color are judged successful only in terms of their perceived ability to "erase" race—even from a play that is as full of racial politics as is Shakespeare's Othello?

The ideology of liberalism—seeing race as simply a "surface" over the "core" of the individual—was easily adapted to characterizations and situations already familiar to audiences, including plays that centered around middle-class family struggles and a characteristically "American" style of actor training that valued the demonstration of interior motivations and a coherent and essential self.23 On the one hand, since liberal integration was developed to address racial inequality and ameliorate racism, it had to acknowledge perceived, pre-existing racial differences. On the other hand, these traits were imagined simply as exterior "masks" over an integral self, that must ultimately be rejected, or at least relegated to secondary importance, in order to achieve full integration. Racial features, whether physiological, linguistic, or gestural, would matter in that they would assure the audience of the authenticity of the surface; however, the character must also reveal a deracinated "self" of a more "universal" constitution that could "correct" this perception. Liberalism thus proposed two visions of the "authentic"—one located in the "reality" of the "colored" body, the other imagined "beneath" its surface—dual, contradictory imperatives that made necessary acknowledging the visible impact of race even while ultimately disclaiming its importance.

Contemporary versions of cross-racial casting demonstrate some of these fault-lines: the tensions that arise around integrationism's agendas for racial representation and its dual imperative of staging and upstaging race. I would argue that the recent emphasis on "color-blind" casting (and its attendant problems) originates in this split. Clinton Turner Davis and Harry Newman, list four broad categories of "non-traditional" casting formalized in the 1980s by the non-Traditional Casting Project—these include:

- 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 a 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"24

Examined in terms of race, what these categories reveal is precisely that anxiety around either "seeing" or "not seeing" racial difference. "Societal," "cross-cultural" and "conceptual" casting all have the potential to highlight racial difference; "[color]blind" casting, on the other hand, actively does not recognize it. The ordering of these categories first looks at "race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability" and then looks away, towards a kind of integrated utopia brought into being by color-blind casting, in which actors are valued for their "true" abilities rather than the color of their skin and acting talent is measured in terms that do not encompass race.

As suggested in Davis and Newman's terms, contemporary cross-racial casting can be seen as a way to re-envision racial difference—to "see" it anew. It does this through challenging the traditional domain of the actor's art. As suggested earlier, the white male body has long been privileged as the ideal "neutral" body. White male actors have been allowed to represent a range of "authentic" Others, receiving praise for their "artfulness"; actors of color, on the other hand, have often been valued for their "natural" abilities (for instance African American singers and dancers) rather than for their ability to create, impersonate, or otherwise inhabit other characters. "Cross-racial" casting challenges this privilege, permitting actors of color to play and be judged by their ability to represent a range of characterizations, rather than to be relegated to the stereotypes of the "natural"—rather than artful—body. If we look at this in one way, cross-racial casting in its many incarnations is truly radical—challenging, at least in acting terms, one aspect of example of what George Lipsitz has called the "possessive investment in
whiteness" by allowing actors of color to appear in a range of roles previously barred from them. 25

However, the pragmatic redistribution of artistic capital, not to mention actual money, was upstaged by another aim for cross-racial casting—this time one that located its hope more specifically in “color-blind” casting. Liberal integrationism’s progressive mission used the theater to teach the lesson that race is but an inconsequential “surface” or “mask” over an actor’s “essential” self. Theater could help educate its audience as to the inconsequentiality of racial difference, preserving the valued “neutrality” of the actor’s body—its reputed ability to stand in for all “humanity”—even while extending it, presumably, to more actors of color on the basis of some deracinated notion of “merit” alone.

As long as the ideal of “color-blindness” existed in tandem with a certain degree of “race-consciousness,” such a message could speak for social reform. “Color-blind” casting could create a theatrical utopia whose race-neutral principles in fact served as reminders of the all-too-conspicuous racial inequalities of the world outside. The integrated stage was held a stark contrast to the bleakly segregated world outside the theater. However, as the tensions and drama of civil rights activism became less of a focus of media attention, and as racial tensions dropped out of the public eye, “color-blindness” took on a new, much more insidious meaning. The imperative to somehow “free” the play, the performance, the actor from his or her race becomes a dismissal of racial difference as something inconsequential. Critics could marvel, as Mr. Bruckner does, at how the talents of the actor of color allows one to see through the “baggage of race” to some truthful insight that lay below the skin.

“Color-blindness” has become deployed not as an idealized vision of a world without inequality, but as a weapon against racial consciousness. This shifting of terms arose in response to liberalism’s paradox: “that it requires the use of race as a socially significant category, despite the fact that the deepest aims of integrationist ideology point toward the transcendence of race consciousness.” (Peller 131). Color-blind casting moved from being a mode of contrast—a vision of an idealized color-blind world that intensified one’s awareness of the color-conscious world off the stage—to barring the open discussion of racial difference; thus effectively reinstating racial silence rather than the hoped for racial “invisibility.”

Thus the concept of “color-blindness” at best makes us question what can be done with cross-racial casting, and at worst, serves as a tool of neoconservative agendas. If cross-racial casting was instituted to give economic equality to actors of color, “color-blind” casting debilitates this goal by removing “race” as a consideration for employment and instead positing some criteria of “merit” that is not racially inflected. Even while American theater remains largely dominated by white actors, white directors, and white playwrights, there is the insinuation that efforts at minority inclusion have gone too far and that whites are now the victims of “preferential treatment.” In an interview, Helen Hunt reminisces about an audition for Measure for Measure that she did for the Public Theatre in New York; and how she uses her own sense of disempowerment in order to fuel her audition scene.

This is an interesting audition to talk about . . . because I went in knowing that the odds were 1000 to 1 against me. They were a breeze away from hiring a black actress and from casting the whole play around the fact that she was black—but I somehow got them to say that they would see me and I had to fly in for it. I had read so many bad movie scripts and so many things I didn’t want to do, that to find something that I really wanted to do that much—not going for it would have just haunted me; I would have felt like a wimp . . . so I worked on it. I worked with a coach and I sat down with my dictionaries and my thesaurus and my four different editions of the play and pads of paper and just worked and worked and worked . . . and by the time I went in I practically knew it, and I had written things in the margin that I wanted to play. Here’s a scene about a woman pleading with this man “Please don’t kill my brother.” She’s coming up against a big authority figure and she’s scared, so there I am at the Public Theatre coming up against this big fancy director and Kevin Kline who wanted an actress with a different color of skin. So I could use the “You have what I want and I feel small and you look big” dynamic in the scene, and I left there knowing that I probably didn’t get this part, but I felt that it was thrilling for me. 26

Hunt’s feelings—which she uses to her advantage in playing the scene—are built around a perception of her being intrinsically disadvantaged simply because she doesn’t have the right “color of skin.” Underlying her account is the argument that merit, hard work, talent, inspiration all come to nothing because they are pitted against a racial barrier that—one cannot help but conclude—is indefensible. The arguments that allowed contemporary cross-racial casting to challenge an almost exclusively white stage have now come full circle. A much more blunt statement of this resentment might be found in a interview with the British actor Ian Richardson, where Richardson discusses how he was cast for the role of Nehru for the series Lord Mountbatten—The Last Viceroy:

It didn’t seem to trouble anyone in India that I was playing an Asiatic, but in England, yes. We did one scene before we went out to India, in the Islington County Hall, which has a rotunda that is exactly like the rotunda in the Indian Parliament in Delhi, and we did the ‘Freedom at midnight’ speech. I only did one take, because at the end of the one take, not Indians, but West Indians, came in with placards saying ‘No white actors with black faces’, and so we had to abandon filming for that day. In India, on the contrary, the people who were the extras actually thought
I was a reincarnation of the man himself. They had to be physically stopped from bending down and kissing my sandals; it was quite, quite bizarre. It's typical of England and of Islington in particular.

In actual fact, for the record, I was not initially considered for Pandit Nehru at all. My photograph was submitted, with my height, my weight, my CV, as a contender for the role of Mountbatten. I was not considered right for that, so I was turned down, but they kept my photograph and my details, because there were so many English establishment figures going to be in it, that there'd got to be something for me to play. The producer, said to her office staff 'Run these photographs through the copying machine, so that we can pout them up on the wall.' My photograph was the first one to go through the copying machine, and it came out rather dark, but they pinned it up on the wall anyway. I wasn't there, but the story goes that the producer looked at it, and then she got some of that white type-correcting fluid, and painted a little congress cap on the top of my head, and then took her pencil and darkened the eyes a bit, and then she said to the girls 'Who's that?' and they said 'Oh, it's Nehru', and she said 'No, it's Ian Richardson', and that's how I got the part. She'd come that day from having sat through four hundred auditions among the Asian community of actors.

Four hundred, and not one of them was right. Now, unfortunately, since they're obliged to cast within the Asian community, or, indeed within the black community, only now and again, will one get a really wonderful performance. I know this is a cruel thing to say, but I rather suspect that we're in for several decades of rather disappointing Othellos.27

NEW RACIAL IDENTIFICATIONS: OUTING KEANU

We have been talking mainly about how the liberal conception of the racial actor both counters the limitations of racial stereotype, but at the same time produces its own contradictions. In treating race as merely a mask in order to maintain that the true self is "beyond" race, the liberal actor makes itself vulnerable to a host of imposter: insidious neoconservative claims of "color-blindness" and meritocracy, or a carefully managed "multiculturalism" that changes only the face of privilege.

I would like to end somewhat more hopefully, with a somewhat playful example of how a third kind of racial actor—radically different from the deracinated liberal actor—might likewise occupy significant attention on the stage of contemporary American racial politics. Elsewhere, I've written about how the racial actors who arose from the consciousness-raising of cultural nationalism challenge both the racial stereotype and, even more significantly, the liberal actor's racially "neutral" body.29 If liberalism, fearing the stereotype's power, attempted to render racial visibility ultimately meaningless—a "surface" characteristic over an essential self—cultural nationalism remade the racialized body into a reminder of past and existing inequalities, a gesture of protest at white domination, and a thing of pride. The racial markers of skin, hair, facial feature, gesture, clothing, language became signals of a positive, rather than negative difference; a difference that, moreover, must be intensified and heightened. Cultural nationalism's reinvention of race sought to stress what it felt to be an indelible and inescapable racial difference, both biological and cultural. In direct opposition to liberal integrationism, cultural nationalism reiterated, even insisted upon, the racial body as a reminder—not just a declarative statement, but an imperative—of difference. Thus the characteristic way that these performances made race not simply "reality" but in fact "larger than life," played its spectacular qualities. If liberal integrationism felt that race was a false "mask" over the deracinated real self, cultural nationalism insisted on the importance of the racial "mask" as a ritualized enactment that would bring forth the "true self." Not only was a new vocabulary for the performance of racial identity unleashed by cultural nationalism but also a new paradigm for how one might relate to these bodies in the process of racial transformation: how these bodies become the objects of interest, attraction, and desire. Even though cultural nationalist performances failed to supplant the ruling sentiments of liberalism, they nonetheless impressed themselves indelibly upon how an American public might think of racial actors today.

Although politicians may argue on the basis of one or another, in popular discourse it is clear the impact of all versions of these racial actors is ever present. One way of seeing this is through looking at how professional actors' bodies, particularly celebrities, are "theorized" by their audiences, interpreted and re-interpreted in light of how they might suit or challenge each of these models.

A few years ago, while doing an internet search for "Asian American actors," I came upon a lively debate around a web-based poll that asked the questions, "Who is the Greatest Asian Male Star of All Time?" and "Who is the Greatest Asian Female Star of All Time?"29

What inspired the most heated debate, however, was the survey's leading question: "Is Keano Reeves (Speed, A Walk in the Clouds, The Matrix) an Asian American actor?" Embedded in this discussion were many of the arguments and attitudes around the concept of "racial actors"; like our earlier examples, one argument seems to be inseparable from another. Keano, a number of contributors suggested, could not be counted as Asian American because he had chosen to identify himself as white. Others argued that, biologically speaking, Keano had to be included as Asian American (or Canadian) because of his part-Chinese father. Is biological racial lineage is (at least in part) what identifies the actor and defines his or her roles? Or is it some aspect of "choice"—whether the actor's race depends on how the actor chooses to identify himself, either through his roles or through his celebrity life (such as interviews)?
• It's really simple. Keanu passes as white and is therefore 'white' to society's eyes.
• Keanu Reeves was cast in "Little Buddha" How more Asian can you be?
• ok...i am no keanu fan but the comments here about him not being aa are just hilarious. so you want him to just say in an interview that he is half asian? "oh the matrix was fun, by the way i'm half asian" (?).."yes, i am currently making more projects, and oh, my dad is chinese-hawaiian" (?) give me a break. perhaps he's not being asked! didn't that ever occur to you people? well have your read ALL his interviews? and i just read a rolling stone article where he is the cover and his being asian was mentioned, and it says that he chose to keep his exotic keanu name bc he was offered to change it.
• Keanu Reeves is so not Asian. Yeah, he is an Asian mix, but he doesn't consider himself Asian. He calls himself a white boy! When has he ever been visible in the Asian community?? Plus, white[s] consider him white because he looks white. Russell Wong is a mix too but he's considered Asian because he looks Asian and he considers himself Asian. Plus...he loves Asian woman. hehe =)
• How do you know what Keanu would say if someone asked him if he was Asian. Obviously, he has told people that he is part Asian, how else would we know then?? Also, he works with Yuen Ping as his choreographer for the Matrix and he has only good things to say about his Asian Martial Arts Coach!
• I am half-Asian and half-white, but I have never had an opportunity to "choose" my race, since I take after my Japanese father more than my mother. If I told someone I was white, they would probably laugh at me. I am proud of being Asian, but I have a natural (I suppose) resentment for someone like Keanu Reeves.
• So what if Keanu never said he was Asian in any interviews. Why would he bring it up unless the interviewer asked him? If he was asked, he wouldn't deny it. He has Chinese blood and that's all that matters. I am 100% Chinese and even if I thought I was white, or like I was white or looked like I was white-it doesn't make me white!
• Keanu Reeves is not Asian!!!!! How can he be Asian when he doesn't consider himself to be Asian? And who cares if he has some Chinese blood. Have you ever heard Keanu Reeves say he was in any magazine articles or interviews? The answer is no. Some people who are mixed of Asian and white can choose which race he or she wishes to be... And Keanu Reeves is not Asian because he chooses not to be.

The liberal impulse to make race a matter of choice, a mere "surface" over a "true" self is hopelessly complicated in this discussion by the constant, ever-present awareness that such "choices" are mitigated by pre-existing categories. Keanu's is never a neutral body, no matter how "white" it seems. Even the commentators who insist that the actor's race doesn't matter, nonetheless preface their arguments with this racial disclaimer.

• Keanu is Asian, but who cares? We're all humans. What difference does it make? Are we all going to see his movies just because he is part asian?
• How about Naomi Campbell? She is Asian too. She has Asian blood which accounts for her beautifully slanted eyes. Let us forget about race and all just intermarry for love. Race only accounts for 10 per cent of our differences. We are all creatures of God and Love is the most important. Rather than focusing on the body, let us focus on our souls!

Embedded within this debate about the ability of the multiracial body to pass as white, or about the liberal actor's "choice," is a desire to claim the figure of the celebrity as a source of racial pride, or to dismiss him on the same grounds.

• Wake up my Asian people!! Why do you guys even care if Keanu Reeves or Naomi Campbell is Asian or not?? You act as if these two celebrities play a major role in Asian-American culture. They don't even identify as being Asian. And if they read some of these comments about them being labeled Asian, they would laugh their asses off. I know what you guys are doing. You wanna "claim" these people as being a part of our race because it gives you a sense of pride. And that they are a part of our culture. As Asians and minorities of America, let's embrace people who are actually Asian and actually talk about their Asian ancestry. And let's not worry about these celebrities with questionable Asian roots.

It would not be appropriate, by any stretch of the imagination, to wrestle Keanu into the vision of the politically radical vision of cultural nationalism; as one contributor to the discussion posted, "Who really cares if he's Asian American or not? He doesn't do anything for Asian Americans anyways, he's not blazing the way for any new Asian American actors. Yes he's biologically part-Asian but he's NOT AN 'ASIAN-AMERICAN ACTOR.' Yet in a conversation dominated by talk of racial passing and "choice," there is another way of reading Keanu, albeit somewhat against the grain of what I've just said. Perhaps in a few of the comments about Keanu, as spontaneous as they are, we can still catch a glimpse of this third type of racial actor: the body that is racially identifiable, but whose race is neither a stereotype, a burden, nor a false mask. Keanu by no means deserves the title of "Asian American" if one thinks about such a term as requiring a certain openly political allegiance, visible difference yoked to activism. But even as this imperative prevents him, for some, from being truly "Asian American," the rampant fetishism of Keanu's body, and particularly his eyes, also point to a kind of desire that marks his body as different from that of both the stereotype and the liberal actor who is able to "choose" multiple racial identifications with ease.
• Keanu, that hottie is definitely Asian. Love that guy!
• He has Chinese eyes and is part Chinese. He's an Asian actor.
• Keanu is an Asian American. His eyes are almond shaped, there's no doubt.
• He's such a cutie.
• NO doubt about it. Keanu is Asian American. Look at his eyes. He is definitely part Chinese. He is so sexy.

Some might claim that these comments smack of the stereotypical exoticism of feminized Asian bodies with beautiful eyes; Keanu is described as “hot” or “exotic.” At the same time, such heartfelt remarks also open another avenue of desire. Keanu’s body is not only sexy; its sexiness allows it to become a different kind of empowering icon, a fetish reminiscent of some of those revolutionary bodies created by much more radical art such as the cultural nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For these viewers, Keanu cannot “pass” as white; however, his “Asian” eyes are precisely what makes him so “hot.”

It is again the actor’s eyes—so difficult to disguise even through the use of the mosteticculous stage makeup or latex appliances—that give him away. However, in the final comments, praise, desire, and racial power have a somewhat different blend—rendering Keanu another type of racial actor altogether.

Endnotes
5 Among the acts that the NY Times called “curious, if not criminal” behavior was a particular “appearance”: “In 1994, Dr. Lee surprised laboratory officials when he appeared uninvited at a Los Alamos briefing for visiting Chinese scientists and warmly greeted China’s leading bomb designer.” Investigators wondered about the familiarity revealed here. “Dr. Lee, it turned out, had met the bomb designer in a Beijing hotel room years before” (Purdy, Feb. 4: 3), an encounter he had not disclosed to laboratory officials. According to F. B. I. experts, China prefers to spy by “mining nuggets from countless foreigners bearing secret knowledge rather than relying on a few master spies” (Purdy, Feb. 4: 3-4). “Mr. Moore, the F.B.I.’s former China espionage analyst, said that while the Chinese routinely seek information from visiting scientists of all nationalities, they concentrate on ethnic Chinese, including Taiwanese, by appealing to a “perceived obligation to help China” (Feb. 4: 13).
17 Fig. 32 “Mandarin”; Fig. 55-56 “Zulu Pierced Nose”. “Other Mongolian Types” from Rudolph J. Litz, The Last Word in Make-Up (New York: Dramatists Play Service: First published 1942, rev. 1977).
19 Yoji Lane, Stage Makeup (Minneapolis: The Northwestern Press, 1950) p. 80.
22 See the NAATCO mission statement at <http://www.naactco.org>: The National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO) was “founded in 1989 by Richard Eng and Mia Katigbak to: promote and support Asian American actors, directors, designers, and technicians through the performance of European and American classical and contemporary works; actively develop an Asian American audience and encourage Asian Americans to become a significant part of a more diverse audience in American theatre; cultivate in non-Asian Americans an appreciation of Asian American contributions to the development of theatre arts in America today.” Viewed September 19, 2003.
23. Through the emphasis on capturing the “inner life” of characters, the Method actor could seek to create an “authentic” characterization that could encompass both an outer racial characteristic, yet reveal an inner self that could be seen as ultimately free from race. Though marked as “black” or “Oriental” or “Hispanic” on the surface, such characterizations could also be shown to be “like” any white character.


31. The poll results as of February 20, 2001:
   “No, because few people know he has any Asian blood.” 23%
   “Yes, because his natural father is a Chinese American born and raised in Hawaii.” 77%

*Illustrations courtesy of Dramatists Play Service, Inc.