Bodies, Revolutions, and Magic: Cultural Nationalism and Racial Fetishism

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Now, being in the movement was about change 
Changing the injustices in our society 
Changing the system that ignored our history in this country 
But the movement changed something else ... 
my wardrobe....

CHANGE ... TALK ABOUT CHANGE
[...] first you had an army jacket with lots of buttons on it 
then to complete the look ... a beret
now blacks had black berets, Latino – brown berets 
maroon was our color ... better with our complexion
[...] we were remaking ourselves
creating our own images and expressions

– Nobuko Miyamoto, A Grain of Sand

We might consider race in accordance with Judith Butler’s useful conception of gender as constructed in terms of a corporeal style; in this sense the racialized body is also made meaningful through “the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (Butler 274). The particular ways in which we perceive, interpret, and value racial difference in the United States today can be understood as a kind of ‘performance’ that takes its significance from not one but, in fact, many layers of social meaning that history has deposited on bodies. Some of these meanings are determined by racist ideologies disguised as “natural” or “biological” hierarchies of difference, “punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress” (273); others present somewhat more optimistic possibilities for racial performance.

Such a conception of racial performance is consistent with Michael Omi
and Howard Winant's figuring of race as "an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (55). Within Omi and Winant's terms of "racial formation," the civil rights period of the 1950s and 1960s figures prominently as the period of "the great transformation," where new social movements would "expand the concerns of politics to the social, to the terrain of everyday life" (96). The excerpt that opens this essay, from Nobuko Miyamoto's *A Grain of Sand*, a theatrical recollection of Miyamoto's experiences in the civil rights movements, recalls the quest for a 'new look' to accompany a nascent Asian American movement's pan-ethnic, diasporic, and collective politics. Miyamoto's playful reminiscence marks but one of the many new kinds of racial performance that emerged from this period. For her and others, such 'looks' went hand in hand with distinctive modes of thought and action; bodily style was inextricably linked to activism and revolutionary sensibility. For instance, Kobena Mercer notes that the wearing of Afros, the urban guerilla look of the Black Panthers, and elements of 'traditional' African dress such as the dashiki or the head-wrap did indeed delineate "massive shifts in popular aspirations among black people," thus furthering "a populist logic of rupture" (107).

These bodily performances have clearly left their mark on how race is understood today. However, the particular cultural legacy of this period, like its political legacy, is still uncertain. Celebration of uniquely "black" or "Chicano" or "Asian American" modes of cultural expression has given way to a questioning of these often overburdened identity categories. In a recent essay on Asian American theatre, Karen Shimakawa describes her students' less than enthusiastic responses to a revival of Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (originally produced in 1972):

For while, in keeping with the "retro" style currently popular, many of these young people affected the idioms (clothes and musical tastes) of the 1970s, they were utterly baffled by this artifact of the era; and post-play discussions revealed that, to their eyes, this play had very little to do with "Asian American identity" as they understood that concept (or even a hetero-masculinist version of it). Certainly, protagonist Tam Lum's jazzy, beat-poetic/stream-of-consciousness style of oration was part of their difficulty ("why can't he just talk like regular people?!") one student asked in exasperation) but their discomfort and bewilderment went far beyond their unfamiliarity with a particular aesthetic: the critique centered primarily on the appropriation of (stereotypes of) African American culture and discourse (Tam's childhood friend goes by "Blackjap Kenji," for example), heterosexist gender roles and simplistic, problematic renderings of multi-racial identity. Surely we had progressed beyond this level of identity politics, the students proclaimed; the Asian America represented in Chin's play, they insisted, was unrecognizable to them, discontinuous with the world they inhabited. (283–84)

It is not only Shimakawa's students who have difficulty seeing connections
between “now” and “then.” Current scholarly and critical work sometimes also tends to avoid or dismiss outright the hopelessly misogynistic, rigidly essentialist, or embarrassingly dated aspects of cultural nationalism, preferring instead the rendering of more hybrid, fluid identity categories that seem to articulate a “truly” liberatory politics.

Bearing this disavowal in mind, this essay tries to undertake a different kind of retrospective, one that is perhaps less quick to celebrate or criticize. It reviews some of the particular theatrical expressions of what might be called cultural nationalististic performance by looking at how such performances might function as fetishes, a term I have chosen both because it suggests the visceral impact and basic force that such racial performances invariably have and because such a term has also picked up—particularly in contemporary psychoanalytic and Marxist theory—a number of troubling associations. In the first two sections, I concentrate on how to assess cultural nationalism’s unique racial performances, not only as such events present a “look” that might now be deemed somewhat outdated but also as this “look” indicates particular tensions of visibility and desire that are still very much alive. My aim is to try to understand better the connections between contemporary racial performance and some of the assertions and contradictions of racial representation that were brought into being several decades ago.

I. CULTURAL NATIONALISM AND RACIAL FETISH

Looking through contemporary plays written about the civil rights period, as well as plays written during that period, one can detect a recurring emphasis on how a change of consciousness must be linked with new modes of racial performance. In these particular moments of bodily transformation, onstage and offstage audiences are asked to re-evaluate how “race” is expressed and valued. One familiar example comes at the beginning of Act Two of Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, in a moment when Beneatha proudly displays her newfound interest in Nigerian traditional dress and folk music. Her brother, Walter, springs up on the table and brandishes an imaginary spear, losing himself in a drunken fantasy of the African chief calling his men to war. This sequence begins as parody, a performance conditioned more by stereotype than by reality. Walter’s chest-thumping declaration of “In my heart of hearts […] I am much warrior!” rightly inspires the retort from his wife, Ruth, “In your heart of hearts you are much drunkard” (78). His comic rendition of the jungle warrior contrasts with the dignified urbanity of Asagai, the “real” African. In keeping with the play’s gentle mockery of its African American characters’ simultaneous idealization and ignorance of African culture and tradition, Beneatha parades her new clothing, “fanning herself with an ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was” (76). At the same time, stage directions indicate a shift toward a dif-
different mode, where, in effect, we begin to see through "the world of Walter's imagination" (79). As he chants to his "Black Brothers," this turns from parody into a more compelling moment of transformation, one that is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of George Murchison, whose curt reply deflates Walter's hail of "Black Brother."

In this transformation, Walter's body is imagined as linking him to an idealized vision of his roots in Africa. In such a moment, he transcends his disenchanted and debased state for a body that exudes masculine power and pride. Certainly this moment contrasts with his speech to his son, Travis, in the following scene, in which he promises Travis material wealth and prestige. If this later speech reinforces the ways in which Walter will continually disappoint his family, and himself, by relying on very limited notions of what the world has to offer him, the earlier moment of Walter's transformation into an African chief foreshadows the relief of the ending, when this repeated disappointment gives way and Walter finally comes into his manhood. This moment of transformation, then, is significant in how it performs a particular version of racial identity, one that gives power to the previously disempowered racialized body. A conception of race is central to the power of this moment, in which Walter's body is invested with blackness that brings to life his hidden but true identity. It is "the inner Walter speaking: the Southside chauffeur has assumed an unexpected majesty" (79).

What do moments such as these reveal about the larger workings of racial performance in this period, and how we should reassess these workings today? Certainly more is involved than surface changes in dress, hair, clothing, language, movement, elements that constituted the memorable "look" of more radical cultural nationalistic groups. Such stagings show that their particular modes of signifying race on the body were inspired not just by a taste for stylistic innovation and self-expression but by more deeply rooted desires and political principles. Theatre, like other forms of cultural expression, embodied the tension between liberal humanism's ideals of "integration" and cultural nationalism's insistence on the continued significance of racial difference.

Cultural nationalism differed most strongly from liberal humanist attitudes towards integration and civil rights in the very idea of performing race. Integrationists identified social progress with "the transcendence of a racial consciousness" (Peller 127). Integrationists saw race as the unfortunate product of long-standing racism: in order to eradicate institutional racism, one had not only to abolish racial categories but also to eliminate the performance of racial difference. Inherent in this idea was the figuration of race as simply a surface characteristic over an interior self that would be essentially the same for all people; in this view, once the legal barriers to racial equality were abolished, race would become obsolete. Thus integrationism rendered racial visibility in a way that both displayed it and made it ultimately meaningless, a surface
characteristic over an essential self. Cultural nationalism saw this not only as a naive denial of the lasting effects of race but also, in fact, as a dangerous misjudgment. Racial stratification, deeply entrenched not only in legal segregation but also in the economic and social system, could not be so easily abolished; furthermore, to suggest that one does not see race is a pretense that allows racism to continue. In the words of Stokely Carmichael, “White America will not face the problem of color, the reality of it. The well-intended say: ‘We’re all human, everybody is really decent, we must forget color.’ But color cannot be ‘forgotten’ until its weight is recognized and dealt with” (67). If integrationism advocated the discarding of racial markers as a false “mask” over the true self, the cultural nationalist relied on a particular performance—and a foregrounding of racial markers—as a political reminder of past and existing inequalities and a gesture of protest at the white domination of culture and power.

Thus these kinds of transformative stagings reflect certain cultural nationalist principles in actively repudiating those potential erasures of racial difference. These moments insist on emphasizing—rather than devaluing—difference as manifested on definitively racialized bodies. The racial markers of skin, hair, facial feature, gesture, clothing, and language became signals of 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 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 in which these performances made race not simply “reality” but, in fact, “larger than life” played up its spectacular qualities. If 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.”

Cultural nationalism unleashed not only a new vocabulary for the performance of racial identity but also a new paradigm for how one might relate to these bodies in the process of racial transformation as they become the objects of interest, attraction, and desire. These characteristic moments illuminate the new vision of the racial fetish that cultural nationalism produces and brings to the public eye. Again, although these kinds of newly racialized vocabularies of performance are sometimes criticized for being essentialist or self-segregating, they should be seen not just in their purely reactionary sense, as restating outmoded racial categories or promoting racial essentialism. Rather, they brought into being a less structured, less predictable fetishism—a projection of certain desires and fantasies on a particular form of the racialized body—in response to other, often programmatic erasures of race that were instituted in the spirit of integrationism and assimilationism. The heightening of racialized
difference that is characteristic of these performances – the emphasis on seeing certain elements or modes of bodily performance as distinctively “black” or “Chicano” or “Asian American” – presented yet another complex layer of sedimented meaning in the construction of race.

Relatively few plays wholeheartedly celebrated such moments; many choose to use them, as Hansberry’s play does, to illustrate the tension inherent in these different conceptions of racial shape-shifting. Alice Childress’s Wine in the Wilderness shows the misguided ideals of the artist, Bill, and his other college-educated friends through Bill’s worship of his romanticized model of African beauty; it takes the “messed-up chick,” Tommy, to show them the “true” face of black womanhood. The Chinese American Tam Lum in Frank Chin’s The Chicken coop Chinaman experiments with a range of bodily and linguistic styles borrowed from African American cultural nationalism, ultimately never settling on a satisfactory language or body of his own. And in Ysidro R. Macias’s satiric comedy The Ultimate Pendejada, the assimilated Robert and Mary Gomes convert into the more radical Roberto and María Gómez, only to find that their local Chicano Power friends are hypocritical and self-serving. It takes a trip to the barrio to show them that simply adopting the “face” of activist politics is not enough: “Your ultimate pendejada was that you changed on the outside only, pero no en donde cuenta, not inside where it really counts” (164). Plays that work with these cultural nationalist racial fetishes, then, both celebrate potentially liberatory performances of race and, at the same time, express a wariness about them. By reinventing the expressive markers of appearance, gesture, language, hair, and clothing, cultural nationalism showed that it was possible to redefine both the form and the content of racial performances. At the same time, the desired fusion of such performances with coherent racial communities and liberatory politics was less successful.

Such works also stress the inherent problems in superficial equations of style and political action. Despite the calls for building political activism on a “cultural base” (Jones [Baraka] 124), there were obvious differences between changing legal and economic structures of power, on the one hand, and changing culture, on the other. The uncertainty lay in determining the connection between these performances and an effective means of radical action. A change in dress, demeanor, and language did not guarantee political agency; in fact, emphasis on cultural expression alone potentially diverts attention away from activism. Moreover, the energy of racial reinvention could clearly be harnessed in less politically effective ways, turning such performances into what Tom Wolfe satirized as a form of “radical chic.” Thus cultural nationalism had to insist again and again that its performances could not simply be reduced to empty posturing or mere “show,” that they bore some deeper connection to liberatory philosophies and political action. But this intrinsic doubt was never resolved. Similar anxieties persist today, as certain multicultural
initiatives are called into question for adopting the “face” of diversity without its political “heart.” Contemporary corporate advertising, for instance, frequently employs not only a conspicuously multicultural-looking cast drawn from many racial groups but even elements of bodily style reminiscent of radical liberatory political movements. Hazel Warlaumont describes a 1972 *Cosmopolitan* advertisement for Smirnoff that featured an African American couple “dressed in stylish African apparel so characteristic of the 60s” and looking “casual, charismatic, and fun” (211); ads like these were the result of savvy marketing campaigns that targeted a “blossoming new youth market” (234). For Warlaumont, such “co-optation squeezed the novelty out of the threatening countercultural movement, reducing it to a worn-out cliché” (234). One might well argue that as time passes, such clichés lose even a minimal connection to the styles that spawned them. Appropriating the now familiar words of Gil Scott-Heron’s 1970 poem, recent online advertisements for high-speed Internet connections and for Apple computers and others assure us that the “Internet Revolution will not be Televised” (emphasis added) or “the digital revolution will be televised.” Describing the 1998 Clio awards for television advertising, Jonathan Dee muses that “[e]very generation, every subculture, has its own icon of misappropriation by the advertising industry: Nike’s use of the Beatles’ ‘Revolution,’ for example, or Munch’s ‘The Scream’ reanimated to sell Pontiacs, or Aaron Copland’s ‘Rodeo’ used to encourage people to eat more beef, or Fred Astaire dancing with the vacuum cleaner, or Jack Kerouac posthumously hawking khakis” (67).

II. THEORIZING THE FETISH: THE “COLORED” BODY ONSTAGE

*Magic* opens doors to things we always knew because we carry the code in our bones, passing it along as blood memory and the murmured dreams of ancestors. (Cleage 161)

How best, then, to analyze and assess the mixed legacy of cultural nationalism? One way might be through an attempt to understand the different dimensions of fetishism. To call such signifiers fetishes is to confront headlong the complexity of desires for the racialized body and the different implications of staging these desires. It is precisely the fetishistic aspect of cultural nationalist performance that illuminates both its attractive powers and its attendant problems. How does one distinguish between the cultural nationalist fetish and other, less hallowed, versions of racialized styles — among them stereotypes, caricatures, and fantasies — that had previously been employed in the service of oppressive and exploitive systems? How do we evaluate such fetishism from the perspective of present-day corporate multiculturalism, in which the appearance of such “radical” bodies has less to do with revolution than with marketing?

The initial attraction to these bodies might first be explored through the
most basic idea of the fetish, less Freudian or Marxist in conception (though these other conceptions of the fetish, as we shall see, will also come into play in important ways) than a so-called "primitive" fetish, an object that can lend its user extraordinary magical and transformative powers. To see this clearly, we might recall Frederick Douglass's account of his anticipated beating by the slave-breaker Mr. Covey in his *Narrative*. As he prepares to defend himself, Douglass is advised by another slave to carry on his person "a certain root, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me." He does so and, despite his initial skepticism, becomes convinced of the "virtue of the root" (Douglass 102). Subsequently, he not only wins his fight with Mr. Covey but also gains a new sense of purpose:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. [...] It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. (104–5)

A similar protective, empowering, and liberating potential is central to the fetishes imagined by these later cultural nationalisms' stagings of racially transformed and transformative bodies. These new racial identities were meant to be rebellious and subversive, their extreme demonstrations of dress, hair, language, and movement a direct affront to the erasure of racial difference advocated by integrationism. They were also meant to be redemptive, to link their users to powerful sources of power, pride, and spirituality. The racialized body itself became a source of political and artistic "magic," a generative creativity that fuels both artist and activist with a sense of domestic and diasporic collective identity. This fetishism of racial signification could well be put to effective use in the theatre, which, broadly speaking, endows bodies with its own kind of magic, power, eroticism, and potency.

The desire for a liberatory politics manifested on the body and through bodily performance – that one can "color" the once debased body in new ways – is one of the enduring legacies of cultural nationalism. That radical social change might be effected through witnessing these bodies, that they might awaken the consciousness and inspire transformation, remains at the heart of much of our conscious as well as unconscious sense of that theatre's power. A belief in such magic touches even the much more guarded hopes of contemporary theatre scholars, such as Dorinne Kondo, who seeks to "reclaim pleasure as a site of potential contestation that might engage, and at times be coextensive with, the critical impulse" (13), or José Muñoz, who suggests that queer artists of color work through a process of "disidentification" that involves
“recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy” (39).

However, the desire for “colored” bodies – and the pleasurable and energizing magic that such bodies are thought to have – must also be viewed with some skepticism. This particular understanding of the fetish is inevitably shadowed by other, less optimistic ideas of what fetishism entails.

The racial fetish is certainly not unique to late-twentieth-century cultural nationalism. Much recent scholarship and criticism has called attention to how the “colored” body has been commodified, exploited, and exoticized as racial stereotype. These critiques often employ psychoanalytic readings to characterize social desire, cultural fantasy, and theatrical pleasure. In this view, the fetish is the fantasized or literal image, object, or body part whose presence is psychologically necessary for self-gratification; the desire for the fetish is prompted by a deeply felt loss or anxiety over loss. This fetish is essentially a false front, something covering a “lack,” signaling anxieties that can only be alleviated through repetitive and obsessive projections of signification. In his reading of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha points out the parallels between the Freudian “primal scene” and the colonial encounter, those “dramas” that are “enacted every day in colonial societies” when “the child encounters racial and cultural stereotypes in children’s fictions, where white heroes and black demons are proffered as points of ideological and psychical identification” (76). The racial stereotype, as Bhabha points out, is a type of fetish that is produced out of the anxieties of the colonial encounter; it is out of his own “phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body” (92) that the colonizer produces the racial stereotype – fragmented, distorted, grotesque, repetitive – as a compensatory fetish.

Particular studies of theatre and performance have called attention to how larger social anxieties around race, nation, class, and gender manifest themselves through these fetishisms of race. Eric Lott, for example, links the popularity of blackface minstrelsy to the anxieties felt by its primarily Northern, working-class white male audiences in antebellum America. Blackface minstrelsy, as performed by white male performers, signaled a racial dynamic that might be called the “pale gaze,” a “ferocious investment in demystifying and domesticating black power in white fantasy by projecting vulgar black types as spectacular objects of white men’s looking” (Lott 153). Such spectacular “black types” were clearly fetishistic in nature, and through the comic antics of blackface they turned into “uproarious spectacles for erotic consumption” (140). This kind of theorization of the racial fetish is also demonstrably useful in reassessing not only American popular theatre but also the works of well-known figures of modern drama (such as Artaud, O’Neill, Brecht, and Yeats, to name a few) whose appropriation of African and Asian traditional performance seems in keeping with the larger racial pathology of Western modernism. Shannon Steen, for instance, reads O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones as
“prompt[ing] and reflect[ing] a desire for control and mastery on the part of white spectators” and compensating for a particular “conception of self” held by O’Neill himself (347).

However effective in these instances, this understanding of the fetish as pathology cannot so easily be applied to cultural nationalism’s renewed emphasis on race. However useful to illuminate the link between racist ideology and cultural representation, such models understand the fixation on racial difference only as the “improper” desire of the fetishist; the fetishist is cast primarily as a “white” racist, or, occasionally, as a person of color who has internalized racism and therefore may be guilty of “autoexoticizing” (Savigliano 2, 5, 144). Not only must the fetish then be “cured”; many cures entail a process of demystification, of destroying or divesting the fetish of any power that it has. The antidote most frequently prescribed is the healthy dose of the “real,” some unexoticized, unfantastical version of representation (a cure often advocated in past calls for “minority” theatres to present “real” characterizations). Cultural nationalism complicates this process by advocating new racial “types” to replace the old when it eschews the liberal humanist preference for a “deracinated” body.

Faced with overwhelming demonstrations of racial pathology (the obsessive preoccupation of “whiteness” with “Otherness”), it is hard to see the power of the racialized body as anything other than a symptom of some “white” illness. According to this view, we can see cultural nationalism’s fetishism only as a misguided reaction to previous racial essentialisms, with the attendant worry that these new incarnations of racial difference will themselves become new forms of stereotyping. New versions of spectacular difference, then, become served up in order to placate social anxieties that—like racism—have never really gone away. This worry only intensifies if one understands fetishism as constructed through the ideology of capitalism as well as through the broader terms of racial pathology.

The psychoanalytic view of racial fetishism, as employed here, suggests that racism, while it may be deeply rooted, is ultimately correctable (through a reform of theatre practice and the strategic deployment of alternative, and presumably more “realistic,” images). The terms of the commodity fetish pose a much more difficult problem. Commodity fetishism describes how capitalist society promotes a fetishistic consciousness, which invests objects and bodies with particular symbolic properties and value. Any desire to see the body of color, then, is tied to that body’s value as spectacular commodity; the theatrical power of that body serves only to generate profit and becomes measured by its marketability. This problem is not prompted by bad intentions or even misjudgment on the part of theatre practitioners, but lies in the racialized body’s transformation into commodity (as the body passes out of the hands of a specific local relationship and into circulation as a commodity). No longer are theatre productions calculated to rouse specific audiences, nor is their suc-
cess necessarily dependent on their strong response, if, in fact, attendance is
linked more to the need for entertainment or prestige (Baudrillard 49, 118)
than to social reform. Theatre, like other forms of “recreation,” may also be
valued for its “distraction,” the extent to which it actually prevents consumers
from understanding the true nature of their alienation and dissatisfaction
(Haug 120).

Again, such a view of fetishism complicates how we might understand the
promise of cultural nationalist fetishes as magic: as challenging the social hier-
archies and as instigating social reform. Michael Taussig has made the dis-
tinction between the precapitalist and the commodity fetish, the difference being
that the precapitalist fetish is all about human relations (“person in product”),
the commodity fetish about some independent value given to an object that in
effect banishes its labor (“subjugate persons, who become dominated by a
world of things – that they themselves created”) (Taussig 28). Given this view,
there seems little hope of rescuing some dimension of precapitalist fetish in
this era of global capitalism. Such a situation makes us skeptical even of the
recent successes of playwrights of color in producing for mainstream audi-
ences. This wariness about the commodification of racial difference in the
American theatre influences a number of contemporary readings. Using the
Broadway and film productions of Luis Valdez’s Zoot Suit as her examples,
Yolanda Broyles-González suggests that the pressure to create a successful
mainstream production may entail an “embellishment in production values”
that may well overshadow “the play’s actual substance” (190), thus
“dilute[ing]” the play “for the sake of mass appeal” (213). Dorinne Kondo notes
that Broadway plays such as Rent and Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk
contain cogent political commentary on relevant social issues but also tend to
“deflect attention from the political and from sharp social criticism through
mobilizing the seductive pleasures of music, spectacle, and dance” (17).

The very terms of radical culture that seemed to promise “new voices” and
the end of the white, masculine, heterosexual domination of the main stage
seem instead to have been appropriated by an audience enthralled by their new
ability to consume Others. The erotics of Otherness, so familiar to the Ameri-
can stage, is both reiterated and disguised by a new emphasis on liberal multi-
culturalism. Such a view denies the present stage frustration, complacency,
and indecision inherent in contemporary American racial politics and suggests
instead that there is real progress to be found in the selected inclusion of
works by people of color. This imagining of theatre as both a cure for racism
and the living proof of a newly pluralistic society would be targeted not so
much at old racists but at more liberal audiences; here the consumption of
these theatre works acts as a palliative, testifying to the myth that civil rights
has actually worked to resolve racism. Thus racial fetishes in their new incar-
nation – as demonstrations of the power of colored bodies – work less to
inspire audiences to social action and more to compensate for the loss of these
radical energies. What is at stake is not so much whether these racialized bodies possess magic – for, judging by their entry into mainstream theatre, they undoubtedly do – but whether this spectacular power has any use other than the generation of profit. Thus a process is set up by which even the most rebellious words and images of cultural nationalism are ultimately co-opted into “radical chic,” easily suiting corporate multicultural initiatives that embrace racial visibility only to disassociate it from political reform.

Such a co-opting seems part and parcel of the apparent demise of the spirit of radical activism in the decades after the early 1970s: political attitudes increasingly expressive of disillusionment, cynicism, complacency, and avoidance. The current state of progress toward racial equality has been characterized, since the 1980s, not only by excruciatingly slow or non-existent implementation of civil rights reforms but also by a powerful neo-conservative backlash and the persistence of racism in its many incarnations.

III. REINCARNATIONS

What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all. (Freud 154)

Ironically, then, the fetishist is the least likely of analysands to enter a psychoanalytic contract. He remains perfectly happy with his love object (an object unlikely to resist his wishes and fantasies). In all likelihood, if he enters analysis at all, it will be at someone else’s request. (Grosz 145)

If we are to believe certain contemporary plays written well after the demise of this activism, the magic of cultural nationalist bodies refuses to die. Moreover, the continued resurrection of these outdated bodies cannot be explained away simply by nostalgia or postmodern pastiche. When they appear, they bring the full and complicated burden of their magical powers with them, challenging viewers to resurrect and harness the desire, pleasure, and energy of the racial fetish back into the service of radical politics.

Two examples may serve to illustrate the complex ways in which such bodies continue to be revived on the contemporary American stage. George C. Wolfe’s 1986 revue The Colored Museum parodies a range of African American figures, including Aunt Ethel, a mammy figure; Normal Jean Reynolds, a teenage mother; Miss Ros, a finger-snapping drag queen; Junie Robinson, an African American soldier; and Lala Lamazing Grace, a flamboyant expatriate entertainer à la Josephine Baker. On the one hand, Wolfe’s “museum” highlights the exaggerated and one-dimensional aspects of these characterizations; in his “The Last-Mama-On-The-Couch Play,” a spoof of Hansberry’s Raisin in the Sun and Ntozake Shange’s for colored girls, characters such as “Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie” or the “Lady in Plaid” over-act their oppression until they
are transformed into the cast of an “all-black musical” where “[n]obody ever dies” (29). On the other hand, these vignettes work not only to poke fun at stock characterizations but also to highlight more surprising secrets embedded within these flattened images. In the opening “exhibit,” “Git on Board,” Miss Pat, the perky stewardess aboard “Celebrity Slaveship” who tells her passengers “We will be crossing the Atlantic at an altitude that’s pretty high, so you must wear your shackles at all times” (1), has her composure ruffled by the rhythmic drumming that persists throughout her attempts to control her passengers. The finger-snapping drag queen, Miss Roj, reveals a keen sense of political injustice and rage just barely contained by her drinking and dancing. Even the most wholly superficial of images, a glamorous couple who live “inside Ebony magazine. [...] where everyone is beautiful, and wears fabulous clothes” (9), describe feeling “[t]he kind of pain that comes from feeling no pain at all” (10). Many of these scenes suggest hidden emotions, anxieties, and secrets that inevitably arise to disrupt the seemingly imperturbable surface of these characterizations. This strategy holds true in “Symbiosis,” in which a man “in corporate dress” (33) tries to throw away all the emblems of his youth. As he places various items in the garbage, mourning “[m]y first Afro-comb [...] My first dashiki [...] Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice [...] The Temptations Greatest Hits” (33–34), he is confronted by a version of his younger self, the Kid. The Kid protests the Man’s attempts to discard him, asserting that “regardless of how much of your past that you trash, I ain’t goin’ no damn where”; the Man finally winds up strangling the Kid, telling himself that he cannot afford even the ghost of his formerly radical black self (“I have no history. I have no past. I can’t. It’s too much. [...] Being black is too emotionally taxing; therefore I will be black only on weekends and holidays”). But just as the Man claims victory over his “rage,” his younger self re-emerges from the trash can with a “death grip on THE MAN’s arm,” asking “What’s happenin’?” (36–37).

This vignette satirizes the impulse to jettison the black activist past as if it were merely a fad; the Man treats his earlier body as simply a surface composed of choices in music, fashion, and books that he has outgrown. The Man’s desire to kill his former self is, as he explains, a survival strategy in order to exist in a “changing” climate (34) that no longer values reminders of racial difference as political difference. However, the continued reappearance and power of the Kid illustrate the lingering power of the cultural nationalist fetish. The Man may seek to dispense with this past bodily incarnation as if it were simply one of these outdated, commodified styles that he can throw away, but the Kid cannot be put off so easily. “Symbiosis” states this tortured relationship between past and present most clearly, but the presence of cultural nationalism is felt throughout The Colored Museum, where “outdated” forms of racialized bodies maintain their hold over even the most seemingly apolitical “new” versions of the African American body.
A more extended example of this powerful intervention is Richard Wesley’s 1988 play *The Talented Tenth*. Wesley depicts a group of African American men and women, former college activists now turned businessmen and professionals, whose affluence and conservative values contrast with the ideals of their youth. *The Talented Tenth* centers on the anxieties of one particular character, Bernard Evans, as he contemplates his personal and professional future. At the heart of Bernard’s work ethic is W.E.B. Du Bois’s charge that the “Talented Tenth,” the relatively few African Americans who had access to education and power, should take responsibility for racial uplift. Bernard sees himself and his former classmates as

the ones who were expected to build the ladder for our people to climb. [...] It didn’t matter where you went to school, or how rich you became. You could even become President of the United States, or sit on the Supreme Court. The bottom line was always the same: helping the Race. Making our people’s lives better. (408)

In the opening scene, Bernard reminisces about his interview with the successful African American businessman Griggs, who owns a small network of radio stations. Griggs charges Bernard to imagine racial progress as achieved through the arenas of money and power and to put aside his own self-indulgent notions of individual success:

All you’ve got is duty, responsibility and the self-discipline that goes with it. It’s the first seven generations after slavery that will suffer the most. They’re the ones who have nothing to look forward to except struggle. They’re the ones who have to bear the pain, make the sacrifices and fight the battles that have to be fought and won. Your trouble will always come when you begin to think that you deserve a good time; when you begin to think that the world is your oyster. You’re generation number six, Mr. Evans. Your grandchildren can have the good time. Not you. For you, there’s only struggle. (361)

Bernard takes Griggs’s advice to heart, imagining his relationship to his work through a paradigm of racial progress, communal loyalty, and generational succession. In the first part of the play, this strategy seems to bear fruit. Bernard holds true to his mission, instituting a more confrontational and overtly political form of programming that will educate and inform black listeners; promoted to vice president, Bernard looks to “inherit” Griggs’s radio stations.

However, the clear line of African American progress that is achieved through successive generations of “struggle” is soon threatened: first by the demonstrated penchant of Bernard’s wife and friends for the emblems of material success and second by the proposed buyout of Griggs Broadcasting by Pegasus International, a white-controlled communications conglomerate. Bernard’s college friends have lapsed into a state of narcissism and elitism;
their goals have become prestige and money rather than social change. Griggs, worn down by his own years of struggle to keep his company alive, finally justifies his decision to sell the company by telling Bernard that racial progress is best served by the material success of individual African Americans. He urges Bernard to accept the lucrative offer from Pegasus, telling him that it is better to be a “pragmatic businessman who looked the dragon in the eye ... and decided to wear an asbestos suit” than a “righteous revolutionary with no prospects” (387).

Bernard is the only one who defies this turn of events, criticizing and alienating his friends and seeking solace in an extramarital affair. What troubles him in particular is the widening gap between the poor and those successful African Americans like himself. Bernard is surprised by his own anger toward the “endless parade of poor downtrodden men holding squeegees [sic] in their hands, fighting each other over the privilege of wiping my windshield for fifty cents” (384-85). For him these men become living proof of his own failure to act as one of the “Talented Tenth”:

Instead of lamenting their sorry fate, I hated them because I knew there was nothing I could do to change their lives. They would always be there, day after horrible day. Their lives would never change. I had managed to grab the brass ring and I was being pulled up and away from them, floating higher and higher. I would survive the madness and they would not. (385)

Although civil rights presented more opportunities to middle-class African Americans, it did little to eradicate the poverty gap. In the present, the lack of true racial equality is often disguised by the new wave of middle-class affluence. Thus the affluent Bernard and his friends run the risk of thinking themselves “beyond” race, disassociating themselves from the continued poverty of other African Americans. The imagined link between rich and poor in the “Talented Tenth” model of race struggle will be disrupted if new generations of African Americans become enticed by their newfound luxury and privilege. Bernard thus experiences the conspicuous presence of poor African Americans as a kind of haunting; for him it presents an irreconcilable contradiction, the breaking of the promise of racial progress.

Such “haunting,” as Avery Gordon suggests, infiltrates and interrupts the complacency of middle-class existence in America:

But, and this is the very difficult part, haunting is also the mode by which the middle class, in particular, needs to encounter something you cannot just ignore, or understand at a distance, or “explain away” by stripping it of all its magical power; something whose seemingly self-evident repugnance you cannot just rhetorically throw in someone’s face. (131)
Interestingly, Bernard is haunted not only by these living reminders of the widening poverty gap but also by the memory of his former girlfriend, Habiba, who was killed fighting the revolution in 1960s Angola. Through actively conjuring up these various incarnations, Bernard keeps in mind the contrast between his current bourgeois lifestyle and the aspirations of his youth. In scene two, Bernard recalls how in college he and Habiba decided to join Martin Luther King’s march to Montgomery and how Habiba’s powerful “race memory” joined the protesters in the passion of collective revolution:

Then, Habiba started shaking, gasping for breath, like she was convulsing. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and looked at me, saying she’d had a race memory. She was with a group of runaway slaves. Armed gunmen had chased them through a swamp. They were trapped with no way out. They began to sing, calling out to God, and the more they sang, the stronger they became. She saw the flash of the gunfire. She felt the bullets searing into her flesh. But she kept getting stronger. They ALL kept getting stronger. Then, Habiba screamed. Just like that. A scream like I’d never heard before. Everyone in the room just stopped. It was like we all felt what she felt. People began to moan and shout and chant. Bloods who’d stopped going church and had sworn off the spirit possession of our parents and grandparents began to rock and shake and tremble — yea, they got the Spirit that night! (364)

Ironically, Bernard’s powerful recollection is followed by his son’s request for money to shop at the mall’s “special holiday sale” celebrating Martin Luther King’s birthday.”

For Bernard, the bodies of both the living and the dead become fetishes that galvanize him into rejecting the pleasurable enticements of material success. Bernard’s extramarital affair with Tanya is prompted both by his attraction to Tanya’s resemblance to Habiba (both in her dark skin and “African” features and in her working-class background) and by his rejection of the values embodied by his wife, Pam (whose light skin and wealthy family connections originally made her attractive to the ambitious young Bernard). When Tanya angrily refuses to play the dead Habiba, rejecting his gift of a kente cloth and accusing him of living in the past, Bernard realizes that his dream of realizing Habiba in the flesh has to do with more than sexual novelty or simple nostalgia. His fetishism of Habiba becomes a means of reconnecting himself to his own desire to work in the service of a larger “racial uplift.” By the end of the play, Bernard has refused Griggs’s advice to work for Pegasus producing “infotainment” and lost his job; he has likewise ended his relationships with both Pam and Tanya. However, with the help of his African American consortium of backers, the “Diaspora Group,” Bernard manages to outbid Pegasus and succeed Griggs as owner of the radio station. As he explains to Griggs, it is through making peace with the spirit of Habiba that Bernard can finally rec-
oncile his past longing for revolution and his present, more pragmatic means of struggle. In keeping African American control over media and business, he succeeds in maintaining his own sense of the lineage of racial progress, even at the cost of his successful career and marriage. The final scene of the play mirrors its opening, with Bernard now lecturing his own son, who comes to him for a job, about his place in the “Talented Tenth” and the need for continued struggle.

In both The Colored Museum and The Talented Tenth, the emphasis is primarily on how former radicals have now been transformed into an upper-middle-class elite in danger of selling out along the lines described by Richard Wesley: “one day you cut your hair, shave your beard, put away your sandals, go from yippie to yuppie, nationalist to buppie. Everyone tells you you’ve done the right thing. And you wonder if you really have” (“One Struggle Over” 8). This transformation of the cultural nationalist body into yet another, far less radical mode of racial performance suggests the victory of conservatism, complacency, and capitalism, in which both psychoanalytic and Marxist versions of the fetish serve as key palliatives. As a sign of pathology or commodity fetishism, the fetish functions to compensate for loss and to ease anxiety or to reassure consumers of their social prestige and status and to distract them from other, less entertaining aspects of their lives. Still, these plays also stress how the ghosts of cultural nationalism—bringing to bear all their magical qualities—complicate these more comforting and comfortable varieties of fetishism that dominate contemporary American life. In both plays, the resurrection of the magic fetish of cultural nationalism is necessary in order to compel the fetishist towards a difficult reinvestigation of the past and a reassessment of the present.

Ultimately, it is the refusal of these bodies to go away, despite our continued disavowal, that signals the lasting importance of cultural nationalism’s transformation of consciousness. Such racial performances have left their definitive mark on how we understand contemporary performances of racialized bodies, whether of the living or of the dead. At the very least, these fetishes maintain their hold in lingering desires continually seeking to realize themselves in the flesh, which disrupt our complacency, our security, and our ability to rest.

NOTES

1 A Grain of Sand premiered at the Los Angeles Theater Center in 1995. This excerpt is from an unpublished manuscript, courtesy of the author.
2 Omi and Winant have appropriated Karl Polanyi’s terms for the introduction of market society in pre-capitalist England to illustrate the shift to a socially based politics in the contemporary U.S. (see Omi and Winant 194 note 2).
3 Advertisements for Medianet’s FastPath DSL and for customers of Apple products

4 See, for example, chapter 2 of my Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage.

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