

## *The Welcome Table: Casting for an Integrated Society*

*Daniel Banks*

I'm gonna sit at the welcome table  
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, Halleluyah  
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table  
Gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days.

—Spiritual

James Baldwin titled his unfinished, final play *The Welcome Table*, describing legendary performer Josephine Baker's home and her practice of adopting young people of all backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities into her family. As I complete work on this essay in November 2012, several events coincide, confirming that it is a significant moment to be reexamining questions of representation and plurality in US theatre. First, President Barack Obama was reelected due, in part, to the overwhelming support of African American (93%), Asian American (73%), and Latino (71%) voters (Robinson). In addition, both the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the "national organization for the American theatre," and the Actors' Equity Association (AEA), the professional union for stage actors, have launched initiatives to explore this topic. The TCG held its Fall Forum on Governance titled "Leading the Charge" because, as Executive Director Teresa Eyring explains, the organization "decided that we must bring trustees and theatre leadership more deeply into a thought process around diversity and how we make concrete strides in thought and practice—as individuals, as organizations, and as an artistic ecosystem" (Eyring 2012). And, in the lead article on the front page of its October/November newsletter, the AEA reasserts its commitment to "access" and "opportunity," both artistically and legally, having participated in the twentieth Federation of Actors World Congress in September where the topic was discussed in depth. The Broadway League has also introduced an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) committee to examine hiring practices across the industry (McColl). There is clearly a renewed commitment to making US theatre more of a welcome table, with room and food enough for all.

I propose that the first step in a sustainable future for our beloved profession and art lies in reexamining the terminology that defines contemporary practices. In some cases, this language serves as an obstacle to more complex narratives about US society; in other cases, the words are misnomers. I have great respect for the work done in the arenas of "non-traditional" and "color-blind" casting; at the same time, I have concerns about the continued use of these and similar terms. Although the introduction of these concepts ignited a crucial process of change in the industry, the terms themselves have now ossified a collective imaginary within the theatre, which works against their original progressive intentions and inhibits practices from changing. In this essay, I will discuss the current language used in US theatre casting, cite examples of work that defy the assumptions embedded in that language, and propose strategies for engaging audiences in dialogue around these important sociological concerns. By troubling the authority of this language I hope to create even greater possibilities for casting, while shifting a national dialogue around identity and identification.

**Fictions**

“Your fictions become history.”

—Barbara Kruger (1983)

“By saying something we do something.”

—J. L. Austin (1962, 94)

The AEA introduced the language of non-traditional casting because, as Harry Newman, founder of the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP), writes: “A four-year study . . . completed in January 1986 revealed that over 90 percent of all the professional theatre produced in this country—from stock and dinner theatre to the avant-garde to Broadway—was staged with all-Caucasian casts” (23). In the past twenty-six years, these numbers have not improved significantly. The Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) was founded in 2011 to “expand the perception of Asian American performers in order to increase their access to and representation on New York City’s stages” (Bandhu 36). In a five-year study of 493 shows in the New York area from the 2006–07 to the 2010–11 seasons, the AAPAC discovered that 80 percent of all shows were cast with European heritage actors.<sup>1</sup>

Regrettably, many of the challenges that the NTCP worked hard to address still exist, as evidenced by these numbers and several high-profile casting controversies during the past few years.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay I focus on the aspects of so-called non-traditional casting pertaining to actors of color, often referred to as “mixed-race,” “cross-race,” “race-blind” or “color-blind,” and “race-conscious” casting. No less important, however, are questions of gender and ability, which similarly need to be addressed.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes that “[t]he way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. . . . We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (8–9). Thus what a person sees—or thinks she sees—is based on how that individual knows the world. The language she then uses to represent that worldview both describes her conception of the world while simultaneously codifying it. The reproduction, or performance, of this understanding is, as Judith Butler writes, the “ritualized repetition” of certain social norms, which impacts the ways identities are culturally apprehended (2). It is through the “forcible reiteration” of these “hegemonic norms” on both societal and theatrical stages that identities, and hence beliefs, are “produced” (2, 107).

This theory of “performativity” is directly connected to how in the West we “know” race via the writings of Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) and German anthropologist Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840). These individuals created arbitrary systems of racial classification that have infused today’s language with their biases about the different “humors,” or attributes, of peoples across the planet and where they fit into a supposed hierarchy of humanity.<sup>3</sup> In order to create lasting change in the national imaginary of “race,” the premise behind these eighteenth-century belief systems needs to be exposed and reevaluated.

Today’s scientists contest the authority of race as a discourse or fact. Professor of evolutionary biology Joseph Graves states that, due to constant “gene flow” over human history, there is no “biological rationale” for the argument that people belong to different races. He explains that “[p]ossibly only six genes determine the color of a person’s skin out of between 30,000 and 40,000” (Graves, qtd. in Villarosa). Thus there is arguably more in-group DNA difference in hair or eye color than between groups based on skin color, despite the ways in which many cultures have focused on skin tone as the determining classificatory feature.

In addition, although contemporary sociology has demonstrated “race” to be a social construction, the term continues to have currency.<sup>4</sup> An overreliance on a discourse of “race” results in a conflation of such concepts as culture, ethnicity, color, class, and heritage. Because of the continued discussion of race in US society, *racialism* (accepting and acting according to a system of so-called racial difference) and *racism* (discrimination according to presumed race, often based on appearance) are ever present. Newman writes of the US theatre in 1986, evoking today’s challenges: “Since so much of our knowledge, understanding, and compassion for the world is shaped by theatre, film, and television, the absence of full and satisfying roles (in the largest meaning of the word) for these disenfranchised artists has had the insidious effect of reinforcing a view of a homogeneous American society that has never been more than a fantasy” (23). Unequal casting perpetuates sociological and biological fictions, which create a form of “law” in the cultural imaginary. However, the language often used to challenge these fictions operates within the same system of racist assumptions and biases. Therefore, in order to avoid perpetuating misperceptions, the theatre needs to change its language. And, as language changes, thought and practice can expand.

## Language

Although the terms “non-traditional casting” and “color-blind casting” are used widely in US theatre, their efficacy is limited. Ayanna Thompson, in *Colorblind Shakespeare*, writes that the “theoretical underpinnings” of color-blind casting are “unstable” (6) because, as she challenges: “What constitutes a blindness to race?” (11), suggesting that it is not possible to overlook a person’s heritage. Jocelyn Brown, in her talk at the 2012 Black Theatre Network conference in Atlanta, explains that “the phrase [color-blind casting] has mushroomed to enormous proportions. Use of the term has become problematic. To complicate matters further, much of what is labeled color-blind theatre is, in actuality, color-conscious theatre” (3). Unless productions do as most major symphony orchestras and audition people behind a curtain, color-blind casting is neither possible nor desirable.

Similar to Thompson, veteran theatre director Clinton Turner Davis, in “Non-Traditional Casting: An Open Letter,” challenges: “This strategy of avoiding race—‘I don’t care if you are black, brown, white, yellow, red, green, or purple; I try to get along with everybody,’ or ‘When I look at you, I don’t see color . . .’ embeds meaningful differences among non-meaningful ones. When was the last time you saw a purple person?” To erase color is to erase identity and legacy; to recognize and appreciate our differences is to know and honor one another’s histories and stories.<sup>5</sup>

Brown advocates, as I do, for a more complex casting practice—building an integrated cast of actors from multiple ethnic backgrounds. This approach, Brown explains, “allows practitioners to assist society in imagining a multi-representation of cultures, to impact world views, and it allows for collaboration through balanced artistic cultural exchange” (11). With a more complex understanding of history and sociology (especially one that does not conflate color, culture, ethnicity, and class), more casting options are available, and thus an audience is reminded or informed of the multiple intersecting narratives of our society. This shift in focus is not about being “color blind” or “color conscious”; rather, it is a commitment to, as the AAPAC states, “reflect[ing] the racial diversity of the real world we live in” (Bandhu 36).

The term “non-traditional casting” has a different challenge. The NTCP opened its doors in 1986 to advocate for the non-traditional casting policy introduced by the AEA: “To address the lack of participation of their black, Hispanic, Asian, and native [*sic*] American membership, AEA conceived of non-traditional casting, which they formally defined as the casting of ethnic and female performers in roles where race, ethnicity, or gender are not germane to the character’s or play’s development. (The NTCP later expanded this definition to include performers with disabilities.)” (Newman 24). The NTCP’s work and services were critical in expanding opportunities for marginalized theatre artists and exposing audiences to a broader vision for theatre in the United States. The organiza-

tion's industry-changing activism includes hosting symposia and meetings, out of which emerged compelling documentation of theatre workers' experiences, and maintaining "artist files"—a database used widely by the theatre, film, and television industries. Nevertheless, Newman concedes that "[a]lthough there are drawbacks to the phrase, we at the NTCP adopted it as part of our title because it had already gained a measure of currency in the industry and because it seemed provocative. . . . Our organizational goal is obsolescence. . . . In time we hope that—like our organization—the phrase will disappear, and 'non-traditional' casting will become the performing arts' new tradition" (ibid.).

The NTCP did, in fact, change its name in 2006 to the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (AIA). Executive Director Sharon Jensen explains that

we believed the new name better reflected the scope of our work and mission. For example, even though since 1990 we had seen the issues of diversity and inclusion as comprehensive (meaning affecting not only casting and the consideration of a diverse pool of actors, but also extending to writers, directors, designers, the artistic leadership and staffing of theatres, boards of directors, and audiences), many did not understand this about us and still thought we were focused solely on issues of casting. Virtually overnight, with our new name, theatre, film and television professionals had an expanded and accurate understanding of our work.

While the AIA continues to advocate for all artists in the performing and media arts, it is no longer tethered to the notion of non-traditional casting, which, as Angela Pao, in *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, explains, "relies on and reinforces conceptions of racial categories that are defined by visual and visible distinctions" (178). To illustrate this latter point, I offer a few examples that, rather than perpetuating the fiction and impermeability of notions of "race," stage a more complex conversation about identity.

## Expectations

I first found myself formally discussing non-traditional casting on a panel at New York University in 1997 after my production there of Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*.<sup>6</sup> Although the panel had "nontraditional casting" in its title, I explained that such casting was neither my intention nor what I had actually done, even though the cast was from a broad range of ethnicities. For example, people questioned my casting an African heritage actor as Mr. Mister (fig. 1) and European heritage-looking actors as his children (Mrs. Mister was played by an actor of South Asian Indian heritage). Viewers, by which I mean both audience members and people involved in production (extrapolating from Thompson's formulation "the sociology of viewing," discussed below), calling this "non-traditional casting" raised several important issues. First, I repeatedly received the comment that there would be no African American in Mr. Mister's position as a successful businessman in the 1930s. However, this analysis is historically inaccurate. There has long been an African American bourgeoisie in the United States. In addition, predating the original production of *Cradle* by ten years, Franklin Delano Roosevelt relied on his "Black Cabinet" of appointed advisors comprised of university presidents, lawyers, ministers, and businessmen. Blitzstein intended that the play have an ethnically mixed cast, which is how it was cast by Orson Welles and John Houseman in its first iteration in 1937 (albeit only some members of the chorus were of color) (Gordon 137–38). These facts are important pieces of American history that defy certain racist assumptions.

Nor was my casting strategy "color-blind" or "color conscious." Thompson invokes the "sociology of viewing" (12) to describe, as Berger does, that specific beliefs influence the way people see. I did not attempt to make a statement by my choice of actor for Mr. Mister. Blitzstein himself did not designate ethnicity or color in the script and, to me, this actor was an appropriate historical choice, as well as the best actor who auditioned for the part. The "sociology of viewing" reveals that "truth" or "realism" in casting is actually only relative to an individual's personal experience of the world.



FIG. 1. Kevin Wilson as Mr. Mister in *The Cradle Will Rock* at New York University. (Photo: Kitty Leech.)

Along these lines, the second misperception about my casting of *Cradle* was that an African heritage man would not have European heritage-looking children. The variety of skin tone within one family has been explored throughout history, notably in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); *Passing* by Nella Larsen (1929); Langston Hughes's poetry, short fiction, and plays; and in numerous publications since.<sup>7</sup> However, different cultural and ethnic groups have differing experiences of this spectrum of familial skin color, while oftentimes unproblematically accepting the variety of eye or hair color. This divergence in sociological experience and viewing, therefore, made my casting choices seem experimental or "unrealistic" to some viewers—what Newman calls "you don't conform to my expectations" (33)—while familiar and "realistic" to others.

I received similar reactions to my casting an African heritage actor in the role of the supposedly Jewish protagonist of Max Frisch's *Andorra* in 1993 (fig. 2). *Andorra* is a parable about fascism, an allegorical text set in a fictitious place (albeit of a real name). What some people had difficulty believing was that, according to the conceit of the narrative, this particular actor could be viewed as



FIG. 2. Steven Beckford as Andri and Tertia Lynch as Barblin in *Andorra* at Marymount Manhattan College. (Photo: Susan Cook.)

Jewish (a misperception of the ethnic plurality of a world religion). Ironically, a week before opening, the actor cast as Andri for his skill and stature among his peers revealed that he was biologically Jewish, even though that was not how he self-identified. My goal in this production, also with a multiethnic cast, was to create theatre that would invite as many people as possible to the “welcome table”—especially an audience that is as eager as I am to see the complexity of our society on the stage. And the choice of individuals cast made perfect sense to me conceptually and sociologically, based on my own cultural experiences.

I offer two other examples that reveal the limitations of current casting language given the semiotics of today’s ethno-social realities: 1) Using the current nomenclature, how would casting actor Wentworth Miller (fig. 3) from *Prison Break*, whose father is African heritage, be characterized in the following roles: Othello?, Happy in *Death of a Salesman*?, or Lymon in *The Piano Lesson*? Are any of these examples non-traditional or color-blind casting? 2) In her autobiography *Just Lucky I Guess*, published in 2002 when she was 81 years old, Carol Channing (fig. 4) revealed that her grandmother was African heritage. Therefore it might seem that casting an African heritage actress as Dolly Levi in the stage version of *Hello Dolly* is, in fact, the most “traditional” choice for the US stage. However, when Pearl Bailey played the role to great acclaim on Broadway from 1967 to 1969,

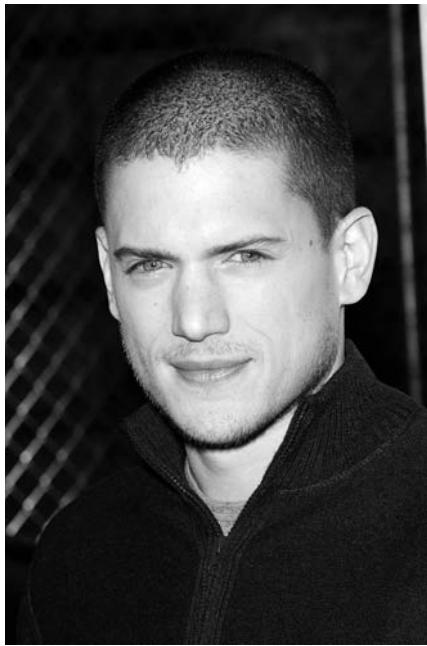


FIG. 3. Wentworth Miller. (Photo: Featureflash/Shutterstock.com.)



FIG. 4. Carol Channing. (Photo: Michael Maloney, *San Francisco Chronicle*.)

the production was recast with an African heritage cast to “make sense” of Bailey in the role, and productions do not generally cast Dolly in this way.<sup>8</sup>

In the above two examples, the casting issue becomes not just the actor’s heritage, but the actor’s appearance. In fact, in creating its report, the AAPAC had to rely on a similar logic to collect data: demographics were determined by “visual observation,” unless “interviews, articles or bios online showed evidence of self-identification with another racial or ethnic group even when that racial identity was not readily apparent” (Bandhu 34). What this ultimately means is that its casting data point predominantly to the lack of Asian, African, Hispanic, Native American, and Arab heritage—*looking* actors on the New York stage.

Since “USers” live in a multiethnic society, we cannot rely on the visual to know a person’s identity, or, more importantly, how he identifies.<sup>9</sup> The visual sign is only as accurate as the person reading it. The inability to determine an actor’s cultural and/or ethnic heritage based on his appearance demonstrates that the notion of race is a conflation and assumption of the impermeable linkage of visual identifiers and heritage. How “non-traditional” or “color-blind” would a production with actors of color be considered if audiences could not read the actors as being from historically marginalized groups? This lack of legibility of identity illustrates Thompson’s point about the “instability” of race and means that language based on a system of racialism is no longer practicable. The next step is initiating a dialogue with audiences to provide accurate historical information about the stories being told and to introduce new language to describe their sociologies.

## Rethinking Tradition

Audience members questioning casting choices that do not conform to their own societal expectations is an understandable concern for theatres on both philosophical and economic levels. Jack Marshall, artistic director of the American Century Theatre in Arlington, Virginia, worries that so-called non-traditional casting practices risk “sacrificing the audience’s enjoyment and understanding of a show to political objectives.” Similarly, a patron of Trinity Rep in Providence, Rhode Island, suggests that color-blind casting “interferes with the believability of the story” and wants casting to make “biological sense.” Certain casting choices in *A Christmas Carol* “distracted” her, and she opines that Trinity Rep is “so blind to race that they defy science” (qtd. in Lonati). The process of change in US theatre and society will advance as institutions continue to work with audiences to negotiate their ambivalences and misperceptions. Might audience members have a different response if they understood that these choices were not experimental practices, but an actual representation of their own society?

The history of casting Shakespeare on the US stage serves as a valuable example of the ways in which current casting language, such as “non-traditional casting,” has created sociological fictions that cause confusion for viewers. For example, the African Grove Theatre was founded in New York City in 1821 while the practice of chattel slavery was still legal in New York State. The company of African heritage artists is especially known for its performances of Shakespeare. The first professional European heritage production of Shakespeare in the United States is usually cited as Thomas Kean’s *Richard III* in 1750 (Boardman and Hischak 560). There were thus approximately only seventy-one years in US history of Shakespeare being performed solely by European heritage actors and, as of this writing, 191 years of actors of African heritage performing Shakespeare. The word “traditional” indexes something that is in the very body and history of the country. Actors of color performing Shakespeare on the US stage are thus an integral part of US theatre tradition.

How then to inform audiences both productively and creatively as to the histories that may expand their sociologies of viewing? The Alliance Theatre in Atlanta has worked to transform its audience members’ experiences and expectations by enjoining all of its staff members to think about



audience engagement. Artistic Director Susan Booth explains that “[w]e’ve always been a theatre of and for its community, and we can only achieve that aim through rigorous dialogue with as full a cohort of our community as possible. The resulting difference is shared ownership of the place and its work—we become stewards of the theatre, rather than distanced purveyors of canonical culture.” The theatre’s strategies include a symposium series in partnership with the Emory University Center for Ethics, where actors participate in pre-show dialogues about the issues in certain plays; post-show discussions; newsletters and program notes; dramaturgical lobby boards; carefully chosen marketing copy; and a “Living Room” series where plays under consideration are read to select audiences for discussion and community response. The theatre also has a full-time engagement associate who, according to Director of New Projects Celise Kalke, is the “fulcrum” for all the activities across the different departments.

Kalke relates an inspiring story about how an audience’s expectations can shift over a short period of time, explaining that, when she first arrived at the Alliance seven years ago, the audience’s response to integrated casting for *A Christmas Carol* was

sometimes curious and critical. So we developed talking points for discussion leaders focusing on the make-up of Dickens’ London as an international multi-cultural city and that the reason to revisit a classic is to develop connections between the material and day-to-day life in Atlanta. At the same time, our other programming began to feature more and more local actors, so our audience was having more exposure to the *Christmas Carol* actors throughout the season. Therefore when we said *Christmas Carol* featured the best actors for each role, our audience knew that was true from their own experience. Not that we didn’t say these things in 2005, we just said them more consistently. The result was the multi-ethnic casting quickly becoming a non-issue for the Alliance audience. And when we did an African-American production of *God of Carnage*, the trust that this choice grew out of wanting to feature the Atlanta casting pool and bring the best show possible to Atlanta, for an Atlanta audience, was complete. We [received] no questions about the choice.

Thus, at the Alliance, transparency about artistic choices and consistent sign-posting of these decisions happen openly as part of a larger dialogue with the community. Similarly, on a panel at the June 2012 TCG conference, Kwame Kwei-Armah, artistic director of Centerstage in Baltimore, stressed the importance of building “artistic relationships” with the community. He described a process of audience engagement and artistic decision-making in which the “organization needs the same artistic flexibility as the artistic process” and remains “intellectually nimble enough” to make changes in a plan when there is a compelling reason to change course.

There seems to be a groundswell of thinking that matches Booth’s and Kwei-Armah’s philosophies. At previous TCG conferences, I had heard leadership express concerns that discussing artistic and planning decisions with patrons could open the door to a subscriber base feeling it could predetermine programming. Kwei-Armah and others at his session, however, demonstrated a conviction that this type of dialogue is actually crucial to a theatre’s health. In addition to newsletters and humanities events, which offer patrons the opportunity to engage more deeply with artistic decisions, some theatres offer pre-show discussions to help create the context for viewing a performance. DNAWORKS, the organization I cofounded, facilitates community dialogues before and/or after performances so that audience members can hear about one another’s experiences and witness other sociologies of viewing within their own communities. Despite how financially stretched institutions are in today’s economy, I have experienced how all these engagement strategies—organized and carried out in concert *with* communities—result in audience building and retention, with patrons as stakeholders in shifting institutional practices and philosophies.

For example, how might it change audience perceptions of integrated Shakespeare productions to know about their historical precedents, such as US-born actor Ira Aldridge, who was dubbed the

“African Roscius” for his virtuosic performances in England of King Lear starting in 1827 (albeit problematically in whiteface)? And that he also played, to great acclaim, Macbeth, Shylock, Othello, and Aaron the Moor in integrated casts. Once an audience knows this rich history, it is no longer necessary to invoke a terminology rooted in affirmative action suggesting that a production is doing something “special” for actors of color.

Unhistorically calling integrated casting “non-traditional” marks certain actors as casting problems to be solved, echoing W. E. B. Du Bois’s searing question in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (101). And it simultaneously obscures the long history and tradition of African heritage actors performing European classical roles. Gayatri Spivak uses the term “sanctioned ignorance” (2) to point to unchallenged intolerance and bias. Newman also addresses these moments of disconnect: “Our challenge was to get our colleagues to recognize that the conventions which guide their choices (or non-choices) are adopted attitudes. Or, to put it as our central question: How do we get the decision-makers in the arts—our nation’s image-makers—to take responsibility for the images they are presenting, or in many cases not presenting?” (24). Clearly and consistently challenging moments of “sanctioned ignorance” is central to moving the theatre forward and creating parity of opportunity.

### Crossing Lines and Moving Forward

During the Community Keynote Forum I facilitated at the 2008 Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC), the gathering of close to 800 college and high school teachers, students, and artistic leaders from the Southeast region shared casting experiences and future hopes with one another. The controversial subject came up of cross-cultural casting in the direction not usually practiced—specifically, whether it was acceptable to cast across color and culture in performing August Wilson’s plays and other roles written for actors of color. Over the course of the session, there was a growing consensus that, in theory, one day casting could happen in all directions, but not until there was equal opportunity for all artists. In other words, the playing field is still not level. Participants also discussed this casting practice, with varying degrees of comfort or accord, as something that could possibly happen in the classroom as a part of acting training to explore playing across culture and ethnicity.<sup>10</sup>

Several acting students of color reported that they had only been cast in departmental shows as maids and in background roles. While I have heard it explained that a student simply was not talented or advanced enough for a lead role, there is an extant body of dramatic literature large enough to provide roles of all sizes that do not play into colonial patterns of segregation. Contemporary writers Naomi Iizuka, Caridad Svich, and Charles Mee, among others, write texts that often have no fixed ethnicity attached to characters and are open to the complexity of today’s increasingly mixed heritage youth and society. Similarly, the genres of Hip Hop theatre and devised theatre offer more flexible casting options (fig. 5). What curricular changes could happen so that the first priority in planning an academic season is for directors to choose plays to fit the talents of all the students and give them room for personal and professional growth? One strategy that has worked for me when I guest direct is to visit the department, meet the student population, and spend time at the school before choosing the play. I want to ensure that the project not only serves the students in the given program, but also the cultural climate of the institution that will be the primary audience for the piece. If the play has already been chosen and it does not meet these criteria, I propose a different text.

Other possible approaches for making educational stages more of a welcome table include involving students in play selection and casting. While it may be several generations until US society is fully integrated, younger artists and current students lend a vital perspective, as they have a different generational experience of identity and belonging. Noted dramaturg Anne Hamilton explains: “What has happened in the last 26 years that has irrevocably forced our need to change is the coming of age of the first generation of mixed-heritage children of those people born after the



FIG. 5. The company of *RelRites: A Devised Theatre Piece Celebrating Hip Hop Culture* at New York University. (Photo by Kitty Leech.)

Supreme Court decision of *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) [in which the anti-miscegenation laws still valid in sixteen states were deemed unconstitutional]. With intermarriage and co-education of all races and integrated neighborhoods comes the changing landscape of people being comfortable around each other.” In addition, institutions may choose to implement initiatives that offer instructors more resources, and support them in staying current with shifts in society and the industry. For example, team-teaching relieves one person of needing to know all aspects of the field. Similarly, departmental retreats, teach-ins, professional-development seminars, and access to organizations like the Faculty Research Network can provide access to people from other areas of the university or the industry to offer supplementary training in teaching literature and rethinking pedagogy. Departments can also mobilize community resources, and teachers can partner with community leaders to expand their curricula and knowledge bases.

At the SETC forum, an early career artist from North Carolina shared that he hoped to create a theatre company where it was known and expected that actors would play roles from different identity locations than the playwright intended. In Pao’s terms, this is an example of “sharing the hypothesis,” where a theatre initiates a dialogue with its audience on the specific aesthetics and politics of a production or mission (102). This proposal led to a passionate conversation about the inherent quality of theatre: that it is not “real” and always asks the audience to make leaps and engage on an imaginative level. To reduce theatre to what is “expected” or “safe” plays against the attributes of the art and diminishes the audience’s participation in the making of meaning. Theatre builds understanding on a human level by inviting its audience into a constant negotiation between self and society. To insist on theatre’s theatricality—that is, its nonliteral, non-“realistic” qualities—is to do the cultural work that will lead to better inter-group relationships.

The Detroit Repertory Theatre (DRT) is an example of a company that, since 1956, has engaged its audiences in such a process. Similar to what the SETC participant proposed, DRT utilizes what company member Milford Luster calls “race and ethnicity transcendent casting,” meaning that the

company will cast the best person for the part “unless the role specifically calls for a certain ethnicity.” In one case, Luster—herself African heritage—was able to play what was perhaps intended to be a role for a European heritage-looking actor, since it was not explicitly stated in the script. Luster explains that the DRT does not consider what it does as color-blind casting, and I would argue that this is a perfect example of how, by retiring this terminology and “sharing the hypothesis” with an audience, a company has created progressive socio-artistic change.<sup>11</sup>

## Rocking the Boat

Throughout this essay I have referred to “integrated” casting, knowingly signifying on a national history that is not unrelated to this conversation. As a whole, US society is still uncomfortably segregated; for example, a 20 May 2012 *New York Times* online headline reads “Jim Crow Is Dead, Segregation Lives On.” This distance inhibits us from knowing one another’s histories, cultures, families, and identities on a deeper level. It is understandable therefore that, as a microcosm of that society and producer of culture within it, theatre also struggles with integration. Nevertheless, what will be the future of US theatre if it does not resist segregation—onstage, backstage, in its administrative offices, and in the audience—and truly become a welcome place for all USers to gather and share in the ritual of witnessing stories that are vital to the country’s collective well-being?

The term “integrated casting” has precedence, most notably at the New York Shakespeare Festival under Joseph Papp’s direction. As Pao relates, “the company’s policies were described in terms of integration and desegregation, never in terms of color-blindness” (46). Is it possible, given the almost two-century history of African heritage actors performing Shakespeare, that the issue challenging some audience members regarding the question of an actor’s ethnicity (both in Shakespeare and other productions) is seeing these productions with an integrated cast? Throughout US theatre history, spanning from minstrelsy to award-winning Broadway musicals, performances with African heritage casts have had tremendous crossover popularity and commercial success—therefore, the point of concern cannot be the presence of people of color onstage. Why, then, does the theatre industry continue to recomplicate the dramaturgy of productions by using segregating language to justify integrated casting? I suspect that this accommodation is for the benefit of viewers who experience integration as something unfamiliar, not part of their daily lives, and for whom seeing an integrated society onstage creates a kind of cognitive dissonance. If societal segregation is the obstacle to an integrated theatre field, bringing this conversation clearly to the fore will provide an important opportunity for communities to reexamine their thinking and biases.

As a step toward both theatrical and societal integration, I also recommend putting pressure on the words “diversity” and “inclusion.” “Diversity” implies there is an unmarked “normal” position on the one hand and, on the other, a marked “alternative” that is different from the norm—in other words, “diverse” as compared to whom or what? Similarly, “inclusion” and “inclusive” suggest that one group has the power to invite another group to the table and “allow” that group entry. This language is not innocuous—it enacts micro-aggressions on populations that have historically been denied access to resources and advancement while suggesting detrimental expectations of privilege and entitlement to others. One fundamental step toward sitting together as equals at a welcome table is finding a way to discuss the plurality of our nation without using language embedded with social and economic hierarchies.

The questions of language, casting, and representation are not without their own inherent contradictions. Unless a person is playing herself in an autobiographical performance, all theatre is cross-casting of some sort. For decades, people advocating for better representational practices on the US stage have queried why a person with a different color skin than a playwright intended should be any less believable than a person born in a different century or on a different continent. As a result of the “sociology of viewing,” some “crossings” are more acceptable than others to certain viewers.

Nevertheless, the complex dynamics of African heritage actors inhabiting parts written for European heritage actors have sparked an ongoing debate. Some theorists—most notably August Wilson in his landmark 1996 keynote speech “The Ground on Which I Stand”—proffer that this casting asks a person of African heritage to “become” or attempt to “pass” for white, while others insist that, because of the semiotics of skin, the character immediately becomes black in the audience’s eye.<sup>12</sup> I am inclined to say that how such casting is read depends on many factors, including the identities of the other cast members and the geographical location of the production (as different regions have different sociologies of viewing), and that no two viewers will see any actor onstage in the exact same way.

While I concur with the argument that productions be discouraged from the tokenism of casting only a few select people of color in order to appear desegregated, I am nevertheless conflicted about the proposition that actors of color should be discouraged from performing in European classics. The process of acculturation is at the heart of US sociology and is the conundrum that all peoples coming to this country, whether voluntary or forced, have faced: assimilating, remaining culturally specific, or a combination of the two. The suggestion that people of color who adopt the speech patterns or class aspirations of the dominant culture, either in their personal lives or onstage, are somehow denying their heritage echoes the nineteenth-century political divide between Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington of resistance versus accommodation. The intensity of these positions reflects the long and unresolved history of societal racism and racialism in this country; at the same time, today’s artists work to strike their own balance. As Michael Kahn said at the 1986 NTCP symposium: “An actor is an independent being and therefore has a right to turn down a role” (Kahn, qtd. in Davis and Newman 31). I would also like to add that an actor is a creative being, and we are driven by and drawn to work for reasons that go much deeper than we may ever understand.

Another important element of an integrated theatre field is culturally or ethnically specific theatre. Institutions dedicated to the literature, traditions, and research of a particular culture still play a valuable role, both as one of a broader range of employment opportunities for theatre workers from that culture or ethnic heritage, as well as a place where individuals can get crucial training in a specialized area of the field. This proposition touches on strongly debated philosophical questions that need further discussion, especially regarding the ways in which funding across the industry determines institutional survival. Nevertheless, the central structural notion is that, if all theatres are integrated at all levels of leadership, administration, and production, the theatre field as a whole could operate more fluidly in multiple, intersecting circles and not be isolated into self-contained entities and aesthetics.

After the debates, after the renaming of terms, after the struggle to be heard and represented accurately, what theatre artists have in common is a passion for and compulsion to tell human stories—good juicy stories, stories with unexpected twists, captivating characters, pathos, history, and evocative language—and to be able to inhabit the words of genius writers respectfully and artfully. What would have happened if actors like Aldridge, Canada Lee, Ellen Holly, or Earle Hyman had banned themselves from European classics? World theatre history would have been deprived of a profound chapter.

As Eyring writes about the theme for TCG’s Fall Forum on Governance, echoing my framing of this essay with Austin’s and Butler’s theories:

as a theatre community, we often view ourselves as good guys with a strong sense of justice, and we typically seek to investigate issues in our society, to help inspire reflection and change. But perhaps we are not facing the fact that we all have biases—and that some of our biases are based on race. And that these biases, which are often ingrained/institutionalized in our society, may be part of the reason why we also have trouble bringing about a more diverse and inclusive theatre community—in terms of race, gender, ability and all the many intersections of difference. . . .

Our theatre field could be, *should* be modeling a better, more inclusive world—not replicating weaknesses in our society. (emphasis in original)

As artists and as cultural workers it is our unique opportunity and responsibility to challenge society's blindspots, to notice the missing fullness of our society on our stages, and to trouble the notion that any family configuration would be "unrealistic," given the heterogeneity of our world. Some initial questions that I propose to guide the steps of directors, designers, casting people, producers, teachers, scholars, critics, and social activists as we move into a new era of theatre-making and representation include: What do we need to learn about cultures different from our own to ensure that the theatre accurately reflects the richness and fullness of our country's cultural, historical, physical, and epidermal landscape? Where are we inadvertently making that richness fit inside the narrow confines of an idea we have inherited, which was originally introduced to keep us separate? And finally, a crucial discussion for further exploration: What kind of training—in academic, institutional, and commercial settings—will be necessary for all parties to become fluent in the current sociologies and literatures of our nation? Reconsidering the language around casting reveals equally important questions about segregation and discrimination in other aspects of US theatre, including the hiring of directors and designers and institutional leadership. As a theatre community and profession, as we discuss these questions we can continue to address persistent inequalities and challenges in representation.

The playing field clearly needs to be balanced before US theatre can seriously entertain a conversation about a "universal" casting policy; and audiences also need a broader understanding of history and the sociology of their own viewing in order to "read" artists' intentions more critically as we attempt to balance that field. At the same time, in the theatre—at its best—we work to move others, be moved ourselves, and understand one another better. I agree with Newman that, if this is our unselfish goal, then someday casting will just be casting and everyone will have an equal seat at the welcome table—a metaphor for heaven in the spiritual quoted above. A colleague of mine asked if this utopian view of theatre is "what we actually do?" My answer, inspired by Josephine Baker, is: "If it's not, let us begin today."

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## Notes

1. Although AEA's study was nationwide, given that New York has the highest number of union stage actors of any city in the country, it is reasonable to use these numbers as an indication of what is happening across the industry. In addition, since the question of casting is primarily about the visual perception of a person's identity and, as discussed below, genetic research indicates that at this point in US history most bloodlines are mixed, I choose the term "heritage" to indicate the predominant visible component of a person's identity within US culture. I acknowledge the inescapable ambivalence of using identificatory language in an essay that challenges the limitations of such language; however, I have done my best to represent people ethnically in the way they choose to represent themselves, while not using terms that presume unified cultural or political affiliations.
2. See, for example, the cases of Steven Adly Guirgis's play *The Motherf\*\*ker with the Hat* at TheatreWorks in Hartford, Connecticut, in 2011 and *The Nightingale* at La Jolla Playhouse in California during the summer of 2012 (respectively, "HOLA Denounces Casting . . ." and Ng), as well as actress Erin Quill's *fairyprincessdiaries* blog about discrimination of actors of color in the theatre.
3. For a detailed history and explanation of Linnaeus's and Blumenbach's beliefs, see Stephen J. Gould, "The Geometer of Race."
4. Writers on race as a social construction include Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose (1994); Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994); and Robyn Wiegman (1995).
5. See *Colorblind* by Tim Wise for a discussion of sociological studies demonstrating the color-based bias and assumptions in the United States, and *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* by Brandi Wilkins Catanese for more in-depth analyses of the limitations of the terms theatrically and sociologically.
6. Sections of this essay are revisions of my 2003 article "A Director's Work: Re-Thinking Non-Traditional Casting," and from the Community Keynote Forum I led at the Southeastern Theatre Conference in Chattanooga on 7 March 2008.
7. See, for example, *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* (1996) by Gregory Howard Williams, and *Caucasia* (1999) by Danzy Senna, among many others. In addition, numerous narratives of enslaved people of African heritage describe the ability to escape and integrate into free society due to their light skin tone that was viewed as "White."
8. In chapter 6 of *No Safe Spaces*, Pao also discusses Levi's ethnicity and how it has been interpreted in numerous productions.
9. I use the term "USer," since the United States is only one of many American nations.
10. See Melinda Wilson's 2009 article for an example of how she cross-culturally cast *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.
11. Another prominent theatre that has pioneered this work is Mixed Blood in Minneapolis, founded by Artistic Director Jack Reuler in 1976.
12. Both Jocelyn Brown (2012) and Melinda Wilson (2009), respectively, argue each of these points.

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