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Defying the Post-Racial in Contemporary American Commercial Theatre

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DEDICATION

To my grandparents, whose sense of humor and penchant for storytelling I owe my deep
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ABSTRACT

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As American society purports to no longer see race, efforts are made for a public colorblindness that often cements the inequality that an ideology of post-racialism would seek to dismantle. This thesis examines how commercial American theatre intervenes in this ideology to prove the persistence of racial animosity and tension in the United States. To conduct this investigation, an analysis of four key plays will be undertaken: David Mamet's *Race*, Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*, Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* and Tracey Scott Wilson's *Buzzer*. Among the most produced, celebrated and awarded plays on Broadway, Off-Broadway and in regional theatres nationwide, the efficacy of these works waxes and wanes. Sometimes hegemonic, often incisive and consistently entertaining, this thesis interrogates how the contemporary American theatrical canon as exemplified by these works approaches race.

Introduction

In July of 2013, the United States watched with bated breath as a six-person jury of women acquitted half-Caucasian, half-Hispanic George Zimmerman of both manslaughter and murder in the second degree of a Black¹ teenager, Trayvon Martin. The racially charged context surrounding this decision overshadowed the question of culpability. The jury—sans the presence of a Black member—became a microcosm for white America at large, dispelling any myth of a post-racial reality long before a verdict was reached. For some, Zimmerman’s innocence constituted a foregone conclusion: the hegemonic white order a redundancy both in terms of adjectives invoked—as the American hegemony is unequivocally a white one—and violence continually committed as it exerted its oppression not once at the hour of taking Martin’s life but anew at the moment of failing to proffer up a paltry apology. For others, a jury reached a conclusion regardless of political and social pressure, trying a man and not a metaphor. Yet the issue of race never melted to the periphery, remaining the focal point of the conversation, however subtextual. Dominant white America either shores itself up against accusations of racism without fully considering the validity of the allegations or laments it only to shrug its shoulders. In the past five years, four of the country’s foremost playwrights

¹ Author Touré provides a succinct reasoning regarding the capitalization of “Black” and the lack thereof as it concerns “white” by which I abide: “I believe ‘Black’ constitutes a group, an ethnicity equivalent to African-American, Negro, or, in terms of a sense of ethnic cohesion, Irish, Polish, or Chinese. I don’t believe that whiteness merits the same treatment. Most American whites think of themselves as Italian-American or Jewish or otherwise relating to other past connections that Blacks cannot make because of the familial and national disruptions of slavery. So to me, because Black speaks to an unknown familial/national past it deserves capitalization” (*Who’s Afraid of Post-blackness?... ix*).

took on a series of interrelated questions continuously asked but inadequately answered: Are we racist? Are we intolerant? Are we hegemonic? Our theatre certainly can be, even at the unwitting hands of these aforementioned artists hoping to effect change.

White male playwrights David Mamet and Bruce Norris are unequivocally of the aforementioned power-wielding hegemony. David Mamet, his rhythmic language earning his dialogue a genre unto itself—“Mamet-speak”²—seeks to be both incendiary and topical, as outspoken about the state of the union as he is regarding the state of the theatre. A sometimes actor and often playwright, the much-lauded Norris purports to question and overturn middle-class white mores—often invoking humor in an effort to shirk any and all notions of political correctness—yet ironically upholds them. Conversely, theatrical newcomer Ayad Akhtar and the established Tracey Scott Wilson, while celebrated, have not reached the same level of household name as of yet. As playwrights of color, they are not of the same dominant social group as white males Mamet and Norris. However, scholars, critics and theatrical producers alike have been quick to praise all of the above playwrights, noting that their witty writing holds up a mirror to a majority white and middle-class audience.

David Mamet’s *Race*, Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park*, Ayad Akhtar’s *Disgraced* and Tracey Scott Wilson’s *Buzzer* are among some of the most celebrated plays of the last five years, Norris and Akhtar both taking the Pulitzer Prize for Drama,³ *Race* being

² Haedicke, Janet V. “David Mamet: America on the American Stage.” *A Companion to Twentieth-century American Drama*. Ed. David Krasner. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005. 410. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 22 Mar. 2014.

³ "Drama." *The Pulitzer Prizes*. The Pulitzer Prizes – Columbia University, n.d. Web. 18 Sept. 2013.

the longest-running Broadway show of its season⁴ and Wilson's *Buzzer* already snatched up by the estimable Goodman Theatre after a successful run at the Guthrie Theatre. All of these plays, however, are racially problematic. Abiding by the literality of its title, *Race* offers still another example of racism to disprove the aforementioned post-racial existence and, akin to Norris's work, proffers up an angry white male as the protagonist of the play in a self-congratulatory and cathartic bid to exorcise the playwright's "white guilt."⁵ In an effort to dispel the misbelief that we inhabit a post-racial world, *Clybourne Park* draws a false equivalency between white flight and gentrification to assert that the dissenters of these social phenomena are equally racist. Contrasting the ethnic identities of white Mamet and Norris with playwrights of color Akhtar and Wilson, the question is raised of who can write about race? Are the same standards applied regardless of the identity of the author? *Disgraced* sees many parallels to all of its predecessors in which a tenuous façade of civility very quickly gives way to verbal and physical violence. Akhtar is perhaps the most potent in his tragic cynicism although Wilson is a close second, her *Buzzer* commanding a harrowing final image to a play that considers the implications of racial paranoia without wholly earning this ending moment.

These are playwrights who know their audiences well. Alternately trading on and dismantling recognizable stereotypes, the characters onstage are those that we recognize easily, from the yuppie white Lindsey from Norris's *Clybourne Park* who exclaims to her new Black neighbors, "Half of my friends are black!" to the white gentrifier, Suzy, who

⁴ Hetrick, Adam. "Case Closed: David Mamet's Race Ends Broadway Run." *Playbill.com*. Playbill, Inc., 21 Aug. 2010. Web. 18 Sept. 2013.

⁵ Steele, Shelby. "The Age of White Guilt." *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 2007, sec. A: 21. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

tells her Black boyfriend with whom she moves to the latter's childhood neighborhood that he can handle it better than she upon a confession that their surroundings are "bad": "You grew up here. And even though you hated it, it is familiar, it is in your body" (Norris 73; *Buzzer*). The plays at hand bring to the fore the insensitive subtext inherent in our interactions with whoever is the Other by baring the alleged, unvoiced tensions lying dormant just below the surface. They therefore possess a common agenda of exposing the hypocrisy of characters and audiences alike. However, in a bid to function as exposés, the works often denigrate racially- and socioeconomically-charged nuances to mere footnotes to the given conversation, if not resorting to outright tropism at the moment that the secondary characters of color or of a differing culture serve as foils for the white protagonists occupying center stage.

Methodology

David Mamet's *Race*; Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*; Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* and Tracey Scott Wilson's *Buzzer* all confront the same ideology: that we inhabit a post-racial reality. They intervene in this ideology by unequivocally asserting that American society is not post-racial because we are all racist. This argument, however, systematically ignores historical and racialized disparities and realities by means of its bottom-line cynicism. Central to identifying this ideology of the post-racial by which these works abide is detailing their respective plots, all of which contend that America's race problem is still alive and strong. With this, a close reading of these plays and their corresponding selected productions will be undertaken, thus this thesis will examine the

representation and interrogation of race as the thematic subject matter within these plays by existing at the interstices of several different but interrelated theoretical frameworks.

While this paper is cultural studies-leaning for its identification of post-racial ideology being that in which all four plays seek to intervene, the analysis of each play will evolve according to the demands of the work itself. As white playwrights Mamet and Norris potentially uphold a hegemonic construction of race by means of their own white identity being in meta-theatrical dialogue with the subject matter, the texts under consideration are therefore not only the plays and productions themselves, but also the critical discussion surrounding them, including interviews with and writings penned by the playwrights. The thesis will also bear in mind the playwrights' intentions when applicable.

To provide a sociological perspective, research conducted by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva will be included in an effort to read these texts against theories and case studies examining the existence of contemporary racism in the United States. Thereafter, a theory of interpellation as it is presented within the realm of visual studies will be used to explore the embodied aspect of these works in performance, while the aesthetics of the viewed productions will be evaluated to ascertain if the mimetic function of theatre is utilized to foreclose upon the possibility of breaking with the status quo.

Justification

In a time in which the advent of performance studies and the restructuring of the theatrical field in the realm of higher education and scholarship calls into question that which is archived and canonized—or perhaps proving those works forever in flux—

training a critical eye toward our perpetuated and pervasive repertoire of work is not only timely but necessary. The four plays in question boast celebrated Broadway, Off-Broadway and/or regional theatre runs, and therefore constitute a contemporary sampling of American or Americanized commercial theatre, an incarnated, institutionalized form of popular culture. As oft-produced playwrights occupying space in the highest echelon of the contemporary American theatre scene, these plays are of relevance for their individual and collective contribution to what cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall once famously stated in “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’”:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. [...] That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it. (453)

Such speaks to performance as a site wherein power is ascertained or abdicated, a notion echoed by cultural studies theorist Dwight Conquergood: “Because it is public, performance is a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated” (84). It is also a forum for “ideological struggle,” as the general field of culture constitutes “a terrain of ‘incorporation’ and ‘resistance’” as per Stuart Hall (Storey xviii). The questions, however, are what viewpoints or ideologies are offered or contested; which conversations started or circumvented; and who emerges with cultural capital at the expense of another, all of which this thesis takes as its point of departure.

Definition of Terms

Ideology

The term “ideology” references a definition offered by Louis Althusser, based off of one that was developed by Karl Marx (Sturken *et al* 70). As Sturken and Cartwright explain in *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Althusser modified the term to account for “a set of ideas and beliefs shaped through the unconscious in relationship to other social forces, such as the economy and institutions. By living in society, we live in ideology, and systems of representation are the vehicles of that ideology” (70). Within the realm of cultural and visual studies, these systems of representation usually refer to an area of popular culture, to which commercial theatre would certainly pertain. The famous cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall deemed ideology as referencing “those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (“The Whites of Their Eyes” 81).

Coupled with this notion of ideology is that of hegemony, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci being the originator of the definition by whom Sturken and Cartwright abide. Hegemony references an ongoing negotiation of power and assumes that “dominant ideologies are often presented as ‘common sense’ and that dominant ideologies are in tension with other forces and constantly in flux” (70). Similarly, “myths” are “the hidden set of rules and conventions through which meanings, which are specific to certain groups, are made to seem universal and given for a whole society,” according to French theorist Roland Barthes, in which the “connotative” meaning passes

for the “denotative” one (20). Hegemony allows for these myths and ideologies to pose as “‘natural’” or “‘given’” instead of culturally conditioned and “‘constructed’” (21).

Hall noted that although ideology is not synonymous with language, the latter, however, is “the principal medium in which we find different ideological discourses elaborated” (“The Whites of Their Eyes” 81). Ideologies do not originate with the individual; rather, the latter exists within a complex web of the former, which “disappear from view into the taken-for-granted ‘naturalized’ world of common sense” (81). Since (like gender) race appears to be ‘given’ by Nature, racism is *one of the most profoundly ‘naturalized’ of existing ideologies*” (81; italics author’s own).

Race

The definition of race with which I will abide is premised upon a 1996 interview with cultural theorist Stuart Hall in which race is defined as being a “floating signifier,” thus bespeaking a social constructionist theory of race as opposed to an essentialist, biological one (*Race: The Floating Signifier*). Along these lines, the meaning of race is not fixed and instead changes with the given context. As a result, power is arbitrated and assigned. This definition is in keeping with that which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva utilizes in his text *Racism Without Racists*, who supplements it by adding that race “has a social reality” in which “it produces real effects on the actors racialized as ‘black’ or ‘white’” (9).

Racialized

I summon Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s definition of a “racial structure” in contextualizing the use of the term “racialized” (9). To define this notion, Bonilla-Silva states the following: “When race emerged in human history, it formed a social structure

(a racialized social system) that awarded systemic privileges to Europeans (the peoples who became ‘white’) over non-Europeans (the peoples who became ‘nonwhite’)” (9). Furthermore, this privileging of white over non-white pertains to all societies with a history of European colonization. Concludes Bonilla-Silva, racial structure is therefore “*the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege*” (9, italics author’s own).

Racial Ideology

By characterizing race as problematic or divisive in contemporary American society, I cite the existence of “racial ideology” as per Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, which references “*the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the status quo*” (9). This presupposes that “the frameworks of the dominant race tend to become the master frameworks upon which *all* racial actors ground (for or against) their ideological positions,” thus relating ideology to hegemony insofar as the latter perpetuates the former (9).

Post-Racial

With Barack Obama’s presidency, the American populace entered an era of the post-racial in which we have collectively—and allegedly—moved beyond the socioeconomic confines of race. In his article “Deconstructing Postracialism: Humor as a Critical, Cultural Project,” Jonathan P. Rossing defines the post-racial as being characterized by “a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic of the past with no viable place in contemporary thought. It upholds the ‘fantasy that racism no longer exists’” (45). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva elaborates upon this concept at length in *Racism Without Racists*, identifying, too, the belief that “Obama’s election is a confirmation of

the veracity of whites' claims to be color blind...and the beginning a post-racial America" (xiii).

Colorblind Racism

Bonilla-Silva disputes an era of the post-racial vis-à-vis "a new racial ideology [he] label[s] *colorblind racism*" (2). As opposed to Jim Crow laws, which assumed that biological factors and lesser morality begot racial inferiority, the ideology of colorblind racism results when "whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (2). Thus, Bonilla-Silva confirms that racial disparities still exist but are no longer conceived to be biologically determined or resultant; rather, "the maintenance of white privilege is done in a way that defies facile racial readings" (3).

Reverse Racism

According to *Key Words in Multicultural Interventions: A Dictionary*, "reverse racism would imply that societal victims of racism would amass the wherewithal to impose racist actions, attitudes, or institutional structures that subordinate White Americans in the manner that people of color had traditionally been subordinated" (Young, Jr. 223). The dictionary entry is decidedly pessimistic regarding the possibility that reverse racism can exist being that such power to discriminate necessitates institutional control to a degree that people of color lack. Thus while prejudice or bias may be harbored, people of color "lack the power and authority to carry out a racist imperative: to systematically subordinate, marginalize, or proscribe the lives of White Americans," rendering reverse racism "an *imaginary* opposite to White racism" (223-4, italics my own).

White Privilege

The *Encyclopedia of Race and Crime* defines “white privilege” as those advantages given in the United States to people of European descent that “exempts [them] from “restrictions and burdens imposed on members of groups that do not fall within the category of White” (Thompson 894). To this I would add that white privilege is also bestowed upon those who can pass as white. As the encyclopedic entry continues, “This advantage of White persons over non-White persons creates disparities between Whites and non-Whites,” as “[b]oth the macro (economic, educational, political, and familial systems, etc.) and micro (beliefs, attitudes, values, friends, etc.) elements of U.S. society seem to indicate that people conduct their everyday lives differently depending on whether or not they possess White privilege” (894).

White Guilt

Shelby Steele’s powerful meditations upon the political effects of white guilt contribute to my definition of this term in which I cite two different articles penned by Steele, both entitled in “The Age of White Guilt.” In the first from a 2007 issue of Toronto’s *The Globe and Mail*, Steel straightforwardly writes that white guilt is “the experience of being stigmatized as racist simply because one is white” (A21). He charts the contemporary advent of the phenomenon to the 1960s Civil Rights movement when the United States “owned up to its long and virulent history of racial oppression,” leading to a “white experience” of “living with and struggling against a reputation for racial bigotry” (A21). In his 2002 *Harper’s Magazine* article of the same name, Steele writes of the stigma of white guilt that “white individuals and American institutions must

perpetually *prove a negative*—that they are not racist—to gain enough authority to function in matters of race, equality, and opportunity. If they fail to prove the negative, they will be seen as racists” (39). Also of particular relevance to this thesis is this conclusion: “That whites are now stigmatized by their race is not poetic justice; it is simply another echo of racism’s power to contaminate by mere association” (39).

Whiteness

Difficult to define for its “slipperiness,” I cite Rebecca Clark Mane’s description of whiteness: “It has been characterized as a historically constructed racial identity (Saxton 1990; Roediger 1994), a structural racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994), a location of unmarked privilege (McIntosh [1989] 2011; Frankenberg 1993; Hurtado 1996), and a property of individuals or subjects (Harris 1993; Lipsitz 1998)” (73).

Central to the persistence of whiteness is its ability to remain concealed, thus critical whiteness studies encompasses “identifying and naming whiteness [as] an important counterhegemonic tool with which to resist the invisibility and unspeakability whiteness attempts to maintain” (74). Clark Mane also invokes the term to reference its “structuring ideology” and “epistemology that produces, secures, and maintains material qualities,” bespeaking its close relationship to white privilege as the advantages bestowed upon the benefactors of whiteness (73).

Chapter 1

Look Back in Anger: The Angry White Guy Astride and Inside of *Race*

In the wake of the Martin-Zimmerman case, the American theatre world responded. The December 2013 installment of *American Theatre* magazine featured an article entitled “The Trayvon Factor,” detailing an emergent nationwide theatre festival to delve into the “issues” raised by the case (Simpson 32). With some of the most prestigious regional theatres and American playwrights of note pledging their participation, and helmed by Keith Josef Adkins, playwright and artistic director of New Black Fest in New York City, “the playwrights who signed on to [his] project—its formal title is ‘Facing Our Truth: Ten-Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege’—are mainly in their thirties and forties, part of the post-Civil Rights Era generation that is refining the discussion of race in the American theatre” (33). The project is demonstrative of a belief in theatre as a medium that can effect social change, which is urgently needed in a society that remains deeply divided along racial lines.

Juxtaposed with this socially conscious response is David Mamet’s *Race*, which can be read as an extended and erroneous hasty generalization. With a career that began in Chicago theatre, by 1978 Mamet, an American theatre denizen, was named associate artistic director and writer-in-residence at the Goodman Theatre while his plays enjoyed concurrent Broadway success in New York City. Mamet received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1983 for *Glengarry Glen Ross*. With actor William H. Macy, he then founded the Atlantic Theater Company in New York City in 1985 and in 1988, *Speed-the-Plow* opened on Broadway followed by the 1993 debut of *Oleanna* at the Orpheum Theatre in

New York. Care of the notoriety and fame of its playwright-director, *Race*⁶ went straight to Broadway when it debuted in 2009.

The play centers upon four characters, two white men in their forties, Jack and Charles, and two Black characters, Henry, forties, and Susan, twenties. Henry and Jack are partners of a boutique New York City law firm at which Susan was recently hired by Jack, as is established early on in the play when Henry dismissively sneers, “She’s *your* science project, Jacky, she’s not *mine*” (Mamet 26, italic’s author’s own). Inspiring this ire are the circumstances surrounding the decision to take the case that the partners are considering at the beginning of the play: egregiously wealthy Charles is accused of raping a Black prostitute with whom he was having an affair but allegedly loved. Because of the racial makeup of the law firm as well as the fact that no one else will try his case, he seeks out Henry and Jack.

From the start, and true to the title of the work, the topic of race will be discussed at length. By way of greeting and after a brief monologue that begins with, “You want to tell me about black folks?” does Henry rhetorically ask, “Do you know what you can say? To a black man. On the subject of race?” Lest there be any doubt—and which Charles correctly supplies—the answer is “nothing,” before he adds that unlike white people, “[b]lack people can talk about Race” (Mamet 5-6). Long associated with saying the unsayable, Mamet is channeling his 1992 work *Oleanna* in many respects throughout *Race*. The former piece sought to confront the perils and constraints of a politically correct existence in the wake of the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas sexual harassment

⁶ When discussing *Race* in performance, I am referring to the February 9th, 2014 performance of it at Next Act Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as directed by Edward Morgan.

melee. In *Race*, the audience is immediately oriented within a world in which there is similar trepidation surrounding the language employed to speak of sensitive subject matter. However, Mamet exceeds the imposition of political correctness with the outright declaration of an alleged double-standard: black people can offer their insight regarding the subject of race whereas white people neither can nor should attempt likewise.

In his essay “The Devil's Advocate: David Mamet’s *Oleanna* and Political Correctness,” Alain Piette defines political correctness as “intent on eliminating from our language, behavior, and value system all forms of offensive and discriminatory attitudes toward certain categories of the population” (177; italics author’s own). Mamet’s belief in the power of language is demonstrated care of his “words-as-weapons”⁷ dialogue but he hardly endorses the edict to be politically correct; to the contrary, as Ben Brantley’s 2009 review of the Broadway production of *Race* immediately points out, the playwright is nearly synonymous with provocation.⁸ This question of who can say what still consumes him in his post-*Oleanna* days. Not only did a linguistic “eradication” of inequality never take place vis-à-vis political correctness, but now an era of reverse discrimination is very much upon us or so Mamet perceives, for Charles is guilty not because he is white but “[because] of the *calendar*” (Piette 178; Mamet 8). Consider the following exchange:

JACK: Listen to our instructions, *obey* them—and cultivate the appearance of contrition.

CHARLES: I didn’t *do* anything.

⁷ Brantley, Ben. “In Mametland, a Skirmish in Black and White.” *The New York Times - Theater*. The New York Times Company, 7 Dec. 2009. Web. 2 Mar. 2014.

⁸ “But that easy demonstration of approval didn’t feel like a reaction to gladden the heart of a dramatist hoping to provoke, to stir, to disturb” (Brantley “In Mametland, a Skirmish in Black and White”).

HENRY: You're *white*.

(*Pause.*)

CHARLES: Is that a crime?

HENRY: In this instance.

(*Pause.*)

CHARLES: You're kidding.

HENRY: Sadly I am not.

CHARLES (*To Henry*): Do you care that I'm white?

HENRY: "Do I hate white folks?" Z'at your question? "Do all black people hate whites?" Let me put your mind at rest. You *bet* we do. White folks are "scared"? All to the good. You understand? We're thrilled you're guilty.

CHARLES: Because I'm white.

HENRY: No. Because of the *calendar*. Fifty years ago.

You're white? Same case. Same facts. You're innocent.

(*Pause*) This is the situation. In which you discover yourself. (Mamet 7-8)

Not only does a politically correct world persist in which words or phrases still fail to be divested of meaning—as the identity of the utterer dictates what can be uttered, as per the first statements of the play—but since white people quite literally got away with murder in the past, it necessarily follows that Charles is inevitably doomed as a result of such historic misdeeds.

Thus, mere minutes into Mamet's production, an ideology is firmly established: that we are not post-racial being that race still very much dictates speech and divides us, and furthermore, that white men are the new targets of discrimination. In "Race, Rape, and White Victimhood: David Mamet's 'Race,'" Cynthia A. Young reaches this same conclusion as regards Mamet's piece: "Rather than a complex interrogation of black and white racial dynamics, the play is an expression of white, male disaffection in the Age of Obama, a theme that is neither novel nor particularly surprising in its contours" (1013). As the play progresses, it will be rife with racial epithets put into the mouths of the characters in an effort to demonstrate just how far from post-racialism we remain, and

time and again will there be declarations regarding what can or cannot be said about race. However, Mamet's outright disregard for a societal mandate of political correctness as well as his suggestion that white men are somehow victimized betray an egregious attitude of white privilege. To be clear, *Race* is not a work that indicts reverse racism; rather, it is designed to present it as a legitimate issue with which white people now contend.

This is a problem. In *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva cites the work of Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro to assert that the “‘cumulation of disadvantages’ has ‘sedimented’ blacks economically so that, even if all forms of economic discrimination blacks face ended today, they would not catch up with whites for several hundred years” (79). Bonilla-Silva explains that a white allegation of reverse discrimination is symptomatic of a major “story line” of colorblind racism, that “the past is the past” (77). Given the continued economic disadvantages alone that Black people face, said past very much informs the present. Those that would have us believe that reverse racism exists—having established that it is an “imaginary opposite to White racism”—are fomenting a racial paranoia based upon myth and fueled by fear (Young, Jr. 224). As per above, the Black character of Henry is the one to suggest that Charles will endure reverse discrimination as a perverse retaliation for what he represents, specifically the white racism perpetuated before: now that the white man is not guaranteed to be found innocent, he is guaranteed to be found guilty because he formerly never was. Reverse racism becomes the plaintiff.

Circling back to this same initial moment and Mamet's would-be allegation that white people can offer no commentary on race, the playwright suggests a dangerous bias

by way of the implication that, in scholar Celine-Marie Pascale's words, "white people would *not* know about race" (31, italics author's own). As per Pascale, a white person's self-proclaimed un-racialized identity allows whiteness to "[emerge]...as an un-raced position" or "a kind of 'normalcy,' an invisible center from which 'difference' can be measured" (31). That Mamet views a discussion of race as polarizing and problematic is in keeping with a historical reality in which race serves as a category by which people are disenfranchised and denied access. His assumption that being white carries with it hegemonic power is also correct. Thus, it is important to note that seeing race does not make one a racist:

In order to resist the production of commonsense knowledge that renders race self-evident, a refusal to 'see' race—as in notions of colorblindness—might seem logical. However colorblindness extends inequities by ignoring or disregarding the importance and impact of historical relations of power (cf., Lopez 1996; Lipsitz 1998; Omi and Winant 1994). Race blindness would in effect extend historical relations of power by reducing systematic inequalities to arbitrary inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Guinier and Torres 2003). Indeed, 'colorblindness' is characteristic of white people's relationship to their own racial identity (Guinier and Torres 2002) and is the very premise of white privilege. (Pascale 29)

Rather, the problem is viewing whites as being excused from racial categorization. The fact that Henry, who is Black, is the one who needs to educate Charles on the meaning of race—specifically Blackness—points to this white "*ignorance* about race" (Pascale 33, italics author's own). That white people neither know nor can speak of race is tantamount to declaring that such is owed to the fact that white is not a racial category: race is something that white people do not possess. To corroborate as much, Jack will remind Susan of this later in the play with, "There is nothing. A white person. Can say to a black person. About Race. Which is not both incorrect and offensive. Nothing"

(Mamet 44). The more careful phrasing would opt for a white refusal to speak on behalf of Black people. However, this would be disingenuous since Mamet has no problem doing as much.

The story continues with Jack and Henry deliberating whether or not they are to take the case, summoning the newly hired Susan to keep Charles occupied while they reach their decision. Jack goads Susan into offering her opinion of Charles, and she declares he seems guilty and desirous of “punishment,” case in point being that he flirted with her, a Black woman aware of the accusation that he raped another Black woman, upon arriving at the office (Mamet 20). Such prompts an exchange in which Jack declares that “blacks. Know things no white man knows,” chief among them “[t]hat the whites will screw you. Any chance we get. We cannot help ourselves.” As to why, Jack finishes, “Because we know you hate us” (20-1).

Awash with requests to track down relevant documentation so that Jack and Henry can be as informed as possible prior to accepting the case, Susan takes a check from Charles that serves as a retainer fee as she simultaneously makes a request that results in Jack and Henry being listed as Charles’s attorneys of record. The timing is unfortunate, as Henry has almost persuaded Jack not to take the case since the former believes it impossible to win and detrimental to their firm in the long run. Consequently incensed, Henry expresses his distaste for Susan, severely reprimanding her for letting “her *color* jump on her *intellect*” (Mamet 27).

The first scene ends as they consider how they can approach the case, particularly since a white preacher in the adjacent room allegedly heard Charles tell the woman, “I’m going to fuck you now, you little nigger bitch,” which was the admission that tipped the

scales prior to Susan's mishap in favor of passing on the case (Mamet 24). However, it occurs to Jack that the case has potential because there was an important omission from the hotel cleaning report. In the newspaper article in which the woman is claiming assault, she is quoted as saying, "He threw me down. He ripped off my red sequined dress" (29). However, as Jack observes: "He ripped the dress off, the room would be *covered* in sequins. It *has* to be. *Tell* him. A sequined dress, you *look* at it wrong, they start to fall off" (30). Jack brainstorms how to spin the story: "They heard 'My nigger bitch.' (*Pause; to Susan*) Anybody ever call you that, while he was fucking you? Crazy with love?" (31) Susan contends, "This isn't about sex, it's about Race," to which Jack smarmily sneers, "What's the difference?" (31)

Never mind, at this point, that cynically conflating sex and race presents those marked other—in this case, the sexualized (women) and non-white—as two interchangeable and whiny populations with whom the overburdened white man, Jack, has to contend. The white savior has just come up with a plan to save the day but even he is skeptical that he will have success since race, like sexuality or gender—another conflation Mamet commits—is an issue with which the white man just cannot win. This martyrdom thinly veils his privilege.

The second scene begins with Jack and Henry detailing their secret plan for a live, in-court performance in which a woman, wearing a mock-up of the exact same red sequined dress of the alleged victim, is thrown onto a mattress so as to demonstrate that the absence of sequins equates with an absence of violence: thus, the sex must have been consensual. Jack suggests that Susan could wear the dress since she is Black and the

same size as the victim. Charles decides he wants to issue a statement to the press, as he claims that he exploited his mistress by making her promises that he failed to keep.

Meanwhile, Susan recalls that Jack identified a trip she took to Venice in the first scene, leading her to ask how he knew she had visited the city being that she failed to disclose it on her employment application. As she interrogates Jack, it emerges that he had her investigated and hired her despite the fact that she lied, which upsets Susan for a few reasons, one of which is the fact that it appears he investigated her and another Black applicant to a greater extent than others. Jack explains he did so to preempt a lawsuit if he ever fired her and when she expresses her dismay as to how wrong this is, he replies with, “But on the other hand it’s *wrong*, you understand? It’s “wrong” that folks of different colors are treated differently under the law. It was wrong *then*, and it’s wrong *now*. Bullshit *aside*—you are accorded special treatment, I have to take that into account” (Mamet 45).

The second scene ends with still another revelation at the expense of Jack and Henry: Charles wrote a racist postcard. As the third scene begins, Charles admits that, to make matters worse, the recipient of the postcard in which he equated the heat of the Caribbean to being in “a hot black cunt”—which Henry reads aloud—was his Black college roommate (Mamet 50). Charles initially cannot understand what he did wrong but as the scene progresses, grows horrified by his behavior and brings up making a statement to the press once more. Henry tells Charles, “We all have to put up with a lot. From each other” (55). With this, Mamet sets up Charles to be a tragic hero.

Jack receives word from Susan that the cleaning woman at the hotel has now amended her statement to recall the inclusion of the sequins in the room. Throughout the

play, Jack has dodged accusations of racism with the refrain that he believes all people to be stupid, not any one particular racial group. This moment, however, renders him far more explicit as to his prejudice:

JACK: [...] You're telling me, some half-literate illegal *hotel* maid, suddenly, takes it upon herself: to go *back* to the police...

SUSAN: "Half-literate..."

JACK: (*Referring to sheet of paper*): Rosa fucking Gonzales. (*To phone*) I have to call you back.

SUSAN: "Half-literate." Hotel Maid.

JACK: Can we call things: by their name? Her social security number is false, her employment application is written in a misspelled scrawl, she is *illegal*. God *bless* her, that's what she is. (*Pause*) When, in a million *years*, is this woman going *of her own free will* back to the police. In a case, she probably can't even *understand*. To call their attention to a fact that she cannot *possibly* feel is important. (*Pause*) You tell me that. Our client, did our client talk to someone 'cause if not Somebody told the other side, and there's our fucking case, and an innocent man's going to jail. (*Pause*) I do not understand. (*Pause*) Alright... (Mamet 56)

Henry asks Susan to get his briefcase from his car so he can speak to Jack privately, at which point he claims that she is staging "the postmodern equivalent of a 'nigger' act" (Mamet 58). He explains, "For the right response, when you ask her to put on the dress, is not, 'Fuck you, *whitey*,' but, 'I'd rather not, and thank you for the job'" (58). Henry claims that Jack is unable to see this because she is Black and he is white, and then adds that he cautioned Jack not to hire her, leading to the admission that the latter did so because he was concerned she would sue them if he failed to give her impressive educational background. In true Mametian fashion since women are always the cog in the machine, Henry declares, "That girl, do you see, black or white, doesn't make a difference, she's *trouble*..." (59). To quell any possible misinterpretation as to

this play's negative, if not hostile, perspective on affirmative action, it is spelled out a second time, this time by Henry: "[...] her privileged, Affirmative Action self is here on a pass, Jack, on a motherfucking pass. Which you gave her. *However* smart she is.

(Pause) I would be mortified, to go through life, thinking that I'd received a dispensation because of my race. And I am ashamed of her that she is not" (59).

Initially, it was Jack who admitted to succumbing to affirmative action out of fear that if he ever fired Susan or passed on her candidacy, she would be able to sue him.

Mamet employs verbatim the same language utilized in the public forum in an ongoing effort by some to denounce affirmative action: that it awards "special treatment" on the basis of skin color (45). He then projects onto Susan by means of her outrage his own white resentment towards affirmative action before doing so anew via the character of Henry. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva notes regarding his study, projection is a common "rhetorical tool" used by white respondents in an attempt to displace "racism or racial motivations onto blacks and other minorities as a way of avoiding responsibility and feeling good about themselves" (64). Projection was especially pronounced in Bonilla-Silva's study when affirmative action was the topic at hand: "Although most students [in the study] expressed open resentment on this subject, a few projected the idea that blacks feel 'terrible' if they are hired because of their race" (64). This is quite literally what Henry expresses: "I would be mortified, to go through life, thinking that I'd received a dispensation because of my race" (Mamet 59). Mamet posits affirmative action as a malevolent force with which to be reckoned, the pressures of which result in Charles's false confession vis-à-vis the hiring of the duplicitous Susan, and he legitimizes a claim as to its demerits by scripting a Black character upon whom he projects his "concern on

how blacks feel about affirmative action’” (Bonilla-Silva 65). In Bonilla-Silva’s words, this is truly—albeit facetiously, a feat of “‘rhetorical beauty’” (65).

Jack and Henry summon Susan back to the office to elicit a confession that she tipped off the opposition and called up Charles’s college roommate. Lest there be any doubt, the misogyny of these characters also runs rampant at this point as Susan, from here on out, is referred to as a girl instead of a woman time and again: muses Jack, “The *girl* sold us out” (Mamet 57). In one exchange, Jack admits to hiring Susan because she is Black, all the while suppressing the doubt inspired by her lie on her employment application. He ultimately orders her to “[g]et out of my sight. Get out of my sight, you fucking ingrate,” to which she responds, “You forgot to say ‘nigger’” (63). After it is revealed that Charles confessed to raping the woman upon the first responding police officer producing a forgotten page of his report in which he “describes the room ‘covered in sequins,’” the final moments of the play see a brief understanding, if not alliance, between Susan and Henry (63). The former asks the latter, ‘Didn’t this fool know that man raped that girl? *(Pause)* Didn’t you know? ... *You* knew—didn’t you *care*? ...’” (63) Continuing along these lines, Henry still calls her out, with an allusion to what they both know to be self-evident: that the roommate could not have been that offended by Charles’s comments given what Black people routinely endure at the hands of their white brethren, and with this, the play concludes:

HENRY: Man of that age? Shit he’s had to eat? That fucking “slight” was *nothing* to him.

SUSAN: It was his college roommate.

HENRY: It was some *white* boy who he knew in college. He didn’t even remember till you called him up. *You* called the roommate up. You ginned him up. *Didn’t* you?

SUSAN: Is that what I did?

HENRY: And your act. Was a violation of the law.

SUSAN: As was yours, when you had me investigated.
JACK: Did you betray me?
SUSAN: In any event it would have had no bearing on the justice of the case.
JACK: You tell me why.
SUSAN: Because, White Man, he was guilty. (64)

As was established, Charles wants to go to the press earlier in the play, which at the time, appears to be a convenient means for Mamet to exorcise his animosity towards it: “The press, Mr. Strickland is the pillory, it is the stocks. It exists to license and gratify envy and greed. It cannot serve you. If you appeal to the press they will tear you apart” (Mamet 37). This leads to still another circular discussion in which Charles feels guilty because he is white and “*exploited*” the prostitute with whom he was cavorting, making her promises upon which he reneged (40). While Charles’s white guilt is mocked by the other characters in the play, it is eventually his downfall when he confesses to a crime that he did not commit. Mamet does not even feign a desire for ambiguity: the amended first responding officer and hotel maid reports are hardly serendipitous, especially when coupled with the college roommate coming forward after thirty years; Susan’s early admission that she believes Charles to be guilty; the suspicious nature of her entrapping ‘mistakes’ that force Jack and Henry to accept the case; and even her college thesis that Henry just so happens to conveniently have on hand from which to read: ““The nexus of oppression is ineluctable...’ (*Pause*) You think, Jacky, you are immune. Because you understand the problem. What you don’t see is, that, to her, you *are* the problem” (59).

Ironically, what Mamet fails to see, is that *he* is the problem. His shoddy script is an obvious machination in which, much like in *Oleanna*, the deck is unfairly stacked against an unsympathetic female character. The takeaway Mamet desires is that Charles’s white guilt propelled a confession to a crime that he did not commit in which

The Man wants to stick it to him care of unjustly manufacturing the requisite evidence once Susan tipped the D.A. off as to the holes in their case. The victim has now acquired enough power to become the victimizer, or so Mamet contends, and here is an example of reverse racism, the hallmark of a Black-on-white-and-or-white-on-Black racial history that we just cannot seem to shake. *Race* is a cautionary tale of how being too mired in that past can cause it to seep into our present; Mamet intends for it to be demonstrative of the current state of our union. He somehow expects us to believe that being a rich white male is an uphill battle in the legal system, which would be comical were it not so tragically and preposterously false: Black men are incarcerated at a rate six times as frequently as white men, and Hispanic men at a rate nearly triple.⁹

Race is premised upon the assumption that Black and white people are on “a mostly equal playing field” (Young 1018). Shortly before its premiere, Mamet authored and published in the *New York Times* an opinion editorial entitled “We Can’t Stop Talking About Race in America” in which he writes, “Most contemporary debate on race is nothing but sanctimony—efforts at exploitation and efforts at restitution seeking, equally, to enlarge and prolong dissent and rancor.” With this, Young concludes, “To speak of race, really racial discrimination, is to use the past to gain present advantage,” which does not square with the “mostly equal playing field” in Mametworld (1018). However, the persistence of, for example, “residential segregation”—perpetuated by “covert behaviors such as not showing all the available units, steering minorities and whites into certain neighborhoods, quoting higher rents or prices to minority applicants,

⁹ These statistics are according to a Pew Research Center analysis comparing incarceration rates among blacks, whites and Hispanics in 1960 and 2010. For more information, see Bruce Drake’s “Incarceration Gap Widens between Whites and Blacks.”

or not advertising units”—or “‘smiling face’ discrimination (‘We don’t have jobs now, but please check later’), advertising job openings in most white networks and ethnic newspapers, and steering highly educated people of color into poorly remunerated jobs or jobs with limited opportunities for mobility” all betray a paradox: for how can the playing field be even in light of pervasive institutionalized discrimination? (Bonilla-Silva 3)

As for efforts for social justice, Mamet dismisses them: “Contemporary considerations of diversity, multiculturalism, affirmative action, reparations and so on are, I believe, the beginning of the final wave of the exceptionalism of the black American experience” (“We Can’t Stop Talking...”). Rephrased, it is high time that we realize that there is nothing exceptional about being Black in America; that there is nothing exceptional about pertaining to a person of color group; that the color of one’s skin does not *color* one’s life in any way, shape or form. Yet the accusation that a white man raped a Black woman serves as the basis for *Race*. In prose, Mamet advocates for the post-racial and blames those “with race” (since Mamet himself is white and therefore neutral) for the failure to live this ideology; in drama—where he gets a far bigger paycheck for a long-running Broadway play than he does an op-ed—he will go ahead and “enlarge and prolong dissent and rancor” just a wee bit longer (“We Can’t Stop Talking...”)

To garner still more relevant examples of the ugly inequality of said proverbial playing field, one need look no further than the issues besetting the theatre community at large as artistic directors of major regional theatres come under fire time and again for planning all-white, all-male seasons, continuously ignorant of their shared subject location being a factor in these decisions. February of 2014 saw a convocation entitled

The Summit of artistic directors from Washington, DC regional theatres, moderated by *Washington Post* theatre reviewer Peter Marks, and organized to address a host of issues relating to contemporary theater-making. During one of the sessions, Strand Theatre's Artistic Director Elissa Goetschius posed a question¹⁰ inquiring how efforts like the announced Women's Voices Festival will remedy a fundamental lack of gender parity in theatre, citing statistics culled from the production histories of the theatres represented at the Summit as evidence of the failure to produce the work of or hire as directors women and people of color.

The respondents were rendered "rhetorically incoherent" in Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's words, a hallmark of colorblind racism and white peoples' speech when "talking about race in a world that insists race does not matter" (68-71). Furthermore, what resulted thereafter was an accusation that "someone wants to just throw stones" as the flummoxed artistic directors took a pseudo-apologist approach to defend the progress—or better stated, the lack thereof—of the past 30 years (Goetschius "Climbing #TheSummit"). This historic moment underscores the urgency of encountering a fundamental lack of diversity in all realms of theatre and the manner that those present—four men and one woman—dealt with this reality is not unlike Jack's quip that sex and race are one and the same: these are pesky reminders of white male privilege, and the

¹⁰ For the entirety of the multi-paragraph question as well as more detailed coverage of this event, see: Goetschius, Elissa. "Climbing #TheSummit." Web log post. *2AMt*. Upstart Blogger, 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.2amtheatre.com/2014/02/19/climbing-thesummit/>>.

“agency”¹¹ said white men must exercise to relinquish it (Abelman “Season Programming and Personal Agency”).

As for the legitimacy of taking into account the identities of white male playwrights like Mamet and Bruce Norris, who will soon follow, some may be reminded of the arguments in defense of Mamet during *Oleanna*’s heyday. In his analysis of this work, Alan Piette ends his article by criticizing those who took issue with Mamet on the basis of his identity: “being a white male automatically disqualifies him from expressing a valid opinion, an *ad hominem* argument often read in the columns of the proponents of political correctness, which in turn leads to an insidious form of reverse-discrimination, which David Mamet would never allow” (186). Sidestepping the belabored point that reverse discrimination is an impossibility given the resources that people of color lack to institutionalize racism against white people in the same manner that whites have historically discriminated against people of color, the whiteness of Mamet and Norris does need to be interrogated.

It is irrelevant whether or not Mamet and Norris self-identify as white. To defend this assertion, one can look to Jonathan Rossing’s example of satirist Stephen Colbert’s boast that positively reacting to President Obama’s 2008 presidential win meant that Colbert must be Black: as he stated, “I never empathize with people who are not like me. So the reaction I had to Obama’s inauguration must logically mean that I am a Black man” (49). As Rossing explains:

¹¹ On the topic of agency, see: Abelman, Brett Steven. “Season Programming and Personal Agency.” Web log post. *Babelwright*. WordPress, 20 Feb. 2014. Web. 28 Feb. 2014. <<http://babelwright.wordpress.com/2014/02/20/season-programming-and-personal-agency/>>.

Simply by naming himself as Black, Colbert foregrounds his own Whiteness. The jarring juxtaposition of his body against his performative statement makes Whiteness hypervisible, even in its silence. Humor offers a tactic for rendering Whiteness visible and salient without the need to name it explicitly. (49)

Both Mamet and Norris pass as white regardless of their own self-consideration and to claim otherwise would be to deny the white privilege afforded to them by means of their appearances. It is necessary to “mark” whiteness as a “position” that is “privileged and empowered” (51). To dismiss their identities as irrelevant—or argue that their shared ability to pass as white is immaterial—is to maintain a post-racial “color blindness,” which perpetuates “racial dehistoricization” or the erroneous claim that institutionalized racism and racial subjugation no longer exist (51).

In keeping with the above, Rossing’s examination of Stephen Colbert’s white identity in relation to his intervention in post-racialism is of interest in light of the cultural influence that Norris and Mamet as critically well-respected and commercially viable playwrights exert: “His [Colbert’s] identity and advantages necessarily complicate his intervention in racial meaning-making and politics, particularly in a context where the public dismisses similar critiques by people of color and invalidates already marginalized voices” (55). As an example, Rossing draws a comparison between the popularity of *The Colbert Report* and Black actor David Alan Grier’s *Chocolate News* that lasted less than a full season in 2008, which was “conspicuous” in light of the success of fake news programs like Colbert’s (55). Grier originated the role of Henry in *Race* on Broadway, for which he was nominated for a Tony Award in 2010.¹² It is discomfoting that it is in

¹² "Search Past Winners—David Alan Grier." *Tony Awards*. IBM Corp., Tony Award Productions, 2013. Web. 22 Mar. 2014.

the context of this problematic play regarding race—penned and directed by a white male—that the fallacies of the work can be ignored to such an extent to ironically command the deserved accolades withheld from this actor one year prior. Admitting freely to the limitations of this comparison—as different media are being pitted against one another sans any in-depth investigation into the factors determining success or failure of these works—it should nonetheless beg the question of a correlation between race and cultural capital.

Chapter 2

“Everybody’s a Little Bit Racist”¹³ in Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park*

In “The Treyvon Factor,” Simpson makes a salient point regarding the frame surrounding a contemporary dialogue on race:

...today’s hard conversations about race are less about the overt racism of assuming that a black kid in a hoodie is up to no good, and more about the subtle biases that come out when people talk about, say, the gentrification of long-standing black neighborhoods, which is at the heart of the second act of Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park*. (34)

Set in a house over the course of fifty years, the first act of Norris’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play takes place in 1959 as a white neighborhood in a fictitious suburb of Chicago attempts to prevent a Black family from moving into the home. The second act picks up in 2009 as the now-Black neighborhood tries to stem the tide of gentrification, the actors in the first act double-cast to portray entirely new characters in the second. *Clybourne Park*¹⁴ is not quite an homage to Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 landmark play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, lacking the requisite degree of tributary, connoted respect as per its absent allusion to it on its own website.¹⁵ However, Norris’s piece is considered to be inspired by and in dialogue with that of Hansberry.

A Raisin in the Sun centers upon the Black Younger family’s recently acquired ability to leave their poverty-stricken neighborhood in favor of a home in the white

¹³ “Avenue Q Cast Recording.” *Avenue Q Soundtrack*. DTE, n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2013.

¹⁴ When discussing *Clybourne Park* in performance, I am referring to the February 26th, 2012 performance of it at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, California, as directed by Pam MacKinnon.

¹⁵ The official *Clybourne Park* website does not allude to the relationship between Norris’s piece and Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, instead linking to other materials that address this connection.

enclave of Clybourne Park in which they are decidedly unwelcome. *Clybourne Park* certainly borrows this premise as well as the character of Karl, the white neighborhood association representative sent to the Younger family to bribe them with an offer of buying back their Clybourne Park home at a hefty price to prevent their presence in the all-white neighborhood. Thus, Norris picks up where *A Raisin in the Sun* leaves off, its first act offering a glimpse into the lives of the characters whose house was purchased, presumably by Hansberry's Younger family: Bev and Russ are moving after the suicide of their son, Kenneth, a Korean War veteran who killed innocent civilians. The first act unfolds as the neighborhood minister, Jim, stops by to check on Bev and Russ as Karl and his deaf wife, Betsy, barge in to persuade them to go back on the sale of their home after the neighborhood association's counteroffer to the Black family fails to entice. Bev and Russ's domestic worker, Francine, and her husband, Albert, who arrives to pick her up, get embroiled in a conversation regarding race, one that ends more or less with the following:

KARL: Bev, I'm not here to solve society's problems. I'm simply telling you what will happen, and it will happen as follows: First one family will leave, then another, and another, and each time they do, the values of these properties will decline, and once that process begins, once you break that egg, Bev, all the king's horses, etcetera—

BETSY: (*Overlapping.*) Kaahhh?

KARL: (*Continuous.*)—and *some* of us, you see, those who *don't* have the opportunity to simply pick up and move at the drop of a hat, then *those* folks are left holding the bag, and it's a fairly *worthless* bag, at that point.

BEV: I don't like the tone this is taking.

RUSS: (*To Karl.*) Okay. Tell you what.

KARL: And let's imagine if the tables were turned. (*Re: Francine and Albert.*) Suppose a number of *white* families started marching into *their* commun—? (*To Francine and Albert.*) Well, actually, that might be to your *advantage*, but— (Norris 35)

The second act picks up as Steve and Lindsey are moving into the same house from the first act, only fifty years later. They have convened with Black husband and wife Kevin and Lena from the neighborhood Owners Association and its lawyer, Tom, along with Kathy, Steve and Lindsey's lawyer and real estate agent. There are a couple of other minor characters, Dan and Kenneth, who are a construction worker and Russ and Bev's son from the first act, respectively. Norris scripts the double casting so the actor who played Karl in the first act plays Steve in the second; Steve's wife, Lindsey, is doubled by the actress who played Karl's wife, Betsy; Francine and Albert become Lena and Kevin; the minister Jim becomes the homosexual Tom; and the first act's Bev becomes Kathy. Kenneth is played by the actor who plays Jim and Tom while Dan is played by the actor who plays Russ.

Some of the double-casting decisions are particularly noteworthy, starting with the two Black characters. In 1959, Francine wore a maid's uniform and was openly belittled by the white characters, even the well-meaning ones like Bev, whose patronizing insistence that Francine take a chafing dish so she could own something so nice and tasteful eventually forces Albert to rebuff Bev: "*(Finally raising his voice.)* Ma'am, we don't *want* your things. Please. We got our *own* things. *(Pause. Bev is shocked.)*" (Norris 41). As Karl desperately fleets from one tactic to the next in an effort to prove that the prevalence of cultural differences between Black and white people would prevent their coexistence, he puts forth:

KARL: Francine, may I ask? Do you *ski*?

FRANCINE: Do I—?

KARL: Or your husband. Either of you?

FRANCINE: Ski?

KARL: Downhill skiing?

FRANCINE: We don't ski, no.

KARL: And this is my point. The children who attend St. Stanislaus. Once a year we take the middle schoolers up to Indianhead Mountain, and I can tell you, in all the times I've been there, I have not *once* seen a colored family on those slopes. Now, what accounts for that? Certainly not any deficit in ability, so what I have to conclude is that, for some reason, there is just something about the pastime of skiing that doesn't appeal to the Negro community. And feel free to prove me wrong.

RUSS: Karl.

KARL: But you'll have to show me where to find the skiing Negroes!

RUSS: *Karl!* (33-4)

In the second act, this conversation about skiing is revisited, this time the Black character of Kevin asking Steve if he skis:

(A laugh erupts from Lindsey.)

LINDSEY: *(Re: Steve.) Him?*

STEVE: You mean—like *downhill?*

LINDSEY: *That I'd like to see.* (Norris 63)

The context of this exchange is polite small talk about European travel, thus Kevin is offering advice: "I just meant, you like to golf, you go to *Scotland*. And if you like to *ski?*" (63) Skiing and golf have long been associated as being the domain of rich white people as per the use of the former in the first act as a marker of white privilege but now we see a world in which the majority of these characters present in the second act are all of the same socioeconomic station. Gone is the image of Black women solely orbiting the service industry, as Lena is not a domestic worker, meanwhile Kevin and Steve share mutual friends and colleagues in the same social circle.

However, there is an exception to this all-inclusive socioeconomic utopia in the person of the white character of Dan, the construction worker, who is Othered every time he enters the scene as the sole working-class person present. The characters assembled

are short with and dismissive of him, which is not so much reflected in the text as it is the demeanor of the actors in live performance. Dan becomes as much of a nuisance as the Black characters of the first act, who are basically yelled at when they accidentally drop a trunk downstairs, which Bev's intercut dialogue reveals: "—please don't do that, they're just trying to *help*" (Norris 30).

Indeed, this is a play about the lines along which we divide ourselves, be they color, class or (dis)ability. The character of Betsey is disabled both for thematic and comedic reasons. Regarding the former, the color of her skin enables her to reap the benefits of whiteness despite the fact that she is deaf. As for the latter, Norris continuously shifts the alliances among the characters throughout the play and in the first act, race is the organizing principle with whiteness at the pinnacle, thus Deafness¹⁶ still trumps Blackness as far as that hierarchy is concerned. In an interview with Bruce Norris, Center Theatre Group Literary Associate Joy Meads notes, "We see people bonding into in-groups by function of creating out-groups, right, and those coalitions are very liquid, fluid in the play" (Norris "An Audio Interview..."). In the second act, these "fractal" alliances between the characters are redrawn and while race is still divisive, so, too, is class, as per Dan's presence above: he becomes, in Norris's words, the "outlier" ("An Audio Interview..."). Furthermore, the play concludes with a scene between the first act's Bev and a character unseen until that point, Kenneth, Bev and Russ's son who committed suicide. The estrangement between mother and son is very much evident, thus we have another divide between veterans and civilians. Notes Meads, "There's an

¹⁶ Within the realm of Deaf studies, "capitalizing *Deaf* indicates persons who partake in Deaf culture, while using the lowercase *deaf* refers to persons with hearing impairment but not cultural identification" (Berson 53).

isolation at the core of this play about tribalism that I think is very interesting. A sense of isolation. Fundamentally, the unit is one, as you say, the tribe is me” (“An Audio Interview...”).

To disable a character for the purpose of underscoring categorization is suspect for the conflation of deafness with disability—as the Deaf community does not consider itself disabled—but still more offensive are the jokes elicited at Betsy’s expense. With glee did the audience respond when Russ finally snaps at Karl’s attempts to dissuade him from using profanity in front of his wife: “She’s *deaf*, Karl!! Completely—(*Waving to Betsy, fake-jolly.*) Hello, Betsy! Go fuck yourself! (*Betsy smiles, waves back.*)” (Norris 39). The humor is used to lighten the mood as the first act reaches its contentious climax and conclusion. However, there is subversive potential to these jokes that may render them more than cheap shots: as Meads observes in her interview with Norris, “your audience actually has to participate in the same thing that the characters onstage are participating in by choosing whether or not they’re going to laugh at what jokes, and I think that dynamic is often impacted by the people around them and who’s laughing” (“An Audio Interview...”). This leads to a discussion in which Norris asserts that audiences like to “coalesce around a single reading of a play” assigning it one, communal interpretation especially as it concerns casting the heroes and villains (“An Audio Interview...”). Bearing in mind his desire to “thwart” this tendency, the second act—which devolves into a series of racist jokes—is considered (“An Audio Interview...”).

Ostensibly gathered to discuss violations to the Owners Association regulations regarding construction, the initial conversation of Act II quickly turns when Lena brings up the issue of the historical value of Steve and Lindsey’s new home, resulting in a

discussion of the monetary:

LENA: I mean that this is a highly desirable area.

STEVE: Well, *we* desire it.

LENA: I know you do.

LINDSEY: Same as you.

LENA: And now the area is *changing*.

KATHY: And for the *better*, right?

LENA: And I'm saying that there are certain economic interests that are being served by those changes and others that are not. That's all. (Norris 70)

In the first act, Karl was desperately trying to prevent the Black family from moving into his neighborhood in a perverse attempt to protect his burgeoning family, a pregnant Betty symbolic of the urgency of his endeavor; in the second act, a pregnant Lindsey (again, depicted by the same actress) is desirous of this neighborhood "in which to raise our *child*," and is affronted that she is being denied entry to it given this honorable enough objective (71). Warns Lena as members of one "*group*" move in: "It happens one house at a time" (71).

The first racist joke that quickly follows as tension escalates is told by Steve, whose premise is two men are in jail, one Black and the other white: the Black man asks the white man if he wants to be "the mommy or the daddy," to which the latter replies he would prefer to be the daddy (Norris 75). The punch line of the joke is the Black man telling the white man, "'Okay, well then bend over 'cause Mommy's gonna fuck you in the ass'" (76). This prompts Kevin to counter with, "How many white men does it take to change a light bulb?" (77) The answer: "One to hold the light bulb while the rest of 'em screw the entire world" (77). Steve offers, "What's long and hard on a black man?" and then answers, "First grade" (77). Finally, Lena trumps them all: "Why is a white woman like a tampon?" (77) The punch line: "Because they're both stuck up cunts" (78).

The play ends shortly afterward, with a dig from Lena that she is not questioning Lindsey's "ethics" by moving into the neighborhood, but rather, her "taste," and then a final insult from Steve, who divulges to Lindsey while Kevin and Lena are still within earshot that the latter—"That woman"—"is the cunt" (80).

In *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, Inga Muscio declares, "'Cunt' is very arguably the most powerful negative word in the American English language. [...] 'Cunt' refers almost exclusively to women, and expresses the utmost rancor. There's a general feeling of accord on this" (xxiii). Writes Frank Rich regarding Norris: "In truth, he's just an equal-opportunity misanthrope" ("Post-Racial Farce"). Continues Rich reverently, juxtaposing the bleaker *Clybourne Park* with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which contains "a glimmer of racial justice" decidedly absent from the former: "His play doesn't culminate in a stirring courtroom scene but with the protracted telling of a joke about a 'big black man' raping a 'little white guy' in a jail cell" ("Post-Racial Farce"). Actually, Norris's play does not culminate in the aforementioned, either: the white male character's offensive jail joke is only trumped by the Black female character's cunt joke. Lena, whose name may be a nod to Hansberry's Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*, emerges as the best racist. She beats the boys at their own game, overtaking their propensity to be lewd by insulting the oblivious Lindsey (who admittedly does merit what is coming to her) as she attempts to run interference as Steve digs himself increasingly deeper into a hole in his design to bring subsumed racial prejudice to the fore. Vis-à-vis the Black female character of Lena, the white Norris arrives at the dramatic climax of his play in performance, as the audience received this moment as the apex of the action in spite of what followed. It is difficult to definitively state if this

moment in performance is one of circumscription for its woman-on-woman violence or liberation, as the Lena Younger of 1959 would never have been able to levy an insult of this caliber at a white person, nor would the majority white audience in attendance have exploded into raucous laughter in appreciation of what felt like a comedic coup: climaxing a play with a cunt joke at an uppity white woman's expense. The moment was cruel, to be sure, and by way of explosive laughter did those not only in attendance pay witness to it but allowed for, if not craved, the comeuppance it bestowed.

Norris dispels any myth of the post-racial early on as it relates to its existence in 1959 Suburban Chicago. This is accomplished immediately and with the very first scripted image of Francine in a maid's uniform referring to Bev as "ma'am" (Norris 7). The racial hierarchy is cemented as the scene progresses not only by means of the outright discriminatory language utilized, but also in a subtler—though no less damaging—manner as well, namely the degree to which the Black characters are either ignored or dismissed throughout the act. As an example, Bev answers for Francine when she asks Russ to move the trunk with her, stating "She doesn't mind" and Russ retorts to Karl in the presence of Francine and Albert that he cares little if "a hundred Ubangi tribesmen with a bone through the nose overrun this goddamn place, 'cause I'm *through with all of you*, ya motherfucking sons of bitches" (15, 39).

The second act also dispels the myth of the post-racial by mimicking the means by which contemporary society goes to great lengths to not only ignore race but to unite among non-racial lines. The act presents a very clear parallel to the one that precedes it, as Lena waits for at least half the act to say what she begins to broach at the beginning of the meeting only to continuously be cut off:

LENA: All right, well. (*Clears her throat.*) Um, I just feel like it's very important for me to express, before we start getting into the details—
STEVE: Sorry, but—Maybe we should wait for Lindsey? Don't you think? If it's something important?
Otherwise—
KEVIN: (*To Lena.*) Do you mind?
STEVE: Wind up repeating yourself.
TOM: (*To Lena.*) That okay with you?
LENA: It's fine with me.
STEVE: But, hold that thought.
LENA: I will. (*Little pause. Tom drums his fingers.*)
(Norris 48-9)

As is evidenced by this exchange, all present are polite to a fault but time and again, Lena is silenced until she intervenes and “*All feel the chill from Lena*” as it is scripted to accompany her dialogue (58). However, as it was established earlier, the characters are divided among numerous lines. Betsy was ignored or silenced throughout the first act for being deaf; Francine and Albert for being Black; Dan in the second for being working-class; and one could even argue that Lena's femininity comes into play in the second act as well, particularly since she says, “(*With a tense smile, to Kevin.*) And could you please not tell me when to—?” after he says to her rather patronizingly, “So go ahead and say what you—” (58). Thus, contemporary American society fails to be not only post-racial but post-gender, -ableism, -classicism: the list is as diverse as those amassed onstage, true to Norris's discussion of the “fractal” identities of his characters (“An Audio Interview...”).

Norris's play is infinitely more successful than Mamet's *Race* for its complexity as well as the self-awareness of its playwright. In his interview with Meads, Norris spoke of political correctness to note that

all of those cultural rules are imposed on everyone so speaking out has to be an act of revolution of a minor kind

in itself whenever it occurs. And it's so perverse the need to do that that even, from time to time, the white hetero male has to speak out, preposterously, as an oppressed minority. I think it's preposterous but we do it. ("An Audio Interview...")

With this, Norris does acknowledge the same framework of political correctness in which one negotiates one's existence and, like Mamet, he is confronting and endorsing the belief that there are limits to what one can express based on his or her identity. However, unlike Mamet, Norris does not reduce the conversation to a play that is a cautionary tale against affirmative action or woe-is-me claim of reverse racism. His awareness of his subject location allows for more commentary.

This is not to say that his work is perfect. In fact, the text is problematic for a number of reasons, the first being the treatment given to gentrification, a core issue of the play. While much can and has been said on the topic, suffice it to say that distilling the issue to "Black people are also racist" ignores the nuance of the issue, if not the issue entirely. Norris structures the play so that a discussion of a minority family moving into a neighborhood comprised of a differing racial majority occurs at roughly the same point in each act, a nice dramatic flourish to demonstrate the continuity of conversation and alleged racism over the fifty-year span of the play. As addressed above, just as Karl, on behalf of the white neighborhood council, expressed the fear that "first one family will leave, then another, and another" in the first act, similar words are offered by Lena in the second: "And if that area is occupied by a particular *group*? [...] It happens one house at a time" (Norris 35; 70-71).

However, white flight and gentrification are hardly two sides of the same coin, and reducing the phenomena to being demonstrative of the racist tendencies of all concerned parties is overly simplistic as well as inaccurate. As regards white flight, a

2008 *Chicago Tribune* article regarding the return of a particular group of friends to their former neighborhood from which their white families fled when they were in elementary school describes “white flight” as “a panic that swept across urban America in the 1960s and '70s. Compounded of fear and racial stereotypes and played upon by unscrupulous real-estate dealers, it impelled older residents to flee when a black family moved into the neighborhood” (Grossman “A Return Flight Long Overdue”). In a 2012 *Chicago Sun-Times* article analyzing the findings of a Manhattan Institute for Policy Research study, journalist Stefano Esposito reports the following:

The study describes the 1960s as the ‘heyday of racial segregation.’ ‘During those years, the fight against housing segregation seemed to offer the possibility that once the races mixed more readily, all would be well. Forty years later, we know that this dream was a myth,’ the report said. ‘There is every reason to relish the fact that there is more freedom in housing today than 50 years ago and to applaud those who fought to create that change... At the same time, there has been only limited progress in closing achievement and employment gaps between blacks and whites.’ (“Chicago Tops Nation for Segregation...”)

Indeed, as the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research report suggests, not only has integration in terms of housing failed to erase the socioeconomic disparities along racial lines that resulted from elective segregation vis-à-vis white flight, but damaging phenomena such as gentrification continues to occur. In an article that addresses Black gentrification in Chicago, the article defines it by means of the anomaly posited by the subject of the piece: “In most U.S. cities the word has generally come to imply the gradual taking of a place from one group (usually poor people, usually minorities) by another (usually middle- or upper-class whites)” (Badger “How Black Gentrifiers Have Affected...”). Thus, those displaced and affected by geography as it relates to housing are not the white middle class of the world of Norris’s play, nor are the Black characters

racist simply for expressing their reticence towards an economically disenfranchising and culturally violent process.

Upon evaluation of *Clybourne Park* in performance, Frank Rich deduces, “The only hitch is that middle-class African-Americans in the present-day neighborhood association are as hostile to white intruders as their racist white antecedents were to black homebuyers 50 years earlier” (“Post-Racial Farce”). This sentence single-handedly underscores the racism inherent to Norris’s play: as Norris may or may not intend, such is nonetheless the takeaway—that the white characters committing white flight in 1959 in the first act of the play are as racist as the Black characters objecting to white gentrification in 2009 in the second act. Scholar Jonathan Rossing speaks to the potentiality of humor being “liberating,” as devices such as juxtaposition draw attention to the fact that “postracialism dilutes and refuses the nation’s racial past” (52). However, *Clybourne Park* uses juxtaposition to a different end, namely to highlight that the Black characters’ laments of the second act echo those of the white characters of the first.

As an example, there is a memorable phrase echoed in both acts, first by Karl in a bid to get Russ and Bev to stay in their home to avoid the influx of Black people into the neighborhood and then by Kevin—again, the Black male character—to undercut his wife’s attempts to buffet against gentrification at the hands of Steve and Lindsey in Act II: “But you can’t *live* in a *principle*” (Norris 29, 64). The meaning of this echoed phrase remains consistent in differing contexts: there is an ideal that cannot be upheld. In principle, integrated neighborhoods are advantageous but in practice, they are unrealistic, if not destructive. The alleged, aforementioned racism of the neighborhood association (or Owners Association), to which the Black characters pertain as well as Tom, is

couched in Lena's intent to point out the danger of white privilege posed to their neighborhood by and executed by means of gentrification. With the influx of white families, the historical and economic realities faced by their community go unremembered and unaccounted for: says Lena, "...honoring the connection to that history—and no *one*, myself included, likes having to dictate what you can or can't do with your own home, but there's just a lot of *pride*, and a lot of *memories* in these houses, and for some of us, that connection still has *value*, if that makes any sense?" (59)

Calling attention to historical racial realities does not make Lena a racist. The play itself is confused, at once attempting to confront the notion of a post-racial reality but doing so by means of alleging that all of its characters are racist. Such an attempt underscores the white privilege of its author as Norris writes two Black "racist" characters: the play, which attempts to challenge post-racialism, becomes post-racial itself at the moment that "[the narrative] paradoxically [enables] a belief that White people suffer as victims of racial disenfranchisement and alienation, or 'reverse racism'" which is defined by Rossing as being indicative of white privilege (48). Frank Rich's conclusion that the Black characters of the second act are as racist as the white characters of the first only further cements Rossing's above argument regarding unduly and erroneously crying racist: "If people equate seeing or discussing race with racism, then naming even the most obvious racial disparities is understood as racism and people are left without recourse to address racial injustice" (50).

Norris's humor is not consistently in keeping with that which Rossing advocates, namely humor as "a critical, cultural project and site for racial meaning-making that may provide a corrective for impasses in public discourse on race and racism" (46). By

equating racism with naturalistic honesty, the post-racial state becomes the unnatural and dishonest one. His impetus for writing the play came, in part, by means of a conversation regarding the Iraq War. He declared to a friend that he did not support the troops because he did not support the war itself, to which his friend reminded him that people of color—for example, Latinos—serve at a disproportionately high rate. Norris’s reply was:

‘Well, so what you’re telling me is that I should, out of deference to the sensitivity of this particular minority, abandon my political position about the illegitimacy of a war because I should be more concerned about their *feelings*?’ And I felt, as a white man, that kind of Rush Limbaugh outrage at having to suppress my political thoughts for the social niceties that my liberal friend was intent upon me observing. So that was the genesis of the outrage that the white man, Steve, in the second act of *Clybourne* feels. (Guare “A New Direction”)

Underlying his words is the assumption that what Norris feels is natural, specifically that in the character of Steve, white audience members will locate their own “Rush Limbaugh outrage” (Guare “A New Direction”). Regardless of whether this is true, the play certainly fails to offer any recourse for transformation despite indicting its audience by reflecting their own bad behavior in the personages of the onstage ensemble. Norris’s comedy is fatalistic and therefore hegemonic, as everyone is racist and that is simply the way society is. Ideology is thus inscribed by the identification and consequent deeming of that which is common sense knowledge or, in Chela Sandoval’s words, providing “the appearance and feel of a ‘natural’ object, rather than of a historically produced and power-laden event” (94.5). When pushed far enough, the true and inevitable feelings of these characters emerge, Steve’s statement the catalyzing one: “You’re trying to tell me that... That implicit in what you *said*—That this entire conversation...isn’t at least *partly* informed—*am I right?* (*Laughs nervously.*) By the

issue of... (*Sotto voce.*) of *racism?* (*Beat, then.*)” (Norris 72).

Norris occasionally arrives at the breakdown of post-racialism for which he strives and as described by Rossing: “Postracialism animates contradictions and tensions that offer fertile ground for humor, and humor, in turn, directs attention back to often overlooked discrepancies and social failings” (46). The character of Lindsey in the second act provides a particularly salient example of bringing to the fore some recognizable white hypocrisy with the age-old stand-by of, “Half of my friends are black!” (Norris 73) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies this disclaimer as a “concealed way” by which whites can voice racialized views in a post-racial society (57). In particular, as Bonilla-Silva explains, “Phrases such as ‘I am not a racist’ or ‘Some of my best friends are black’ have become standard fare of post-Civil Rights racial discourse. They act as discursive buffers before or after someone states something that is or could be interpreted as racist” (57). Effective though these instances are—and in the majority white Taper audience, Lindsey’s claim that “half of [her] friends are black” was met with howls of laughter—most of Norris’s satire hinges upon this indictment of his white audience: these are the people for whom he is writing (Norris 73). Therefore, while his humor in this instance did “animate” the “contradictions and tensions” of a post-racial reality in which people are determined not to see race until it is advantageous to own up to seeing it, it is also exclusionary for its disregard of people of color (Rossing 46).

Norris halfheartedly convicts them as well with his allegation that objecting to gentrification is potentially racist but the Black characters are generally foils for the foibles of their white counterparts: in the first act, it is at their expense that the most racist moments take place and in the second act, they play the straight men to the more

outlandish white personalities occupying the stage. Woolly Mammoth Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz also identified ““Bruce’s main target of satire [being] the white people,”” confirming the audience that Norris seeks to reach (Basso 31). On the subject, Norris himself has asked, ““Why should I write something that is not germane to audiences’ lives? Theatre has always been an expensive middle-class pursuit. It is a precious, pretentious thing for precious, pretentious people. You drive in your expensive car to the theatre, get it valet parked, and then watch a play about poor people. Why?”” (Rubin 28).

To his credit, Norris has made a livelihood of more or less prosecuting his white and/or middle class audiences for their hypocrisy. Just a few of many examples, his 2004 play *The Pain and the Itch*¹⁷ is an absurdist, satirical portrait of a suburban white family’s Thanksgiving dinner that unearths petty secrets that will unwittingly destroy the lives of a family of color, and when this comes to pass, the white family is casual, at best, and completely uncaring at the most unrealistic. Similarly, his 2010 *A Parallelogram*¹⁸ is a seemingly science fiction-esque story of a relationship gone awry, a play that is demonstrative of Norris’s cynicism to an extreme degree and one that also grapples with white male privilege care of the white male character who asks, “How do I always wind up playing the bad guy? Because I’m the man? Are we saying there’s something inherently unsympathetic about men—or white men—in particular?” (Morris “*A Parallelogram Shows Pulitzer Prize Winner...*”) Instead of disingenuously writing a

¹⁷ Norris, Bruce. *The Pain and the Itch*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008. Print.

¹⁸ *A Parallelogram*. By Bruce Norris. Dir. Anna D. Shapiro. The Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles. 8 Aug. 2013. Performance.

play “about poor people” in which his middle class audiences would simply feign interest—or so he accuses—Norris attacks their privilege head on, his work failing to be escapist or cathartic (Rubin 28). Nothing in the worlds of his plays ever ends well. However, as will be grappled with in subsequent chapters, this raises the issue of the power of theatre and the possibility of an inscription of bleakness. If we see what looks like our own realities so loyally presented before us with no way out of the despair and thorny issues that entrap us, what is to become of us? Norris is not incorrect in stating vis-à-vis *Clybourne Park* that racism endures—although he may be erroneous in the parallel he offers between the two time periods—but bringing awareness is not sufficient to remedy it. Truly, none of the playwrights who populate this thesis propose action; they depict a problem, said problem leads to demise and then they metaphorically throw their hands up with a ‘What now?’, this resounding question left to marinate in their audiences’ minds.

As *Clybourne Park* went on to become one of the most-produced plays of 2013,¹⁹ suffice it to say that it has been well-received by critics and artistic directors alike. Perhaps the lone wolf to dissent, at least publically, has been Kwame Kwei-Armah, who became the artistic director of CenterStage in Baltimore in 2011 and promptly programmed a season with *Clybourne Park* in repertory with his own play, *Beneatha’s Place*. The aim is for the two works to be in conversation with one another and their

¹⁹ According to the October 2013 issue of *American Theatre* magazine, Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park* was the second most-produced play of Theatre Communications Group member theatres for the 2013-2014 season, with 16 productions nationwide. Additionally, it was the most-produced play of the 2012-2013 TCG member season.

mutual inspiration, *A Raisin in the Sun*. In an article written about him for *The Guardian*, Kwei-Armah, a Black Briton, says the following of Norris's work:

'I felt that the message of the play – not necessarily the thing Bruce Norris intended – was that white flight from a neighbourhood [sic] equaled black blight. That whites build and blacks destroy. There was a line in there that attacked black intelligence directly. I saw it at the Royal Court and I felt insulted by it. Enraged. And what was worse was that in all the reviews I read of the play—written almost exclusively by middle-class white men—not one of them even hinted that they had seen that message in the play. It was a huge critical success. And so here I was in my first week and there is this clamour [sic] to perform it, and the argument that there were similar issues of gentrification just up the road in Baltimore...' (Adams "Kwame-Kwei-Armah: 'I Was Constantly Moaning in London'")

Like *Clybourne Park*, *Race* enjoys widespread production as well with little criticism as to its false premise of reverse racism leading to white victimization in the legal system. Mamet's play moves along quickly and is full of snarky one-liners, making it plausible to miss the assumption that underlies it, especially given the overwhelmingly white audiences that theatre is known to attract.²⁰ Norris, too, is an instigator who know his audiences well enough to declare that they may pay lip service to desiring issue plays striving for social justice but that ultimately, these have little effect. Whereas *Race* resorts to the didacticism of its biased author, *Clybourne Park* mirrors and skewers its white audience, albeit falling short for its false equivalency and exclusion. With this, we move onto two playwrights of color also seeking to address just how far from post-racialism we remain.

²⁰ According to The Broadway League, "Seventy-eight percent of all tickets [in the 2012-13 Broadway season] were purchased by Caucasian theatergoers" ("The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2012-2013").

Chapter 3

Muslim Is the New Black in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*

Increasingly, theatre makers are seeking a new generation of American playwrights reflective of the changing demographic of American society. New work desperately needs to account for a multiplicity of cross- or trans-cultural experiences, particularly since some of these emerging playwrights are

the children of the growing number of interracial marriages in this country, or were raised in homes with adoptive parents of different races, or were white kids who grew up listening to hip-hop and socializing and dating across color lines—all of which makes for still other stories with differing but still informed perspectives on race. (Simpson 33)

Theatre is no longer the sole domain of white male playwrights, directors and arts leaders, although sometimes it still seems as if their presence is ubiquitous and the control they continue to exert far-reaching. In recent years, even institutions like the Pulitzer Prize have taken note, awarding to Ayad Akhtar the award for drama in 2013 for his first widely produced play, *Disgraced*. Furthermore, the historic binaries this country sees as far as race is concerned—namely white versus Black—are also being dismantled with the increasing representation of various cultures, ethnicities and races in the performing arts.

Even so, discussing race, religion and culture on the American commercial stage remains a burdensome project. Long the domain of angry white men like Bruce Norris and David Mamet who seek to convict white people of their own hypocrisy but in so doing, prove themselves exclusionary for designing works solely for a particular audience demographic, Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* is slightly more balanced, or perhaps nebulous, in terms of at whom, exactly, the indictment is levied. Winning the Pulitzer Prize for

Drama in 2013 after opening at the American Theater Company in Chicago in early 2012 before transferring to the Lincoln Center in New York City later that year, *Disgraced* is now poised to crop up at regional theatres nationwide given its acclaim, as with every major opening, it garnered rave reviews. Regarding the Lincoln Center production directed by Kimberly Senior, also at the helm of the American Theater Company production, *New York Times* theatre critic Charles Isherwood praises Akhtar's "dialogue that bristles with wit and intelligence" before offering his interpretation of the spine of the play: "Mr. Akhtar, a novelist and screenwriter, puts contemporary attitudes toward religion under a microscope, revealing how tenuous self-image can be for people born into one way of being who have embraced another" ("Beware Dinner Talk on Identity and Islam").

As Isherwood intimates, *Disgraced* thematically touches upon myriad subjects, chief among them the ongoing tinderbox of navigating cultural and religious differences as well as the travails of assimilation, or perhaps better stated, the peril of being a person of color in the United States. In the field of cultural studies, Roland Barthes discusses the idea of cultural myths that are encoded within a society by which certain ideologies are perpetuated, a concept that Stuart Hall expounds upon as he discusses the ways in which said ideologies may be read: either in keeping with the message of the dominant-hegemonic group; entirely in opposition to it or a negotiation somewhere in between (Sturken *et al* 20; 72-3). This chapter will begin with a semiotic deconstruction of the ideologies and myths confronted in *Disgraced* by sourcing the ways in which they are historically encoded: a neo-imperialist Orientalism still manifests itself in an East/West divide—demonstrating a long-standing prejudice towards Arabs and Islam—and operates

in tandem with a “double-consciousness” imposed upon American people of color as lip service is paid to a cultural relativism that still remains elusive. Looking to these concepts as theoretical lenses by which to not only discuss the insidious racism exposed by Akhtar’s work but ground it within prevailing discourses regarding the subject, it will be argued that *Disgraced* casts Muslim as the historically maligned binary to the white Anglo-American: Muslims in the States are disenfranchised in much the same way that African-Americans were at the turn of the nineteenth century. Lastly, the playwright’s objectives for his piece will be evaluated in light of what the play hopes to achieve: like the other plays under investigation, *Disgraced* dismantles the myth of the post-racial by proving that race as well as culture still socially stratify and enslave us all.

One of the principle aims of *Disgraced* is to confront what it means to be Muslim in the United States and to expose which racial groups possess hegemony at the expense of others. Playwright Akhtar, of Pakistani descent, was born in New York but spent his childhood in Milwaukee before getting advanced degrees in theatre and film directing from two different prestigious Ivy League universities, Brown and Columbia. The play revolves around Pakistan-born protagonist Amir, a high-powered New York attorney who passes as Indian thanks to a name change as well as a long-ago renunciation of the Muslim faith in which he was raised. His white wife, Emily, is a painter with a particular predilection for Islamic art and its incorporation in her own work. At the center of the brief 85-minute one-act is a fateful dinner party in Amir and Emily’s Upper East Side apartment to which Isaac, a Jewish curator at the Whitney, and his Black wife, Jory, one of Amir’s co-workers, are invited, ostensibly to celebrate Emily’s inclusion in an exhibit at the Whitney. What results is a meltdown of epic proportion, one that boasts parallels

to none other than Mamet's *Race*, which reviewer Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune* observes:

...there are echoes of [...] David Mamet's 'Race' in the play's determination to say what others dare not say, and to argue that Americans cannot see past race any more than overachieving ethnic minorities can easily see past their own complex (and potentially self-destructive) role in an America that is both progressive and stubborn. ("Tolerance Is No Easy out in Riveting 'Disgraced'")

Senior's directorial concept²¹ remained loyal to the dictates of Akhtar's script, thus the production endeavors not to "oppositionally" read the play, instead abiding by a "dominant-hegemonic" reading as far as the translation from page to stage is concerned; in other words, the director and company "[identified] with the hegemonic position [of the script] and [received] the dominant message of an image or text [...] in an unquestioning manner" (Sturken *et al* 72-3). It is stipulated in the stage directions that the entirety of the action takes place in an Upper East Side apartment in New York City, starting in late summer of 2011 and concluding its final scene in 2012. The production consents to as much, as the lights arise on a posh but glaringly white living and dining room interior: white walls, white moulding and bright ambient lighting further emphasize Lauren Helpern's gleaming scenic design. The action begins with a rather arresting image as Emily beholds her posed husband, Amir, "40, of South Asian origin, in an Italian suit jacket and a crisp, collared shirt, but only boxers underneath. He speaks with a perfect American accent" (Akhtar 6). The character of Emily is described in the stage directions as "early 30s, white, lithe and lovely" and the conventionally pretty and quite

²¹ When discussing *Disgraced* in performance, I am referring to the December 17th, 2012 performance of it at Lincoln Center Theater in New York City, as directed by Kimberly Senior.

blonde Heidi Armbruster as Emily certainly fulfills the brief; in his review, Isherwood even goes so far as to describe her as “a dead ringer for Laura Linney” (Akhtar 6; “Beware Dinner Talk on Identity and Islam”).

With a reproduction of Velázquez’s *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* in front of her, Emily paints Amir standing in for, in her words, “a Moor” (Akhtar 7). It is revealed that this portrait was inspired by an incident in a restaurant the preceding evening in which a waiter was somehow racist towards Amir. Expressing his discomfort that his wife is choosing to depict him as “a slave”—which Amir repeats throughout their exchange—in jest, he suggests that she summon her “black Spanish boyfriend” instead to pose for her:

AMIR: You don’t have to rub it in, babe.

I know all men are not created equal—

EMILY: (*Gesturing for him to take the pose*): Could you do the thing?

AMIR: (*Adjusting his arm*): Way to make a guy feel wanted—

If anything, I guess I should be grateful to José, right? Broke your dad in. I mean at least I spoke English.

EMILY: Dad’s still traumatized. He brought up that Thanksgiving on the phone the other day. (6-8)

Velázquez’s 1650 *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*²² portrays the Spanish painter’s slave-turned-assistant of Moorish descent, as he was freed a few months after the painting debuted to nearly instant celebration for its fidelity to the real-life subject. Juan de Pareja opted to stay with Velázquez for an additional four years after he was formally freed and eventually would remain with the painter until the latter’s death (“Catalogue Entry,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Emily chooses Amir to stand in for de Pareja presumably

²² Velázquez (Diego Rodríguez De Silva Y Velázquez). *Juan De Pareja* (born about 1610, Died 1670). 1650. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011. Web. 12 Dec. 2013.

for the subjects' tenuously shared heritage. However, the Moors were Arab and African Muslims who occupied the Iberian Peninsula until the 15th century, thus Pakistani-American Amir would have no connection to a people who existed not only centuries prior but whose ethnic background was markedly different. In fact, as Muslims are found worldwide and in countries as vastly different as Turkey and Indonesia, abiding by a shared religious tradition hardly speaks to a common ancestry.

Thus, in this moment, an example of rather overt Orientalism is beheld with Emily's hasty generalization. In 1978, Edward Said published a scholarly treatise on Orientalism, both its genesis as well as its identification as a certain Occident versus Orient mentality. Said writes that Orientalism is

a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also a whole series of 'interests' which [...] it not only creates but also maintains. (12, italics author's own)

Said traces the history of Orientalism through the West's imperialist attitude toward the East, which as per the aforementioned, manifests itself in myriad ways and possesses an underlying racial bias especially apparent in the 19th century with the advent of Darwinism and an attempt to biologically deem some races inferior to others. "Orientals" were marked as being "backward" or "uncivilized" to justify imperialist agendas and to bestow the mark of Oriental therefore carried with it "an already pronounced evaluative judgment" given the established hegemonic "framework" in which the Orient abdicates power to the Occident (207). There is an insidiousness with which Orientalism manifests itself, as it is not simply a "'them' and 'us'" divide: "No one can escape dealing with, if

not the East/West divide, then the North/South one, the have/have-not one, the imperialist/anti-imperialist one, the white/colored one” (327).

Returning to *Disgraced*, the initial tableau that greets the audience is a man of color undressed from the waist down, posing for his Caucasian wife who is inserting him into a historic portrait in the person of a slave. His wife’s depiction is inspired by the fact that Amir is not only racially distinct from her but a minority in the United States who possesses little cultural capital, although Amir notes that he is still favorable to the “black Spanish boyfriend” who failed to speak English, identifying the existence of a racial hierarchy that will be explored by the play (Akhtar 7-8). However, like Juan de Pareja, he is subordinated, or so Emily sees him based on the fact that assumptions regarding him are made: of the waiter, she remarks that he failed to see who Amir “really” is until the latter “started to deal with him” (7). The implication in this statement is that the waiter soon realized that Amir was less “them” and more “us,” and yet his wife perpetuates this divide via a historical nod to a disenfranchised man whose likeness to a painting legitimated his existence. She may fancy herself able to truly see who he is but it is questionable to what extent this is possible when she still fetishizes his Otherness.

Even in 1978 was Said remarking upon the reinforcement of stereotypes in the electronic (and now digital) era, particularly those regarding Arabs and the religion of Islam. He cites three particulars that

have contributed to making even the simplest perception of the Arabs and Islam into a highly politicized, almost raucous matter: one, the history of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islam prejudice in the West, which is immediately reflected in the history of Orientalism; two, the struggle between the Arabs and Israeli Zionism, and its effects upon American Jews as well as upon both the liberal culture and the population at large; three, the almost total absence of

any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately discuss the Arabs or Islam. (26-7)

Disgraced addresses all three of these facets regarding the stereotyping of Arabs in the States. Just as Amir changed his last name because he feared it betrayed his Muslim heritage, so, too, did his Americanized nephew, Abe Jensen—whose actual first name is Hussein—change his to avoid anti-Islamic sentiment that he feared his name would garner. The first scene concludes with Abe’s arrival at Amir and Emily’s apartment to prevail upon Amir to come to the defense of an imam imprisoned unjustly and on the grounds of supposed terrorist ties. At this juncture, several allusions are made to a Muslim versus Jewish divide, including the fact that Amir’s mother would “roll over in her grave” to see his name amid the Jewish last names of the partners at Amir’s firm as well as his assertion that the imam would be “more comfortable if he wasn’t being represented by a couple of Jews,” the scene culminating in an anecdote in which Amir’s mother spat in his face as a result of his unsanctioned interest in a Jewish female classmate (Akhtar 11, 14).

Indeed, the theme of Muslim against Jew will recur throughout the play, reaching its apex during the fateful dinner scene in which Isaac and Amir go head to head to in a hyper-intellectualized and –masculinized exposition and takedown of what Billington correctly identifies as “American liberal guilt” (“Lawyer Faces the Abyss...”). Having asked if Isaac ever experiences a “*blush* of pride” when “Israel [throws] its military weight around,” Amir states that “a lot of folks *like* hearing that,” which is all but unheard of in the United States (Akhtar 64). The deck is stacked against the Arab world in the States given our diplomatic, military and cultural affinity with Israel and as the play will increasingly demonstrate when tempers flare onstage, more than thirty years

later it still remains impossible “either to identify with or dispassionately discuss the Arabs or Islam” as per Said’s affirmation, liberal progression notwithstanding (27).

From the start, the white characters in the play are aware of the danger of appropriation contained by Emily’s work. As they discuss it in the second scene, Isaac reconsiders his previous allegation of as much, or as Emily puts it, “About me being a white woman with no right to be using Islamic forms?” (Akhtar 29) Isaac reminds her, however, that her work will result in an accusation of “Orientalism,” adding, “I mean, hell. You’ve even got the brown husband” (Akhtar 30-1). Both Emily and Isaac are blind to how they perpetuate a “white/colored” divide of which Said speaks; in fact, they consider themselves immune to it by means of their awareness of its existence (327). Such is darkly comical, however, in light of the extent to which Isaac in particular is forthrightly racist as he passes off his skepticism regarding Amir’s “place” in society as what “the viewer” may harbor when glimpsing Emily’s portrait:

ISAAC: So there you are, in your six-hundred-dollar Charvet shirt, like Velázquez’s brilliant apprentice-slave in his lace collar, adorned in the splendors of the world you’re now so clearly a part of...

And yet...

AMIR: Yeah?

ISAAC: The question remains.

AMIR: The question?

ISAAC: Of your place.

For the viewer, of course. Not you.

It’s a painting, after all... (Akhtar 46)

This exchange marks a departure from the innocuous small talk at the beginning of the third scene as Isaac and his wife, Jory, convene at Emily and Amir’s apartment to celebrate Emily’s inclusion in the Whitney exhibit. Although attempts are continuously made to return to joviality—like when the foursome discuss an upcoming business trip

that Isaac will be taking—race and culture never fail to recede from the conversation. As a case in point, Isaac confesses his distaste for flying and airport security only to level an inquiry of what the experience is like for Amir. The latter “cut[s] right to the chase” and voluntarily submits himself to security, a decision that Jory praises before her husband condescends with, “It’s racial profiling” (Akhtar 49-50). In the Lincoln Center production, without missing a beat, Karen Pittman as Jory responds with, “Honey. I know what it is,” thereby reminding her liberal white husband that he knows not of the treatment he so abhors (50).

Along the lines of a discussion of race and one’s social location, it is Amir and Emily’s coupling that conjures a literary trope, which Celia R. Daileader writes of in *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth*. Daileader asserts that “in Anglo-American culture from the Renaissance onward, the most widely read, canonical narratives of interracial sex have involved Black men and white women, and not Black women and white men” (7). Although Amir is not Black, utilizing the paradigm of *Othello* is both illuminating and valid for its parallels to this story: by the play’s end, Amir will brutally beat his wife for cheating on him with another man and a fellow character in the play, Isaac. Akhtar himself acknowledges the utilization of this trope, admitting to the inclusion of

a colored male subject who is acting out on a white female love object through violence, and in a way rife with political valences. In that respect the play is drawing on a tradition of representation: Shakespeare and V.S. Naipaul and William Faulkner. I wanted Amir’s act of violence to be in dialogue with the acts of violence defined by that lineage. (92)

Furthermore, true to the latter part of her statement regarding the lack of “Black women and white men” as an interracial model in literature, the relationship between Isaac and Jory is secondary and ultimately in the service of affirming said racial hierarchy that Akhtar and the production alike explore (Daileader 7).

Daileader writes that *Othello* is demonstrative of a “masculinist racist hegemony [that] used myths about Black male sexual rapacity and the danger of racial ‘pollution’” so as to “control white women” and therefore protect the “‘purity’” of the white race (8-9). This fear of white women being taken by Black men dates back to the end of Reconstruction in American history when its “‘failure’” resulted in the need for white women to be protected from Black men and—by extension—the white race from “contamination” (Paulin 417). The play alleges that this fear still exists, although it is no longer the Black man of whom to be weary: the character of Isaac expresses a resounding confidence that Emily will never be happy with someone “like that,” her desire to be with Amir a contemporary jungle fever and passing flight of fancy as she shirks societal norms, not unlike the novelty of incorporating Islamic forms in her work (Akhtar 70). It is revealed that Isaac and Emily had an affair in the time between the second and third scenes in the play while they were both abroad in London for business, which helps explain that the animosity that Isaac feels toward Amir is not purely ideological, but personal. However, he conflates the two as he begs Emily to choose him over Amir: “The slave finally has the master’s wife. [...] If what happened that night in London was a mistake, Em, it’s not the last time you’re going to make it. A man like that... You *will* cheat on him again. Maybe not with me, but you will. [...] And then one day you’ll leave him” (Akhtar 70).

Gender theorist Todd W. Reeser offers several potential theoretical models by which to analyze masculinity in an Anglo-American context, including the existence of “racialized triangles,” citing Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* as similarly articulating one such phenomenon. Reeser examines a model of “two racially distinct men and one white woman as mediator,” which is

...predicated on the concept that mutual desire can equalize racial hierarchy when the non-white upgrades to white status through the medium of the desired object. By desiring, attaining, or loving the white woman, the non-white man imitates white masculinity in the framework of desire and may gain access to white privilege or to whiteness itself.

The correlation to Fanon is evidenced by his statement regarding a colonial context: “By loving me [the white woman] proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man” (Reeser 209).

This model is relevant for providing a paradigm by which the triangle between Amir, Emily and Isaac may be discussed, one fraught with racial tension and exhibiting the inheritance of a colonial past. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois published his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk* wherein he expanded upon the notion of “double-consciousness.”²³ Du Bois retains the title of the essay for the first chapter of *Souls*, introducing this theory anecdotally as he opens with the recurring question posed to him: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (7) He recounts the memory that problematizes his identity, an experience

²³ This notion of “double-consciousness” in *Disgraced* was also noted by La Jolla Playhouse’s Director of New Play Development and Dramaturg Gabriel Greene, as per the program note for another Akhtar play, *The Who & the What*, which debuted in February of 2014. Says Greene, “In re-reading *Disgraced* and thinking about *The Who & the What*, I’m reminded of W.E.B. Du Bois talking about double consciousness, the idea that people see themselves through the lens of the dominant culture” (“*The Who & The What*” Program).

from his New England childhood in which he and his peers would exchange “visiting-cards” until one day his was refused by “a newcomer [...] peremptorily, with a glance” (8). This first resulted in a desire to likewise ostracize those who did so to him—excluding him from their world “by a vast veil”—until, he writes, “this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them” (8). This experiential designation of difference—Du Bois’ story a microcosm for that befalling the African-American identity—leads to the development of a “double-consciousness” as he explains:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8)

This notion of a hybrid or hyphenated identity is re-contextualized more than a century later in Akhtar’s play. Akhtar throws this “double-consciousness” in relief via distinct paths: first, by Othering his central character at the hands of his fetishizing white wife. Thereafter, her subsequent infidelity leads not only to a white-on-color love triangle resulting in Amir’s catastrophic demise but her relationship with him also serves as a cautionary tale disciplining those who commit miscegenation or try to “wrest” that which shall not be possessed; in this case, the white woman (Du Bois 8). Finally, Akhtar creates a racial hierarchy of privilege by means of the Black female character, Jory: she is

awarded partnership at the law firm despite his seniority and greater dedication.

Muslim—or better stated, being perceived as being Muslim—is the new Black in terms of disadvantage. Muslim is now the non-white binary. Says Amir with the revelation that Jory is made partner over him: “Your first three years? Were you ever at work before anyone else in the morning? Were you ever the last one to leave? Cause if you were, I didn’t see it. I *still* leave the office after you do! You think you’re the nigger here? I’m the nigger!! Me!!” (Akhtar 72)

As the most verbally and physically violent moments of the play take shape with the above language, Amir spits in Isaac’s face, resulting in the latter retorting with, “There’s a reason they call you people animals” (Akhtar 73). Amir asks Emily if she cheated on him and she confirms it, constituting the climax of the play:

All at once, Amir hits Emily in the face. A vicious blow. The first blow unleashes a torrent of rage, overtaking him. He hits her twice more. Maybe a third. In rapid succession. Uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment. (75)

Akhtar predicates this moment of violence in the opening tableau of this same scene in which Amir breaks a glass out of anger on the outdoor terrace. Moments later, it is established that this results from the revelation that he is on shaky ground at work over his name change and his Pakistani origins when his colleagues start to investigate him after his perceived defense of the imam. The Lincoln Center production failed to convey Akhtar’s stage directions, as neither was Emily’s face rendered “bloodied” by the scene’s end nor was the physical violence brutally violent: the blow looked like a stage slap and was without any semblance of ferocity (76).

As a result, the machinations of the script were rendered overt and contrived in a bid to land the theme of the oppression that assimilation asserts on the individual as well as the hold of culture, even one renounced. Further blatant is Abe's seeming turn to fundamentalism as a result of this violent act that he walks in on at the end of the scene, which is revealed in the concluding moments of the play: "For three hundred years they've been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got?" (Akhtar 85) Emily returns to their apartment momentarily, long enough for an audience to see her officially leave Amir, who plaintively tells her, "I just want you to be proud of me. I want you to be proud you were with me" (87). The play concludes as "he takes a searching long look" at her portrait of him, *Study After Velázquez's Moor* (87). As per this bookending image, Akhtar states his aims for the piece: "The play begins with a Western consciousness representing a Muslim subject. The play ends with the Muslim subject observing the fruits of that representation," the "fruits" less the physical-*cum*-metaphorical portrait, but rather the violence and consequent decimation of the protagonist's existence as he knew it (96).

Just as Emily's artistic predilection for Islamic forms renders itself a fad when it is ultimately discarded at the play's end, so, too, are Isaac's words regarding her departure prophetic, albeit complicated by the incident of domestic violence. The character of Emily serves as a foil for the dramatic action of the plot—consequently betraying the paternalistic, shared vision of playwright and production alike—and her existence further affirms that as a hapless white woman, she does need protection. Not

only is this aspect of the piece racist but it is distinctly misogynist as well at the hour that she is stripped of both her dramaturgical and fictional agencies, her rejection of Amir ultimately conveyed not as a demonstration of empowerment and self-sufficiency but as recovery from caprice.

For the character of Amir, religion is still very much tied to his racial identity despite his apostasy, an imposition made both by American society at large as well as by Amir himself. Such is reflected in the pressure experienced by Amir to change his last name to mask his Pakistani heritage as well as the assumption that he must be not only Muslim, but the imam's attorney when he was quoted at the latter's arraignment. Rarely does he speak of his Pakistani ethnicity; rather, the topic of discussion is his renounced Islamic culture. Such further supports the argument that Muslim-Americans parallel the plight of African-Americans a hundred years prior, especially as it relates to the spiritual dimensionality of the hyphenated identity: "...for Du Bois the essence of a distinctive African consciousness was its spirituality, a spirituality based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, their history of patient suffering, and their faith" (Bruce 301). Muslim-American identity is also conflated with a notion of the "tribal": as the conversation blatantly shifts to Islam and, more specifically, the teachings of the Quran, a holy book that Amir categorizes as "one very long hate-mail letter to humanity"—the line that singularly garnered the biggest laugh from the 2012 Lincoln Center performance that was viewed—Isaac and Amir go head-to-head as the former defends the merits of the faith while Amir condemns it on the grounds that women are to submit to their husbands and can be beaten if they fail to obey them (Akhtar 55, 63). Perhaps the most incendiary moment of the play is the following exchange:

AMIR: ... And so, even if you're one of those lapsed Muslims sipping your after-dinner scotch alongside your beautiful white American wife—and watching the news and seeing folks in the Middle East dying for values you were taught were purer—and stricter—and truer...you can't help but feel just a little a bit of pride.

ISAAC: Pride?

AMIR: Yes. Pride.

Beat.

ISAAC: Did you feel pride on September Eleventh?

AMIR (*With hesitation*): If I'm honest, yes.

EMILY: You don't really mean that, Amir.

AMIR: I was horrified by it, okay? Absolutely horrified.

JORY: Pride about what?

About the towers coming down?

About people getting killed?

AMIR: That we were finally winning.

JORY: *We?*

AMIR: Yeah...I guess I forgot...which *we* I was.

JORY: You're an American...

AMIR: It's tribal, Jor. It is in the bones. (62-3)

Still another binary is offered that encompasses not only white versus non-white; Christian versus Muslim; or even American versus terrorist; rather, a tribal warfare harkens back to a colonial construction of West versus East. Thus, Akhtar and the production itself intervenes in the ideology of the post-colonial: non-white, Muslim and Eastern still equal terrorist in the American consciousness.

The production design for the 2012 Lincoln Center staging even goes so far as to reinforce this equation: during the transitions between scenes, a pillar with a rectangular stained glass window affixed to it midway up its shaft is backlit, resulting in the shape of a large cross being illuminated nearly center stage. The image foreshadows both an interrogation of Islam, one to which it is initially subjected by Amir himself, as well as a capitulation of it. Isaac initially defends the merit of the faith, which Amir clarifies is more cultural than not: "The point isn't just academic. There's a result to believing that a

book written about life in a specific society fifteen hundred years ago is the word of God: you start wanting to *re-create* that society. After all, it's the only one in which the Quran makes any literal sense" (Akhtar 61). Ultimately, it is the apostate and Eastern Amir defeated once more by the hegemonic, Christian West, thus this design choice embodies a reassertion of the center.

Returning momentarily to Du Bois' concept of the "double-consciousness," Bruce asserts, "In the absence of any kind of adequate idea of cultural relativism, the idea of double consciousness allowed Du Bois to talk about an African mode of thought and what we would now call a cultural conflict between the African and the American in a way very like that made possible by a notion of relativism" (305). He thus sought the means by which to affirm that these two selves—the African the American—were both valid, thus one culture not inferior to the other. While Du Bois may have advocated a reconciliation within the Black individual of these two identities—a transcendence to "a better and truer self" as Bruce so reminds in his essay—this "synthesis" is considerably harder in the face of racism: "The merging of African and American selves was, or at least could be, an act of will, and Du Bois so treated it. The merging of selves created by American racism was not" (306-7). *Disgraced* serves as an illustrative example whereby neither cultural identity nor racism can be transcended: Amir fails both at self-acceptance, of reconciling his Pakistani-Muslim self with his American one, and falls victim to a racism that costs him both his livelihood as well as his wife. The play is cynical insofar as it reminds its audience that belief in transcending these binaries and social constructions is not only naïve but hypocritical: to hope for as much is to deny the hegemony that we perpetuate.

As for hegemony, there is no question of who wields it. If the play is a microcosm for society at large, it is first and foremost those who pass as white who are in power. They can allege to be progressive but the end result is infidelity when they abandon their spouses of color for someone of their own kind and overt racism when pushed to the point of defining the other. Akhtar presents a protagonist who commits the same fallacy that many Americans do, namely equating being Muslim with cultural inclusion. The indictment is one revealing hypocrisy: despite Isaac touting that what Amir has to say “doesn’t come from Islam,” but rather, from Amir himself, he reveals what he really thinks of Amir and all those like him when he refers to “you people” so as to label them “animals” (Akhtar 64, 73). Since it has been established that it is not Amir’s Pakistani nationality being discussed but his apostasy, the “animals” of which Isaac speaks are Muslims (73). Furthermore, Amir still solicits Emily’s pride even after she commits cultural tourism, thus reiterating the tragedy of desiring acceptance and affirmation from those incapable, unwilling and in control of spaces as diverse as the workplace, the airport and the household.

Despite the playwright being American and setting his story in the States, the play carries with it features of a post-colonial discourse as far as laying bare several thematic binaries that are offered over the course of the work: “Post-colonialism’s agenda, however, is more specifically political: to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power based on binary oppositions such as ‘us and them’, ‘first world and third world’, ‘white and black’, ‘coloniser and colonised’” (Gilbert *et al* 3). To be clear, the play does not qualify as post-colonial drama in terms of its form by Gilbert and Tompkins’ standards in *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice,*

Politics, but its content does seek to expose these binaries that post-colonial literature seeks to disrupt. Furthermore, the myth that we inhabit any era of the post-colonial or post-racial is dispelled via a play that perpetuates a neo-imperialist reality by means of the efficacy of its realism: said binaries loom large. Gilbert and Tompkins discuss a “new discursive imperialism [that] sets up relationships that are generally less formal than those established by the British Empire but no less profound in their capacity to determine the material and cultural parameters by which much of the world now lives” (277). By means of the mass media, “discourses and images that reinforce hierarchies based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, and class” are produced, which consequently earns the United States the label of being neo-imperialist for the perpetuation of them (277).

Asked in an interview with the Bush Theatre Artistic Director Madani Younis as to his thoughts regarding his own work, Akhtar said: “I *do* believe personally that the Muslim world has got to fully account for the image the West has of it and move on. To the extent that we continue to try to define ourselves by saying, ‘We are *not* what you say about us,’ we’re still allowing someone else to have the dominant voice in the discourse” (96, italics author’s own). However, Akhtar is impossibly cagey (as playwrights are wont to be) regarding what this definition of identity pretends to be. The danger of smart writing, convincing realism and a persuasive argument regarding one oppressed group now usurping another in terms of disadvantage is that the cynicism is felt loud and clear. The point is taken that a lifetime of double-consciousness and embodying the prevailing cultural myths leads to the stereotyped behavior so feared, in this case, the wife-beating violence associated with Islamofacism. However, how does accepting this stereotype

buffet it? Or, perhaps, therein exists the implication of white liberal guilt at the moment that one realizes the power structures at play but still remains ignorant of her culpability.

Chapter 4

Three's Company: Paranoia, Jungle Fever and Violence in *Buzzer*

Regarding segregated neighborhoods, Bruce Norris asked the following would-be rhetorical question in an interview:

Even if prices in white neighborhoods are higher, how come there's not more movement? How come we don't voluntarily integrate? I think it has to do with discomfort—with feeling like you're the minority. It's uncomfortable to live in an area where you are that minority, no matter which way it works. (Basso 31)

Playwright Tracey Scott Wilson may lack the Pulitzer Prize for Drama that Mamet, Norris and Akhtar share but her work is no less probing as it leaves its indelible mark upon the American theatrical landscape. On the surface, her play *Buzzer*²⁴ seemingly seeks to pontificate upon the same premise as described above by Norris. However, at its core, she offers a work that is a meditation on racial paranoia, letting no one off the hook for the (un)substantiated fears we possess and upon which we act.

Wilson is a fiction novelist by training who made the switch to playwriting after a bout of writers' block. Hailing from Newark, New Jersey, her playwriting career began in Minneapolis with a short piece at the Guthrie Theatre in 2001 before she returned to the New York City area and worked with several prestigious Off-Broadway theatres including New York Theater Workshop and New Georges. Her play *The Story* opened to acclaim at the Public Theater in 2003 followed by a similar reception for *The Good Negro* in 2009, which also debuted at the Public (McKinley "Finding Her Own Way...").

²⁴ When discussing both the text of *Buzzer* as well as the production, I am referring to the February 9th, 2014 performance of it at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, as directed by Jessica Thebus. At the time of composition of this thesis, the text was still unpublished.

Buzzer originated at the Pillsbury House Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota before transferring to the Guthrie Theater. It received a workshop during the Goodman Theatre's *New Stages* festival and finally debuted as part of the Goodman's 2013-14 main stage season, now poised to make its way to New York or to regional theatres nationwide as *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Chris Jones predicts: "This admirably complex and wholly unflinching play has otherwise been seen only in Minneapolis to date — and I'd bet, given its intensity, veracity and cast size, it will be on or off Broadway in short order" ("Back in the Old Neighborhood...").

The play opens with a monologue delivered by a late-20s, early-30s Black male, Jackson, a clean-cut boarding school and Harvard Law graduate who is vying to get an apartment in his old neighborhood. In the very first lines of the play, Jackson reveals that the neighborhood was downtrodden to the point of being disastrous, but with the advent of "coffee shops" and even a "gym," is changing, although just how rapidly will soon become a core question challenging the characters of this three-hander (*Buzzer*). Jackson dismisses "nostalgia" as prompting his return to his former neighborhood (*Buzzer*). However, in this initial moment as well as the exchange that soon follows with his long-time girlfriend, Suzy, in which he reveals that he acquired the apartment as rent-to-own and would like her to move in with him, inherent in the subtext is the pride that Jackson feels at his arrival at a different socioeconomic sector. Although the apartment promises to be a worthwhile investment, Jackson's motivations to return to a still-impoverished place foreshadow a later use of class to intimidate instead of might.

Jackson's girlfriend, Suzy, is also in her late-20s, early 30s and is white. Her own monologue at the top of the show reveals that she is on administrative leave for yelling

“frak” in an effort to break up a fight at the inner-city school at which she teaches; the principal mistrusts her and believes she said “fuck” (*Buzzer*). Jackson reassures her that she will not be fired, to such an extent that she will lead the “precocious magical Negroes” who are her students to victory against a white, rival high school in some kind of academic contest and then actress Sandra Bullock will be cast to play her in the film version of her success story (*Buzzer*).

This early dialogue speaks to the post-racial world that these characters think they inhabit in which they are aware of race to the point of being nonplussed by it. Additionally, the word “gentrifier” is similarly used in the first ten minutes self-referentially as Suzy agrees to move in with Jackson, a stark departure from the characters of Norris’s *Clybourne Park* who dare not speak their identities (*Buzzer*). Wilson’s characters are consequently far from colorblind and the pendulum swings wildly in the opposite direction; their treatment of race is so casual that it borders on being blasé.

As soon as Suzy agrees to move in with Jackson, he discloses that he invited his friend Don to temporarily move in as well, a decision that Suzy is vehemently against but to which she acquiesces. A rich white junkie who has been in rehab seven times, Don and Suzy had a falling out over his chemical dependency. Naturally, there is a standoff between the three as soon as Don moves in, the underlying tension made worse by Jackson’s constant absorption with his cell phone. When the buzzer from the broken intercom sounds and both Suzy and Don refuse to go downstairs to answer it, Jackson leaves in a huff and with the threat that he will not play “magical Negro man” in an effort to make the other two play nice (*Buzzer*).

According to the program note, the play is set in New York, which the scenic design reflects with bodega and ethnic market signs on the periphery of the set to hint at the neighborhood's demographic ("*Buzzer*" program). Additionally, the sound design constantly alludes to as much, with very on-the-nose hints of rap music or reggaeton and alternate yelling, fighting or the occasional sound of a car backfiring. The characters fearfully pause to consider these noises, connoting by means of this silent pondering the possibility of gunfire. The genius and aggravation alike of this concept is that it deals in stereotypes; so, too, does the play put forth that racial paranoia persists in being premised upon as much, post-racial posturing aside.

As a case in point regarding the stereotypes in which this play deals, one need look no further than the first archetype twice introduced above, that of the "magical Negro." As per a 2012 *Time Magazine* article regarding Obama's presidency, the "magical Negro is a character full of knowledge and wisdom, sometimes with supernatural powers, whose job is to help a white protagonist reach his full potential" (Touré "The Magical Negro Falls to Earth"). The "magical Negro" tends to be a literary and cinematic trope and Touré points to Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* as a "classic example" ("The Magical Negro..."). Wilson is a far less manipulative writer than David Mamet when it comes to scripting characters of a different race. A Black female playwright, she pens her characters without the same political agenda as Mamet and also sans his "cynicism and snark," in the words of Chris Jones: [regarding the distinction between *Buzzer* and Mamet's *Race*] "Wilson is a more feeling and, thank goodness, self-doubting writer (a scribe who has yet to get the notice she deserves, frankly). She keeps you guessing as to where her deepest sympathies lie" ("Back in the Old Neighborhood...").

With the “magical Negro,” however, Wilson toys with the play’s relationship to a post-racial ideology. Jackson may fancy himself wizened enough to avoid tropism but in actuality, the two white characters constitute the focal point of the story and certainly their relationship drives it, providing the catalyzing incident that will lead to the work’s climax. Furthermore, the living arrangement of these characters does cement a hegemonic ordering among the three roommates to be explored, and every scene that follows is evidence that they do inhabit a very much racialized world. Thus, the white characters unwittingly cast Jackson as the so-called “magical Negro,” despite his warnings to the contrary.

Don is familiar with the neighborhood, as he lived with Jackson for a period while he was deep in his drug use and consequently turned away by his own family. When Jackson offers his residence anew, Don is initially reluctant, declaring that the neighborhood is “still bad” (*Buzzer*). Similarly, when Jackson goes downstairs to answer the buzzer, Don mentions to Suzy that the last time he and Jackson lived there, UPS trucks would not deliver to the neighborhood because people would phone in fake orders and then steal from the truck, if not the truck itself; as a matter of fact, he muses, the building in which the three are now living used to be a crack den in which addicts died. Along with the aforementioned design, such continuous statements regarding the danger of the neighborhood augments the mounting fear, both for the characters and for the audience on their behalves. The foreshadowing is apparent, if not heavy-handed.

One of the steps of Don’s recovery requires him to write a letter to Suzy and Jackson detailing his misdeeds, which prompts him to privately apologize to Suzy for coming onto her during a vacation the three took. Suzy initially denies that she was the

recipient of this advance but the ice begins to melt between them and soon Don is recounting the exploits of his drug-addled days in the neighborhood, citing his “white privilege” as protecting him when his father’s car service sent a limo one time to help him evade drug dealers to whom he owed money (*Buzzer*). Don tells Suzy he saw her get hassled by some guys on the street and asks her what happens but as she refuses to tell him, the conversation changes to a teenaged model who was raped and killed recently in the area. Suzy brushes this story off as an attempt by Don to scare her but the latter is genuine, offering to walk her back from the subway stop at nights before asking, “Are you scared?” (*Buzzer*) This scene is pivotal, both for its firm establishment that the neighborhood is to be feared as well as its demonstration of the burgeoning alliance between these two characters in Jackson’s absence and care of their shared fear. When Jackson is present, he is engaged with his proverbial cell phone, further fueling the fire that is being ignited between Suzy and Don.

In the next scene, Suzy’s façade begins to crack. After wondering if she will become like her co-worker who inherited an apartment in a desirous neighborhood when it “was shitty” and survived its transformation only to look as if she had been through a war, Suzy confronts Jackson: their neighborhood is “bad” (*Buzzer*). Furthermore, enduring it is easier for Jackson: “You grew up here. And even though you hated it, it’s familiar. It’s in your body” (*Buzzer*). Suzy is not only an outsider but comes from a background in which she was not forced to grapple with daily threats to her safety. Jackson manipulates her by offering to move with the caution that they will miss out on the great investment that is their apartment when the neighborhood changes, and then asks what happened to so preoccupy Suzy. She does not divulge her harassment.

Shortly thereafter, the three toast Don's new job and the lifting of Suzy's suspension from her school. Don and Jackson reminisce about their good old days together, again establishing a hierarchy insofar as inclusion in the neighborhood is concerned with Don better off than Suzy but lacking the racial access that Jackson possesses; Don's days as a drug dealer earned him some degree of street credibility and consequently allowed him to pass, to such an extent that a girl with whom he had a relationship called him her "little cracker" (*Buzzer*). Suzy suggests in light of Don's new job and seemingly successful recovery that he come speak to her students. Don volunteers that he should write a book, prompting Jackson to facetiously encourage a tell-all about surviving life in the ghetto, pointing out the hypocrisy of concern solely for the white people who get out. Though he proclaims he is not trying to "romanticize" ghetto life, Don is called out by Jackson for his claim that he was happy living in the neighborhood: says Jackson sarcastically, it was a "magical Negro mystery tour and you loved it" (*Buzzer*). Don dodges Jackson's indictment of cultural tourism by lauding the community for not "judging" him in the way that he would have been in his domicile of "manicured lawns and gated driveways" (*Buzzer*).

During this back and forth between Jackson and Don, Suzy pipes up on Don's behalf but Jackson is defensive over Don's skewed and selective memory as well as his insinuation that those surrounding him were fellow "fuck-ups" who did not judge him simply because they were in no position to do so (*Buzzer*). Jackson correctly identifies that Don is blaming the victim: the latter felt at home amid "fuck-ups," and inherent in this false praise for being so welcomed is a deduction that being impoverished equates to not only being "fucked up" but responsible for said impoverishment (*Buzzer*).

Furthermore, Jackson “*loves*” the “manicured lawns and gated driveways” (*Buzzer*; italics my own). He is back in his former neighborhood because he is laboring under the belief that it will soon be counted among such wealthy communities.

At this point, the latent animus between Don and Jackson is unearthed: as per Suzy, Jackson and Don’s father had one of their regular lunches. In fact, Don’s father will not see Don because of his drug use and treats Jackson like the son he never had: in him exists the opportunity to be proud. In an effort to poison Jackson against his father, Don tells him that his father is racist, to such an extent that he would refer to Jackson and his mother as the “good blacks” when they were younger (*Buzzer*).

With this exchange left unresolved, the play jumps to Don’s speech delivered to Suzy’s class in which he tells her at-risk youth not to do drugs because, unlike him, they will receive no second chance on account of their race. In this instance, not only does Don revisit his awareness of his white privilege but also displays his white guilt: “I’m lucky,” he says, “I know that” (*Buzzer*). Back at the apartment post-speech and unaccompanied by Jackson, the topic of conversation shifts still again to the neighborhood in which they live and Suzy comments upon how “sad” it is, relaying a story about doing relief work in Malawi (*Buzzer*). There the people “tried” despite having nothing, the implication being that, in contrast, the impoverished folks in their midst fail to make such an attempt (*Buzzer*). Don assents by offering his own insight, starting in with how recovery requires taking responsibility, trailing off to connote that were their neighbors to do likewise, their fates may be different. In this moment, we behold a confession-turned-connection as Don and Suzy air their innermost deep, dark racist thoughts. Thereafter, Suzy owns up to not only remembering her kiss with Don,

but feigning intoxication to sate her own curiosity and desire regarding her physical attraction for him. As it turns out, she kissed him back. Predictably, Don kisses Suzy, who exits the stage entirely and then returns, literally launching herself at him. They passionately fall upon the couch, undressing.

In the next scene, Don has taken off, unable to bear the guilt of his treachery. Upon his return, he and Suzy are at an impasse, as she demands he move out but he refuses lest he abuse drugs again. As he went on a bender after their kiss during the vacation of yesteryear, relapse in times of stress is a real possibility. To both downplay their circumstances when Don does not give into her as well as manufacture an excuse for what happened between them, Suzy confesses to being lewdly cat-called by men on the street but insists that nothing will come of it; they are simply trying to get a rise out of her because she refused to smile at them, and then refused to acknowledge even their racial insults that devolved into comments on her “white pussy” (*Buzzer*).

Forced into a corner by Jackson regarding why he went missing—who also threatens to kick him out since it seems like he is using drugs anew—Don uses Suzy as the excuse (as well as her excuse): Suzy is being harassed on the street. Jackson insists on confronting the men. Desperate to ensure his safety, Suzy minimizes the commentary as being ubiquitous but Jackson points out that this is a different situation being that she is threatened at home, to which Suzy delineates home and the neighborhood as not being one and the same.

Don is also unsuccessful at convincing Jackson to back down so he instead insists on accompanying him, particularly since he has been in many more fights than Jackson and came to the latter’s aid time and again. This is telling, particularly when Jackson

declares that he wishes the men would tangle with him. In need of validation that his successful law career and formidable salary cannot offer, Jackson wants to handle himself on the street in a way of which he was incapable when younger. Don robs him of this opportunity, however, by preempting a conversation and talking to the men. He narrates that the ringleader, Dennis, insulted Suzy because he tried to make civil conversation with her on the street and she ignored him, whereupon it turned ugly as she became emblematic of the white gentrifiers who move into the area and dismiss the long-time residents. In a bid for reconciliation and because he asked, Suzy and Don escort Dennis upstairs to see the apartment's renovations, all of which occurs offstage.

Jackson is incensed, referencing Don's "white savior" status: he leveraged his race to deny Jackson the confrontation he so desired, knowing full well that "the only reason Don was able to do that is because he's white" (*Buzzer*). Suzy tells him not to "condescend to [her] about race," adding, "How long have we been together? I get it" (*Buzzer*). Jackson tells her that she does not: if he had spoken to them as Don did, they would have attacked him but they dare not touch a white man lest they end up in prison, betraying the predilection for the legal system to take crimes against white people more seriously than those committed by people of color against fellow persons of color. Jackson is angered by Don's ignorance of his privilege but "loyal" to him for being a true friend (*Buzzer*). Rejected by the kids in his neighborhood for failing to be "ghetto" enough, Jackson was then held to an irrationally high standard in boarding school as the sole student of a certain class and color whose presence was forever suspect (*Buzzer*).

The tension is further ratcheted up when Jackson happens upon Suzy and Don flirting in the kitchen the following morning. Immediately aware of the chemistry

between them, Jackson responds by coldly inquiring as to the whereabouts of an engraved watch given to him by Don's father before mocking Don for speaking to the men harassing Suzy, calling him the "nigger whisperer" (*Buzzer*). To retaliate, Don insults Jackson's deceased mother, claiming that she traded sexual favors with his father as payment for the money that he lent her while she was unemployed. The men physically go at it before Suzy intervenes, injuring her wrist, and Jackson flees to fight the men outside. The roommates reach a partial reconciliation later that night but Jackson is persistent, insisting that the men are not sufficiently chastised. He reminds both Don and Suzy that they should not "let crime happen" simply because they are in a poor neighborhood (*Buzzer*). He adds, "We're gentrifiers, man. Cops will come when we call. We don't have to put up with this shit" (*Buzzer*).

As Jackson hints at his plans to come, Don finally breaks down and confesses that the mess in which they find themselves embroiled is not a result of Suzy being taunted and endeavors to out his infidelity with her. Suzy tries to quiet him but when Jackson demands to know the truth, she begins to disclose it before Don changes his mind and takes the fall, lying that Suzy caught him using drugs in the apartment only to conceal it at his request. Disbelieving, Jackson demands that Don whisper to him what he was using and then asks Suzy the same question, convinced that they are covering up "something worse" (*Buzzer*). He implores Suzy to tell him with, "No matter what you say, it will be fine. I love you and it will be fine. But you have to tell me, baby" (*Buzzer*). She does not answer so Jackson summarily kicks Don out with, "Anything else we could have worked out" (*Buzzer*). Don starts with, "You say that, but—" and never completes the admission (*Buzzer*).

In the lobby of the building, Suzy joins Don alone to see him off, promising that she will convince Jackson to allow Don to come back. However, the latter refuses with “it’s only a matter of time” before Dennis and the other men retaliate against Jackson and Suzy since the neighborhood is “fucked up, and will be for a long time” (*Buzzer*). Don brings up the model who was raped and murdered in the neighborhood as an example that gentrifiers—contrary to what Jackson insists—are not immune to the violence of their surroundings. As a final case in point, Don goes into still another example of a white teacher friend who was beaten to death by his Black students. With a promise that she be careful, Suzy and Don sit in silence.

The production concludes with an arresting tableau: as Don and Suzy sit on an indoor step in the lobby with their backs to a glass door, a previously seen white tenant approaches, struggling with his hands full, so Suzy holds the door open for him. Moments later, a Black teenager dressed in baggy jeans and a cap walks up to the door to enter and Suzy, without hesitation, slams the door in his face. Wide-eyed, he bangs on the door, staring at Don and Suzy, who refuse to answer. He keeps banging on the door and they sit down, backs toward him, facing the audience shame-faced. Finally, he gives up, shaking his head in anger as he walks away. The lights dim.

To intervene in an ideology of the post-racial, Wilson selects a premise for the work that does not allow whiteness to persist in being “un-raced”: the minority status of the two white characters in a majority-Black neighborhood forces them to confront their whiteness at the moment that they fear that their race renders them targets (Pascale 31). Furthermore, Wilson time and again exposes whiteness as a “site of privilege” (Kondo 102). Don is the most aware of his white privilege—or at least the most verbal as regards

it—but even his awareness has its limits. He knows that he literally phoned in his privilege to have his father’s car service send a limo by which to evade drug dealers—which was also a reminder that he could leave the neighborhood and return to the white picket fences of suburbia at any point—and he harnessed it to altruistic ends when he told the students in Suzy’s class that an unjust social structure will not allow them the second chance that he received. However, he is blind to his privilege when it allowed him to act as the “white savior” that made nice with Dennis and his cronies (*Buzzer*). He and Suzy also share an especially egregious moment of ignorance when they confess that the population that surrounds them is to blame for the circumstances in which they find themselves: if they only tried harder, as Suzy points out, or took responsibility for their lives, as Don admonishes, then they would have access to the same privilege that Don and Suzy enjoy. Suffice it to say that this blatantly ignores the entirety of institutionalized racism and is a belief in it and of itself that not only betrays the privilege of those who possess it, but demonstrates exactly how it functions. In short, this is the working definition of white privilege.

Suzy is aware of her privilege as well. Though she is scared of Dennis and his buddies, she also reassures Jackson that they would not dare touch her. She knows that her privileged racial status would mean catastrophic consequences for anyone who perpetrated violence against her, a white woman, and attempts to convince herself of, and find solace in, being untouchable. For his part, Jackson also takes advantage of the white privilege afforded to him by association and as a gentrifier—he points out that the police would come if his household called. In short, the privilege of these personages is exposed precisely when they are removed from sites in which it is uncontested: when

they live among fellow members of their given racial or socioeconomic group, their privilege goes unmarked. Wilson writes a play in which it is thrown into relief against those who do not and cannot trade upon it. Thus, whiteness is exposed thematically and vis-à-vis the situational, mostly by way of the dialogue. It is reinscribed, however, with the dramaturgical structure of the piece.

Buzzer shares important similarities with *Race* and *Disgraced* insofar as all pieces count upon a very normative theatrical form. The latter is distinctly Aristotelian²⁵ and Akhtar stated on record that he sought to write a tragedy.²⁶ Wilson's plot, while convoluted, is mostly linear and counts a quotidian dramatic structure: the infidelity between Suzy and Jackson concludes the first act and serves as the inciting incident that leads to the street fight after Jackson confronts Suzy's harassers. The would-be climactic scene occurs when Don and Suzy are on the precipice of revealing their fornication to Jackson and there is definite falling action thereafter as the cheating duo take in the aftermath of Don's lie. Mamet is the most Aristotelian of the trio, observing the unities of time, place and action to the greatest degree. Only Norris's *Clybourne Park* counts on two distinct acts with completely different characters and takes advantage of the theatricality that double-casting affords as it relates to the expression of his theme. It is

²⁵ While Akhtar does not observe Aristotle's unities of time, place and action in *Disgraced*, the plot certainly takes primacy and the story is told linearly, with exposition giving way to an inciting incident, leading to a climax followed by a resolution.

²⁶ In an interview with *Telegraph* theatre critic Dominic Cavendish in the wake of his 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama win, Akhtar says the following: "...I really wanted to write a legitimate modern tragedy — I wanted to write a play that would affect an audience so deeply they would then walk away being forced to ask all kinds of questions the play could not answer for them" ("Interview with Ayad Akhtar...").

potentially unfair to judge these plays based upon what they lack but they all share a certain blandness as it concerns theatrical form. While feminist theatre is long aligned with an attack on Aristotelian structure—a harbinger of normativity and consequently masculinity—the plays on hand do not seek to break with the milieu as it concerns contemporary regional theatre fare. Their boldness has its limits and is consigned to theme and subject matter in what is a distinct bid for the familiarity that an otherwise conservative audience needs to make the uneasy truth of their hegemony digestible.

Norris and Wilson interpellate²⁷ their audiences by inviting recognition of themselves in the mimetic²⁸ performances onstage, an interpellation that is ultimately subversive for the depictions aplenty of white people behaving badly. While Norris openly mocks the white characters in his play in a way in which his audience can recognize—as a case in point, the audience laughed aloud when Lindsey proclaimed that “half of [her] friends are black,” demonstrating an awareness of this cliché—Wilson’s exposure of her characters is a slower burn (Norris 73). Suzy is being threatened and we

²⁷ The definition of interpellation by which I abide is that of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright in *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*: “A term coined by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser to describe the process by which ideological systems call out to or ‘hail’ social subjects and tell them their place in the system. In popular culture, interpellation refers to the ways that cultural products address their consumers and recruit them into a particular ideological position. Images can be said to designate the kind of viewer they intend us to be, and in speaking to us as that kind of viewer, they help to shape us as particular ideological subjects” (446).

²⁸ I cite Aristotle himself in the use of this term, which I do not seek to define considering that philosophers throughout antiquity have been debating this concept that hints at the nature of art itself. Instead, I acknowledge its existence somewhere between “imitation” and “representation,” and invoke it to speak of the power of live theatrical performance (47). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the function of tragedy to lead to the “catharsis” of its audience, accomplished by means of their identification with the protagonist’s arc “arousing pity and fear” (49). Thus, I cite the power of theatre to emotionally engage and move the spectator by means of said live, onstage imitation-representation.

are concerned for her. Furthermore, Don and Suzy are fearful because they heard stories of people who looked like them getting hurt—the white model is killed blocks away and Don's white friend killed by Black aggressors—and there is a fear of the Other based on race. In the end, this fear is called into question when violence results solely because those who fear it breed it: Don confronts the men for their comments and then Jackson starts a physical fight with them to exorcise the conflict present in his own household. Therefore, to possess this fear is problematic because what right, in the end, did one have to be afraid?

Just as this question is being considered, Suzy slams the door in a Black man's face, the final image to interpellate the audience. Perhaps she does this because she and Don just had a conversation about white people getting killed by Black people. Perhaps she did this because Don is relieved to be leaving. In response to her offer to convince Jackson to allow him to stay, Don declares that such is futile because the neighborhood is dangerous and the men will just exact revenge anyway. Don, the most self-aware of the trio, is celebrating a happy byproduct of taking the fall and getting kicked out: he gets out of the neighborhood. Lastly, perhaps Suzy slams the door because the circle of violence of which Don forewarned is being continued: the audience is forced to consider if her alleged racism protected her. After all, he neither had keys nor was seen previously onstage like the white tenant who entered moments before him.

As the theatergoing audience is vastly white, Wilson consequently does not allow her audience a way out with this final stage picture. There is power in the act of a Black playwright scripting her white characters to turn their backs on a Black man, locking him out. Two white characters deny a Black character access and a Black playwright

possesses the authority to make her majority-white audience grapple with this reality, however fleeting, metaphorical or a microcosm for the macrocosm. Wilson succeeds where both David Mamet failed and Ayad Akhtar hiccuped. For his part, Mamet interpellates his audience so as to perpetuate the myth of the post-racial by coercing an acceptance of the false legitimacy of reverse racism. In order for such to be possible, racial groups need to be on equal footing and therefore have the power to systematically and institutionally discriminate in the manner that whites historically have done. Because the innocent white man goes to jail in his play as a result of reverse racism, he reinstates the myth that we live in a post-racial world.

As for Akhtar, his use of interpellation is more nuanced. In the aforementioned interview with Madani Younis, he states, “I wanted to engage the audience in a way that was much more fundamental, more primal than the contemporary approach to catharsis allows...The kind of vital emotional and intellectual engagement I long to establish with the audience requires closing the distance between the play and its viewers” (“An Interview with Ayad Akhtar”). Coupled with a desire that Western Muslims in the States recognize that they are still not in control of the discourse surrounding their identity when the Muslim protagonist Amir realizes by the play’s end the effects of “Western consciousness representing a Muslim subject,” Akhtar therefore seeks to interpellate his audience to be the subjects that lead to Amir’s demise or, at the very least, “[arouse the] pity and fear” of Greek tragedy regarding what befalls him (“An Interview with Ayad Akhtar”; Aristotle 49). However, as was established in the analysis of the Lincoln Center performance, the onstage violence of Amir attacking Emily lacked the necessary realism for this moment to collapse this distance. The shoddiness of the fight choreography

highlighted the liminal space between audience and performers, underscoring artifice. Such is a fine line because, as Anne Ubersfeld writes in “The Pleasure of the Spectator,” “What one sees is the Other who suffers, and there is pleasure in the fact that it is someone else; but there is also the pleasure of that it is not true” (245). However, one also craves the possibility of danger and the suggestion of truth. *Disgraced* withheld as much. It also trusted its audience too much to discern a message of subversion, thereby potentially reasserting a stereotype of Muslims as fundamentalist wife-beaters should those watching fail to locate his alleged disruption of discourse.

The production and playwriting of *Buzzer* was similarly dissatisfying in its relationship to violence. While this was to the detriment of *Disgraced*, Wilson did not intend to portray onstage violence save for a brief scuffle between Jackson and Don in which Suzy finds herself in the middle and is unwittingly jostled sufficient to injure her wrist. Rather, the absence of actual violence is what underscores the racial paranoia. As a result, there is a large degree of dramatic action that then becomes hearsay. This is occasionally boring and stagnant. Further diffusing the tension is the inevitability of the paltry violence that does take place. At great length is it intimated to come, as there is no doubt that Jackson will get beat up, not least of all because the character reiterates umpteen times that he will talk to the men bothering Suzy.

Furthermore, as Jones noted in his review regarding Wilson’s tendency to “keep [her audience] guessing as to where her deepest sympathies lie” and in spite of her interpellation of the audience into Suzy and Don’s subjectivities, investment in the fates of these characters is hard-won (“Back in the Old Neighborhood...”). This is attributed to her manipulation of them, particularly the instance of infidelity between Suzy and

Don. Both Akhtar and Wilson resort to the white woman cheating on her significant other of color as the inciting incident to lead to the climax of the play. In both instances, this is a cheap trick to manufacture tension, although Akhtar is more upfront as to the thematic takeaway of this endeavor given that he quite literally scripts Isaac telling Emily that she will never find fulfillment in Amir care of his color: “The slave finally has the master’s wife. [...] A man like that... You *will* cheat on him again” (70).

Wilson presents a relationship that is far more substantial in *Buzzer*. Whereas Emily is a cipher in *Disgraced*, unaware until the play’s conclusion that she Others her husband even when he informs her in the very first scene that her homage to *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* does just that, Jackson and Suzy’s banter indicates a more sensitive navigation of their interracial relationship on both of their behalves. Jackson can freely comment upon white Suzy teaching inner city Black youth à la the fictitious Sandra Bullock movie as an illustration of this cliché, and all three characters discuss race without exhibiting any of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s markers of “rhetorical incoherence” that can accompany a discussion of it in an allegedly post-racial world; as such, these characters are mostly adept at distinguishing between racism and what merely constitutes an observation of a racialized social reality (68).

That Suzy is therefore so tempted by the sameness of color personified by Don is difficult to buy. Although their hook-up is predictable given the myriad scenes in which these characters bond over their whiteness (white fear, white guilt, white privilege), when Don comments that Jackson theorizes that the two do not get along because they are too “alike,” one cannot help but relegate that similarity to a racial one, as what else, precisely, do Don and Suzy have in common? (*Buzzer*) Affection emerges only after

they are left alone, Jackson at his high-powered job or on his cell phone to the exclusion of Suzy when he is present. Furthermore, in a play in which race is consistently observed, to deny its bearing on this coupling rings false.

Thus, while Wilson is more subtle in her inclusion of adultery, it is nonetheless incorporated as much to give way to the rising action of the play as it is to suggest a commentary on interracial relationships, and it is this commentary that is unsavory: beware the disingenuous white woman and her incapacity to truly love a man of a differing color. In lieu of a compelling exploration of the effects that a neighborhood has on Suzy and Jackson's relationship, the play instead explores the effects of a fellow character, Don. Alternately, accepting that Suzy straying is a manifestation of the neighborhood's effects, this plot point is still more cheap and insulting given the burgeoning prevalence of interracial dating and marriage.²⁹ Like *Disgraced*, *Buzzer* reduces interracial relationships to a stereotype of jungle fever, and via the same actress, no less, as Lee Stark (Suzy) was also in the world premiere of *Disgraced* as Emily at American Theater Company in Chicago.

²⁹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes, "In general, interracial marriage, which accounted for less than 1 percent of all marriages in the country, accounts today for 5.4 percent" (178).

Conclusion

In a 2010 interview with Boris Kachka of *New York Magazine* regarding his recently opened play *Clybourne Park*, Norris admits the following: “[M]y primary exposure to anyone African-American up until I was 14 was our maid. There's no way to escape the fact that I'm a racist.’ [...] ‘I'd like to imagine I was an android who had only pure thoughts, but I'm a human, and I'm an animal. And I think that's true for everyone” (“I'm a Racist'...”). *Clybourne Park* would go on to garner some of the most important distinctions in the commercial theatre world, including the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Drama³⁰ as well as the 2012 Tony Award for Best Play.³¹ According to the Pulitzer's website, Norris was awarded the prize for “a powerful work whose memorable characters speak in witty and perceptive ways to America's sometimes toxic struggle with race and class consciousness.”³² Not bad for a self-proclaimed racist.

In an interview with fellow playwright John Guare, Norris is quoted as stating, “My ideal audience response is to have them come out of the theater saying, ‘I don't know what's right anymore. I used to think I knew what was right, but I'm not sure I do” (“A New Direction”). Of this crisis of conscious, Norris is successful. He interpellates his white audience to indict them for their hypocrisy and as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva demonstrates in his work, racism abounded in 2009 just as it did in 1959, although

³⁰ “The Pulitzer Prizes—Citation.” *The Pulitzer Prizes—Citation*. The Pulitzer Prizes, n.d. Web. 02 Mar. 2013.

³¹ “Search Past Winners.” *TonyAwards.com - The American Theatre Wing's Tony Awards*. IBM Corp., 2012. Web. 2 Mar. 2013.

³² “The Pulitzer Prizes—Citation.” *The Pulitzer Prizes—Citation*. The Pulitzer Prizes, n.d. Web. 02 Mar. 2013.

its contemporary incarnation is less obvious and more insidious. Norris's work is not levied at the people of color in his audience and this renders him exclusionary, but as audience engagement initiatives still fail to break the death grip of white subscribership, perhaps it is unfair to find fault with a playwright who writes for the audience he has instead of the one he may desire. However, in so doing, he Others the people of color in his audiences.

The reason why race as a subject matter is off-limits in David Mamet's *Race* is owed to an oppressive and mandated politeness, and Mamet fancies himself a bastion of honesty by saying the unsayable. Like Norris, his extracurricular commentary is relevant for revealing that Mamet's white male subjectivity colors his work: were it not for efforts like affirmative action or multiculturalism that maintain the "exceptionalism of the black American experience," he presumes that society could be post-racial ("We Can't Stop Talking..."). Mamet fails to see the structures of whiteness that necessitate such practices as affirmative action, misbelieving that they propagate "dissent and rancor," so it necessarily follows that he mistakes his work as a vehicle for truth-telling instead of an extension of such division ("We Can't Stop Talking..."). If "There is nothing. A white person. Can say to a black person. About Race," then perhaps Mamet should follow his own advice, and say "nothing" (44).

Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* utilized a Pakistani-American character to upset an association of racial tension with a Black-white binary in the United States. Exposing a conflation of culture and race as regards Muslim persons in the West, Akhtar also utilized characters of differing races to suggest a hierarchy or stratification in which Muslims are now receiving the historically terrible treatment associated with being Black in white

America. However, the play fundamentally Others its protagonist to land its theme, with Akhtar going on record to state that he wanted to write a work that begot the fallout from Muslims being subject to a Western control of both the discourse surrounding their identity as well as the effects of discriminatory treatment. This is certainly accomplished alongside of exposing the pressures of assimilation and the injustice of an imposed double-consciousness, but at the expense of the protagonist of the play, and via condemnation of the central interracial relationship of the work. Furthermore, he buries the objective of his work far too deeply to rupture with the prevailing hegemonic discourse.

Speaking of resorting to infidelity to up the ante, *Buzzer* also presents a white woman with a man of color, the former's fidelity tested when she, too, seeks comfort in a man of her own pigmentation. Taking a page from Akhtar's script, Wilson suggests anew that white women fetishize their non-white partners. *Buzzer* shares with *Clybourne Park* a theme of gentrification, exposing the unmarked site of privilege that whiteness traditionally occupies with careful writing and engaging dialogue. However, her balanced characters and dependence upon unseen violence occasionally undercut the dramatic conflict in her play, especially as the audience watches fear takes its toll without feeling much of the fear itself, nor investment in the safety of the onstage personages in the first place. Yet this distance from the fear the white characters experience also offers the possibility to recognize it as paranoia—and little more than an age-old suspicion of the Other—at least until the final moments of the play quite literally close the door on the total condemnation of its white protagonists. After all, how can they be judged for their

racist lockout when now we fear for them. Is this very fear, after all, justified? The paranoia—and thus the racism—is transplanted.

The commercial theatre world responded to the Martin-Zimmerman verdict by grappling with a racially charged issue vis-à-vis the nationwide cycle “Facing Our Truth: Ten-Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege.” With this, one can point to theatre functioning as social change. In the works discussed at length in this thesis, these playwrights share a similar desire to intervene in an ideology that we inhabit a post-racial world, although the means by which some do so is dubious. Though too slowly, commercial theatre is aware of its need to address societal ills. The fact that these successful plays do just that is testament to the field finally putting its money where its mouth has long since been.

The plays tend to end somewhat cynically, affecting tableaux or rattling exchanges asking time and again where we could possibly go from the contentious quagmire in which we find ourselves still mired amid injustice and inequality. Yet the hope is that depiction, and conversation, can catalyze change. Audience engagement; continued advocacy for persons of color in theatrical leadership both on and off the stage; and cycles that address specific real-world problems are steps in a positive, productive direction and areas for continued research. So, too, is the question of the extent to which a playwright functions as ethnographer, her racial identity forever in dialogue with her characters and the actors who embody them. The desire is that this thesis is a step in this decidedly un-cynical direction, a reminder to interrogate that which we canonize and patronize.

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