

Miscast/e:
A Historical and Sociological
Evaluation of Biracial Displacement in
American Theatre
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It all began with Mr. T. It was Spring of 2012. The Upstate New York air was brick, and the streets were covered in a disgusting, muddy slush that you only really know if you spend a spring in Upstate. The school day had just ended, and a young Christian (me, I'm Christian) was running as fast as he could, which in his mind was as fast as Usain Bolt but in reality was as fast as any other 8th grader with mild asthma and a dream. I was sprinting home because it wasn't another ordinary day; that cold Friday afternoon had the potential to change my life forever. I had auditioned for two shows at my local youth theatre—*The Wedding Singer* and *Into The Woods*—and it was the day the cast lists would come out.

My father was at work when I got home, so I snuck into his room, careful not to disrupt the ecosystem. I booted up his Windows 95 desktop, a big no-no, logged into my Gmail account, and lo-and-behold, there it was: my future. I opened up the cast lists and scrolled until I saw my name. And (now, what I'm about to tell you is comedic. Feel free to laugh with or at me) I was cast in *The Wedding Singer* as: "Mr. T Impersonator." Did you laugh? Because I certainly did. First of all, why is this even a character in a musical? And if you had seen me at age 13, you would know that the skinny kid with a 3c wavy kid n' play haircut, light-caramel skin, and a high-pitched voice was simply not going to be able to pull off Mr. T. The only fool to be pitied would certainly be me. Despite all that, the creative team had done what they thought best. I was the only Black boy who auditioned for the two shows, and "Mr. T Impersonator" was the only race-specific character; therefore, I had to play that role. I thought to myself, "Well, it's better me than some rich White kid in blackface," but I was uncomfortable. At 13 years old, I was already conscious of how my lived experience as a light-skinned Black kid was different from my darker brothers and sisters. The next weekend, I talked to the director about my casting, and his response was, "Well, you're Black aren't you?" He was right, I am Black. What he seemed to miss as he gaslit my concerns was that the Black experience is not a monolithic one. What he missed that is integral to my Black experience is that I'm Black and White.

Fast forward five years, I'm a freshman in college, pursuing my B.F.A. in Musical Theatre in a competitive program. I had auditioned for the mainstage season, and my bright-eyed and bushy tailed self didn't even care if I was cast, I was just happy to be there (after all, freshmen often don't get cast.) After a week of callbacks, I found myself transported back to my 8th grade self as I anxiously awaited the cast lists, but this time I didn't have to sneak anywhere to check my email (hooray for iPhones!). At approximately 8:43 pm on a Thursday, my phone buzzed, and there it was, the cast list. Against the odds, I was cast! I was in the ensemble of *In The Red and Brown Water* by Tarell Alvin McCraney, and I understudied "Elegba," a young Creole man, a trickster, based on the Yoruba god of the same name. I was over the moon. Not only was I ready to take the next step in my theatre training and learn from the upperclassmen and creative team, I would be playing a character in a play that inspired me. To be in a show with a predominantly Black cast was something I hadn't experienced before. I saw myself in the world of this play, and I got a chance to tell the story. I was artistically fulfilled.

The next semester came around and, inevitably, another week of auditions. One of the plays we were doing that season was called *K-I-S-S-I-N-G* by Lenelle Moïse. *K-I-S-S-I-N-G* is

another show with a predominantly Black cast, a coming-of-age story that follows a group of teenagers as they discover how to maneuver struggles with socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and emotional baggage. When I checked the call back list, I found something surprising. Or, I guess what was surprising was what I didn't find: my name. At first I thought, "Oh well, I must not be right for the part," but as I read through the list, I noticed that every single Black student who was in *In The Red and Brown Water* the previous semester was called back except for me. That's when it suddenly dawned on me: the director probably didn't see me as "Black enough."

How could that be? I'm Black! Everyone knew that! Right? Well, that's not the case. The director of *In The Red and Brown Water* was a Black woman whose son is biracial, with the same complexion as mine. Of course she knows the varying shades of Black. In contrast, the director of *K-I-S-S-I-N-G* was a middle-aged White man whose reputation among the Black students is "the blackest White guy in the department." That being said, I reckon that he didn't call me back because he didn't know that I was Black or didn't see my skin color as one that would fit in the world of the play.

This kind of racial erasure continued to happen throughout my college years. Ultimately, I felt isolated. The professors whose jobs were to assign material to guide my artistic growth consistently failed me because they couldn't place my race. When I told them that I was Black, they made loaded comments suggesting that my Black wasn't convincing enough. My professors' inability to acknowledge my racial identity made it difficult to tell the stories that I needed to tell to feel artistically fulfilled. Theatre is a visual art form, but what happens to actors whose race is hard to place? Since my professors were unhelpful, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I began to research the history of Black-White biraciality in America and its relation to theatre.

Black-White Biraciality in America

One of the first Black-White biracials in recorded American history, Elizabeth Key, was born in the Virginia colony in 1655. She was the child of Thomas Key, a White Englishman and property owner, and his indentured servant, Bess. What set Elizabeth apart from many biracials of the Colonial era was that her father publicly claimed Bess as his lover and Elizabeth as his daughter. Thomas Key was fined for his interracial relations, but he continued his relationship with Bess. In order to guarantee Elizabeth's freedom, he baptized her. As tensions grew too difficult for Thomas in the Colony, he fled back to England, leaving Bess and Elizabeth indentured to Elizabeth's Godfather. Thomas arranged that after nine years, Elizabeth would be freed and would inherit the wealth that he left for her. Unfortunately, her Godfather also left for England, leaving Elizabeth to John Mottram, a wealthy tobacco farm owner, who did not uphold the agreement and kept her indentured. After Mottram's death, ten years after she was to have been freed, Elizabeth took the case to the local legislature with the argument that she should be treated as an English subject like her Father. At this time, there weren't specific laws about how

to deal with biracial offspring, because their existence was technically illegal. The legislators ruled that she indeed was free and that the Mottram estate should pay reparations for the ten years' extra time she spent in servitude. She was even granted status as an English subject and permitted to marry an Englishman (Browne-Marshall; Brent).

Elizabeth's case brought to light that legislation had not fully considered where biracial humans fit in the Virginia Colony (Banks). In 1662, the Colonial Legislature established the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which stated that the status of a child follows the mother (Banks; Billings). This shift was fueled by White supremacist desire to keep biracial children in the chattel slavery system, as most biracial offspring were the result of female slaves being raped by their master. This law led to what we now know as the "one drop rule" which locked biracial humans into slavery from the late 1600s to the end of slavery and is still an accepted understanding of racial identity today (Banks). It also created an informal caste system within the chattel slavery system and introduced varying skin tones into the Black community.

Whites created phenotypic categorizations to discern the genetic make-up of slaves: Sambo (87.5% Black, 12.5% White), Mulatto (50% Black, 50% White), Quadroon (25% Black, 75% White), Octoroon (12.5% Black, 87.5% White) (Ya Azibo). Supported by Social Darwinist thinking that the lighter one's skin, the more evolved one was, lighter skinned Blacks were able to work inside the master's house doing household tasks, while the darker you were, the more likely you were to be in the field (Harriss & Khanna).¹ By 1860, 41% of free Blacks were Mulattos, while only 10% of slaves were Mulatto, which highlights the preferential treatment that biracials received and continued to benefit from through the 19th Century (Reece) and arguably today. Although America is not considered a pigmentocracy, the obvious ties to class and skin color are undeniable in the United States.

Since the 1650s, Black-White biracials have been expected to identify with their minority race through hypodescent (Rockquemore and Brunσμα; Peery & Bodenhausen). After slavery ended, miscegenation continued to be illegal until the 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* ruled that laws banning interracial marriage were unconstitutional. Although the status of a child no longer followed the mother, because all Blacks were free, the "one drop rule" is the social construct that keeps Whites and Blacks separate today (Rockquemore & Brunσμα).

According to the Merriam-Webster definition² of biracial, however, most African Americans today are biracial, for the average African American carries about 24% European genetics (Bryc). Many Blacks argue that non-consensual racial mixing is why they personally don't identify with their White ancestry (Leverette). In the context of this paper, biracial refers to a person whose parents identify as belonging to two different races, regardless of their genetic background. Mixed race refers to a person who identifies with two or more races.

Many Black-White biracial people identify as Black, especially those of an older generation where marking more than one race on the census wasn't an option (Campion).

¹ The Water Dancer by Ta-Nehisi Coates is a great fiction book that examines this dynamic of light privilege in 18th Century America. The main character, Hiram, dreams about owning the plantation that he works on, knowing that he is property to his father.

² "of, relating to or involving members of two races"

Current studies show that the “one drop rule” has allowed biracial people to feel accepted within the Black community, contributing to the formation of a clear sense of racial and cultural belonging (Gilanshah; Khanna). Danzy Senna says in her article “The Mulatto Millennium” in the book *Half and Half*, “[y]ou told us all along that we had to call ourselves black because of this so-called one drop. Now that we don’t have to anymore, we choose to. Because Black is beautiful. Because black is not a burden, but a privilege.” The “one drop rule” has helped her find community and helped her embrace her Black heritage with pride.

Not all mixed race people embrace the “one drop rule.” The Mixed Race Movement of the 1990s was a social movement that called for legal recognition of mixed race individuals by the government. This was met with backlash from both the Black and White communities, as it challenged the sociological and legal consequences of the “one drop rule” (Gilanshah). Individuals who supported the Mixed Race Movement rejected the notion that they must assimilate to just one race or culture. In 1993, Maria P.P. Root published the “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” which states:

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

- Not to justify my existence in this world.
- Not to keep the races separate within me.
- Not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity.
- Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy.

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

- To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.
- To identify myself differently from how my parents identify me.
- To identify myself differently from my brothers and sisters.
- To identify myself differently in different situations.

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

- To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial.
- To change my identity over my lifetime -- and more than once.
- To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.
- To freely choose whom I befriend and love.

Supporters of the Mixed Race Movement argued that to be their authentic selves, they must embrace their entire identity, including their mixed racial heritage. Because of their advocacy, the 2000 Census allowed multiracial humans to check off more than one box indicating their race. This was a landmark achievement, as it recognized the growing mixed race population and validated mixed race identity.

Today, we have many biracial icons, from America's sweetheart and Black Queen Zendaya, to social activist and actor Jesse Williams, to former President of the United States Barack Obama and current Vice President of the United States Kamala Harris. There is a growing population of mixed race individuals, and we're seeing them thrive in mainstream media and politics like never before. Many of these prominent figures identify as mixed race or biracial.

Now, when I was growing up, I was raised to be Black. I grew up in a Black household. My White mother wasn't in the picture, so it was my father, my twin sister, and my brother making it through life, one day at a time. We are all artists, so it goes without saying that we never had a lot of resources. My father always says, "We're not rich with money, but we're rich with love," and he was right about that. My father taught us our history from a young age. We watched documentaries like *Eyes on the Prize*, he taught us about Emmett Till and COINTELPRO, and we watched movies that celebrated our culture, including Tyler Perry movies and plays. He taught us to be unapologetically Black, though somehow he didn't realize that the world we were walking into saw us in two ways: Black and "not that Black."

My racial identity is not dependent on how others perceive me. Jorge Luis Borges has a great poem called "Borges y Yo" that discusses who we are outside of other people's perceptions of us. I believe that we are all that we know ourselves to be, and other people's perceptions give us a chance to reflect on the multitude of identities and histories that we carry with us every day.

Growing up, I thought there were two kinds of biracials: those who were Black, and those who decided to pass for White, and nothing in between. Having studied the history of biraciality in America, it's clear to me that this is a very narrow depiction of an entire population's existence. I turned my attention to the depictions of biraciality in theatre and literature to understand why I had such a narrow understanding of biraciality.

Biraciality in American Theatre and Literature

An early piece of literature that depicts a biracial person is Langston Hughes' 1925 poem "Cross:"

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?

This poem perfectly exemplifies the Tragic Mulatto trope. A Tragic Mulatto is an underdeveloped biracial character who embodies the Marginal Man Theory (Watson; Stonequist).³ Often a Tragic Mulatto character will leave their family and pass as White in an attempt to live a “normal” or “privileged” life. This works until their racial heritage is discovered, at which point they either kill themselves or a parent, or they return home to their Black family—where White audiences thought they belonged in the first place. Langston Hughes adapted “Cross” into a full length play called *Mulatto: Tragedy of the Deep South* (Hamalian & Hatch). At the end of the play, the titular character kills his father and is chased by the townfolk; his lynching is implied.

Many writers of the 19th century wrote Tragic Mulattos in their books, plays, and films as a tool to help argue for or against slavery and racial mixing. Whatever their intentions, the Tragic Mulatto trope further perpetuates systems of oppression and marginalization of the Black community (Watson). Some famous Tragic Mulatto characters in film include Julie LaVerne in *Show Boat*, the title character in *Pinky*, Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life*, Shelly Carter in *Lost Boundaries*, Susanna Drake in *Raintree Country*, and Clio Dulaine in *Saratoga Trunk* (Breon).⁴

An early musical with a Tragic Mulatta character is *Show Boat* by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. I had learned about *Show Boat* in my History of American Musical Theatre class, but I learned a watered down summation of its plot. I was taught that it was the musical that revolutionized American musical theatre, and it was, but it's also steeped in anti-blackness, and thus its depictions of Blacks and biracials are deeply problematic.

Based on the book by Edna Ferber, *Show Boat* tells the story of a group of entertainers who work on a show boat in Natchez, Mississippi in 1887 and how their lives unfold as they try to find love while maneuvering gender roles and anti-miscegenation laws. *Show Boat* was the first “fully integrated” musical, meaning the music, lyrics, and dancing were all used to advance the plot (Totenberg). In addition, *Show Boat* was the first racially integrated musical on Broadway. The combination of plot integration and racial integration made this musical incredibly progressive for its time. *Show Boat* revolutionized the American Musical Theatre art form and created the style of theatre that is seen on Broadway today (Axtell).

An important supporting character in *Show Boat* is Julie, a White passing biracial woman. Her story line in *Show Boat* is peripheral to the central plot, but serves as the intrusion

³ Written in 1937, the Marginal Man Theory, developed by Everett Stonequist, was a psychological analysis of mixed race individuals. The Marginal Man Theory states that a mixed race individual “is poised in psychological uncertainty between two (or more) social worlds; reflecting in his soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds...” (Stonequist).

⁴ All of these roles were played by White actresses playing white-passing Black women

that sets the story in motion. At the start of the musical, Julie is the leading lady on the show boat and is married to Steve, the show's White leading man. Because of anti-miscegenation laws, their marriage is illegal, but Julie has managed to keep her racial identity hidden. In Act 1, Scene 1, there is a physical altercation between Steve and the boat's engineer, Pete, who has been making passes at Julie. This altercation ends with Pete warning of his revenge, alluding to his knowledge of Julie's racial identity. In Act 1, Scene 2, Magnolia, the main character, confesses to Julie her love for Ravenal, a gambler. Julie warns Magnolia to be careful with love, because it's difficult and uncontrollable. She sings "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," one of the most famous musical numbers in the show. Queenie, a Black woman, overhears Julie singing and asks her how she knows that song; she's never heard anyone that wasn't "coloured" sing it before.⁵ Queenie jumps in and sings, and the Black ensemble backs them up with dancing and harmony.

Shortly thereafter, in Act 1, Scene 3, Steve is notified that the Sheriff is out to arrest them for breaking anti-miscegenation laws. In an attempt to save themselves, Steve interrupts rehearsal, cuts Julie's hand with a pocket knife, and proceeds to drink some of her blood. When the Sheriff arrives, he explains that he too has Black blood in him, making their marriage legal. All of the performers back them up, and they avoid the legal charges. Unfortunately, they are now unable to perform for White audiences and have to leave the boat and find other work. Fast forward to 1903, sixteen years after Julie left Mississippi with Steve, and Ravenal and Magnolia move to Chicago with their daughter Kim. Ravenal abandons Magnolia and Kim because he can no longer provide for them, so a devastated Magnolia goes looking for work. She finds a nightclub called the Trocadero. Unbeknownst to her, Julie, now a heavy drinker, sings there. Magnolia auditions with "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man." When Julie hears Magnolia singing the song she taught her, she quits her job to guarantee that Magnolia is hired. This is the end of Julie's story line in the musical.

Julie perfectly fits the definition of a Tragic Mulatta. For starters, her character is underdeveloped; her entire purpose is to support the White protagonist, Magnolia. This is seen at the beginning of the musical when Julie almost has her identity exposed by singing "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" to Magnolia. The very real threat of her racial exposure doesn't seem threaded into her actions in the show; otherwise she wouldn't dare sing 'dat' song. She only seems worried when Queenie says, "...ah didn't ever hear anybody but coloured folks sing dat song. Sounds funny for Miss Julie to know it---." In the simplest of terms, Julie should've known better. It works out great for Magnolia; after Julie's identity is exposed and the Sheriff forces her to leave Natchez, Magnolia is given Julie's position as leading lady.

If Magnolia had taken Julie's advice in Act 1, Scene 2 and stayed away from Ravenal, Magnolia might not have ended up a single mother in search of a job in Chicago, which ultimately would have left Julie employed. However, Julie sacrifices herself again in Act 2 by quitting her job so Magnolia can take it. When Julie overhears Magnolia's audition at the Trocadero and decides to leave, Magnolia doesn't even know of her presence or sacrifice.

⁵ Interesting to note that this moment was included in the original Broadway production, but was taken out in the 1951 MGM film.

It is never explained why Julie helps Magnolia, nor does Julie explain why she left her home and decided to pass as White. It is left for audiences to assume that being Black was so hard and traumatic that cutting all ties to her family was worth the privileges that living a White life had to offer.

Similarly, the dramatic shift we see in Julie from Act 1 to Act 2 is rooted in anti-Blackness. In Act 1, we see Julie to be healthy, beautiful, and talented. She's so beautiful that she's pursued by other suitors, despite being married to Steve. She is an upstanding citizen, and all her castmates love her and are willing to cover for her when the sheriff comes around. This all shifts when in Act 2, Scene 3, Julie is described in the script as:

This is Julie -- a hollow-cheeked woman -- looking older than she really is -- with all the earmarks of one who is down and out -- marks which she has desperately and pathetically tried to hide by over dressing, by making use of too many odds and ends of finery, and by a too anxious application of rouge and lip-stick. She sits there, oblivious to all that is going on around her. From time to time she opens her hand-bag and takes out a flask -- typical of the bottled goods of the time -- and furtively takes a drink.

This drastic shift in Julie comes after her racial identity is revealed, implying that her life as a Black woman has led her husband to leave her and caused her to develop an alcohol addiction.

Ultimately, Julie is torn between two communities, the White community that is depicted onstage and the Black community that remains offstage, unseen by the audience. We see throughout the show her ostracization from White communities. We see it when she loses her job because she's Black. We see it when her husband leaves her. And, we see it when she gives her job up to Magnolia. Her narrative fits the Tragic Mulatta trope and feeds into a White exceptionalist narrative.

Although it's been over ninety years since Kern and Hammerstein II wrote *Show Boat*, their depiction of racial homelessness is still existent in theatre today. In *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris, we see a modern tale of a Tragic Mulatto. *Slave Play* takes place in the present day and follows three interracial couples as they participate in "Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy" in order to unpack repressed biases and traumas related to race and sex. *Slave Play* opened on Broadway at the Golden Theatre on October 6th, 2019 and ran for a 17-week limited run, closing on January 19th, 2020.

In *Slave Play*, Phillip is a biracial man who is dating Alana, a White woman. We meet Phillip in Act 1 during the couples "fantasy play," where the characters are role-playing specific chattel slavery sex scenarios. The audience doesn't immediately know that they are in sex therapy; the action is played out as if the play takes place during slavery-era America. Phillip and Alana are playing out a scenario where Phillip is a reserved, mulatto house slave, and Alana, the Mistress of the house, has called him in to play violin for her. Phillip starts to play, but Alana doesn't want to hear Beethoven, she wants to hear "some of that Negro music," so Phillip

bizarrely starts playing “Pony” by Ginuwine. This moves Alana to strip into her lingerie and start dancing. Things progress, and she throws Phillip onto the bed, pulls out a long, black dildo, and proceeds to use it on him.

In Act 2, we see the three couples sitting in a circle attending group therapy and discussing the details of the sexual scenarios that we witnessed in Act 1. This is where we see the characters’ real personalities trying to overcome their sexual and race-related traumas outside of their role-playing situations. Phillip is still quite reserved and allows Alana to do much of the talking for him until the group leaders suggest that racial trauma is the reason he suffers from anhedonia⁶ and struggles to maintain an erection.

Phillip in many ways fulfills the Tragic Mulatto trope, as seen through his sense of racial unbelonging. In response to the group leaders, Phillip tries to convince the group therapy members that he has a healthy self-image and that he has transcended race. He says, “I feel like / people have to will me black / for me to be black / otherwise / I’m just a sort of / like / just a hot guy who’s not exactly black / or white.” He says, “I’m not black / I’m not white / I’m just Phillip. And Phillip’s like this / superhuman dude / who’s beyond, / like, / black and white. / You know?... I have no memories / of being traumatized / more than like ... / ... some of the other people here?” His self-evaluation is clearly a delusion, as evidenced by the racially traumatic events he shares with the group. He recounts a story from his freshman year of college. While showering in the locker rooms, a teammate said, “Look at donkey dick over there, I always forget Phillip’s a nigger until I see that thing swinging because he definitely doesn’t play soccer like a nigger.” Another teammate in Phillip’s defense replied, “Phillip’s not a nigger, Phillip’s Phillip.” In the locker room, Phillip experiences racism and racial invalidation at the same time. Existing “beyond” race is a survival technique he employs to maneuver White, racist environments. By creating a transcendent racial identity he removes himself from his racial trauma.

The issues in Phillip’s relationship with Alana are more evidence that he experiences racial trauma and doesn’t transcend race. We learn that Phillip and Alana met on FetLife, an app like Tinder for people with fetishes. Alana’s ex-husband was aroused by cucking,⁷ and they brought Phillip in as a third to fulfill this fetish. Phillip and Alana’s entire relationship is built on his insecure racial identity and the validation he receives through Alana’s fetishization of his blackness. He says, “maybe my dick only works / when I know I’m black.” Although Phillip grows to understand that his relationship with Alana is built on his racial insecurity and her fetishization, Phillip doesn’t grow comfortable and confident in his racial identity.

In the character description, Phillip is described as “a mulatto who still has to learn his color.” This is in contrast to the character Teá, who Harris, the playwright, describes as, “a mulatto who is studied in her black and her white.” Teá, in response to Phillip’s monologue, identifies herself as a “fair-skinned Black woman” who understands “reticence about owning

⁶ Anhedonia is a psychological condition characterized by an inability to experience pleasure in normally pleasurable acts.

⁷ Cucking is a sexual fetish where a White man gets sexual pleasure through watching his wife have sexual intercourse with a Black man.

your traumas.” Teá is one of the founders and facilitators of the Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy that the group is undergoing. The goal of the therapy is to work through Black racial traumas within interracial couples. By validating Phillip’s place within the group, she implies that he should see himself as Black and traumatized.

In writing these two mulatto characters—Teá, who identifies as Black, and Phillip, who struggles to—Harris is saying that biracials belong within the Black community and that the biracial identity dilemma can be resolved through the acceptance of one’s blackness. Tragically, by the end of the play, Phillip has not “learned his color.”

Show Boat and *Slave Play* are just two of many examples of plays that use the Tragic Mulatto trope. Through my analysis of these plays, I had gained an understanding of the ways in which the trope has been used throughout the past one hundred years.

Biracials have been used as a tool to fight for equality, and it may be this idea that continues to move writers to use the Tragic Mulatto trope. In his thesis, “Here, There, and In Between: Travel As Metaphor In Mixed Race Narratives of the Harlem Renaissance,” Colin Enriquez talks about narratives that use mixed race characters to question race relations and challenge social expectations:

In interracial narratives, such instability typically drives the plot until the character is sacrificed for the sake of concluding the story; while the “mulatto” lives, the center of the hegemonic race narrative cannot hold. If readers do not stop to consider the character’s actions as individual choices—and take into account the ways that rendering such choices hinders or aids mixed race representation as a distinct and viable perspective—the richness and slippage of the character is undermined. The sacrifice of the character is only tragic if we ignore the full arc of the character and the shifting environmental circumstances (Enriquez).

In other words, the trope is a narrative device rather than a depiction of a lived experience. The lack of honest depictions of biracials can be seen as a form of racial invalidation, a common experience for biracials.

Racial Invalidation and the Experiences of Biracial Actors

Racial invalidation occurs when someone’s racial identity is misidentified or rejected due to biased perceptions of race, class, and cultural markers (Franco and O’Brien; Franco et al; Harriss & Khanna; Peery & Bodenhausen). Unlike monoracial people, multiracial people often desire external validation of their racial identity (Khanna; Remedios & Chasteen). Racial invalidation can cause significant psychological effects such as cultural/racial homelessness, poor self-esteem, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation and attempts (Franco and O’Brien; Franco, et al.).

Depending on how closely a biracial's physical characteristics and outward expressions of culture (i.e., clothing style, hair style, music tastes, speech patterns, etc.) align with a perceived race, biracials will experience different levels of acceptance by their parent communities (Smith & Moore; Franco & O'Brien). Often Black-White biracials will be mistaken for members of the Latine community (Franco & O'Brien). Personally, because of my racial ambiguity, I often get asked the infamous question, "What are you?" When I respond that I am Black, I'm met with, "Oh, I thought you were Puerto Rican or something" (I get Puerto Rican a lot).

For example, in the summer before my Junior year of college, I was cast as "Carlos" in a summer stock production of *Legally Blonde the Musical*. Carlos is a deus-ex-machina character who saves the day by outing the pool boy at the end of Act 2. When I got my contract, I was immediately uncomfortable. I had worked at this theatre the summer prior, and the artistic director knew that I was a light-skinned Black, not Spanish. Why did he cast me? I emailed him that I was uncomfortable with the casting choice and that someone who belongs to the Latine community should be cast instead of me. 48 hours later, he responded that he had consulted with the Board of the theatre company (an entirely White board, might I add) and they thought that morally it was okay for me to play this role: the script doesn't specify the ethnicity of the character. What they morally justified gave me a moral dilemma: should take the role and gain the professional theater credit, or pass it up because the role was not meant for me? In the end, I accepted the role, and the two characters implied to be Latino were played by Black actors in that production.

Khanisha Foster writes about a very similar experience in her one-woman play *Joy Rebel*. Foster is a biracial actor, writer, director and educator who works as an adjunct professor at USC School of Dramatic Arts. After years of struggling to find work as a Black-biracial actor, she wrote *Joy Rebel*, a full-length theatrical piece that explores her life as a biracial human and the obstacles she faces in theatre, film, and her personal life.

Foster talks about how being a biracial actor is difficult because she's often misidentified as Latina. When she turned 21, she got a meeting with a well-known African American agent, an opportunity which could have led to her big break. In their first meeting, the agent told her that the industry is looking for comedic Latina actors. Khanisha, taken aback, told the agent that she in fact is biracial with no Latina heritage whatsoever. The agent replied, "You're not believable as Black... [n]o one is going to see you as Black... [f]rom now on you're Latina." Even though Khanisha knew that she was taking roles from Latina actors, she played many Latina characters over the following few years. This kind of racial invalidation is commonplace for biracial actors. Foster wrote a one-woman play to tell her story because she knew that no one else would.

Khanisha's agent was probably right about how the industry was going to view her. Theatre is a visual artform, and most of the people on theatrical creative teams are White and have a narrow perception of what the Black community truly looks like. This miseducation leaves biracial actors to be exoticized or to play an entirely different race or ethnicity than that with which they identify. White creative teams are less likely to identify racially ambiguous

actors as members of the Black community, often taking them out of consideration for roles that they could play.

Heathcliff Saunders, a biracial musical theatre actor, has a similar story. In his *Medium* opinion piece “What I Think When I Hear That Broadway Is Racist,” he explains that the nuances and societal implications of his biraciality and light skin are not acknowledged in the industry. An example is his discomfort with being cast as Seaweed in a production of *Hairspray* where of the entire Black ensemble, he was the lightest. Seaweed sings, “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.” When he brought to the director’s attention that his skin color didn’t match the story he was telling, his director responded, “Well, you’re Black aren’t you?” (Does this story ring any bells? Hint: I pity the fool.) This response erases half of his identity, while simultaneously disregarding the inherent differences between darker and lighter-skinned Blacks.

Racial ambiguity is often exoticized in performance industries. In the *BACKSTAGE* article, “Ethnic Ambiguity: More Roles, But Still a Mixed Bag,” posted in 2004, multiple actors talk about their experiences of being racially ambiguous in the theatre, film, and modeling industries. A black-white biracial interviewee, Joanna Hartshorne, explains that her racial ambiguity has been an asset in her career. She states, “I don't like labels. But being ethnically ambiguous has helped me. I certainly get a lot of calls, so I've come to accept terms like 'ethnically ambiguous.' I sometimes think the term means almost anything other than all white." She goes on to acknowledge that she, like Foster, was often called in for Latina roles. For over a year, she played a character who was half-Brazilian on the TV show *As The World Turns*.

Biracial actors of various racial mixtures experience this same dilemma. In her article, “Is Being ‘Ethnically Ambiguous’ Really An Advantage?” Tess Nakaishi worries about casting directors seeing her as too Asian for White roles and too White for Asian roles, even though she is equally both. Many of her peers, directors and professors have told her that her ethnic ambiguity can be a tool for her to land roles. Nakaishi struggles with whether or not to capitalize on her ambiguity and audition for roles whose race is specified as one with which she does not identify just so she can get a foot in the door.

Biracial actors experience many forms of racial invalidation at the casting call, in the rehearsal room, on the stage, and in the audience. This is not unique to my undergraduate theatre studies. This is a problem that exists in every crevice of the theatre industry.

How Do We Fix It?

A multitude of identities and histories is what America is all about, and theater at its best reflects the nuances of this melting pot. But the complicated history of biracials in America is not reflected in the mainstream theatrical canon. There is a profound lack of theatrical literature on this experience, and the literature that does exist often relies on the invidious Tragic Mulatto trope.

In order to combat this, we need more stories to be told. There simply aren’t enough stories getting produced that share intersectional experiences. Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago

has an online resource for theatre professionals called *The Mix* that focuses on advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion work by honoring intersectional stories. There are hundreds of plays in their database, but only 3.5% of the characters are mixed race. How can it be that the mixed race population is the fastest growing population in America and yet they only make up 3.5% of the characters in a database of plays that tell intersectional stories? This is unacceptable.

In addition, theater makers need to learn that races are not monolithic and cast accordingly. Biracials are not a new invention, we've been around as long as anybody else, and we have our own histories and stories that deserve to be told. As W.E.B. Du Bois says, "It must be remembered that even at present racial types are not static but are growing and developing entities." Du Bois is right. Through my research, I have learned how biracials have changed from free people to slaves and from Black to White to Black-and-White, and all the places in between. So when Broadway shows are casting all light-skinned or all dark-skinned actors, they are actively neglecting and erasing the nuances of our histories. We need shows that celebrate our diverse bodies and tell our stories honestly.

Recently, I was in a conference with Broadway for Racial Justice, and a group of us were talking about race in the theatre industry. A question was posed: Can you name a play or musical where you felt seen and represented? I looked around at the six other people in the Zoom room (one Asian, two Black-White biracials, one Latino, and two Black), and none of us felt like we were authentically represented in the theatre produced on Broadway. If that's not a sign that the stories on Broadway need to have a more diverse representation of BIPOC lives, I don't know what is.

Conservatory programs should be teaching us how to be artists, but at the present moment, they teach students techniques to fulfill the same tropes that have been in use since *Show Boat*. We don't need any more Tragic Mulattos, Mammys, or Jezebels. Broadway is a machine that keeps pumping out the same stories, told the same way, and people are sick and tired of the constant exploitation of Black bodies and Black trauma on stage and off. It's time to decenter whiteness on the American stage so that everyone's stories can be told, including intersectional ones that challenge current systems of oppression.

Biracials are so much more than the tragic figures that they've been painted to be. They are just as dynamically human as any other human, with flaws, gifts, futures, and histories. There are so many stories that have yet to be told, and many of them exist within the intersectionalities of race, gender, culture, class, sexual orientation, and more. Theatre is a vehicle of social change that has the potential to transform society, but until theatre can recognize all of the intersections of humanity, the only stories that will be told are ones that are steeped in white supremacy and preconceived hierarchies of oppression. There is no singular history, so why should there be a singular story about race that gets to be told?

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