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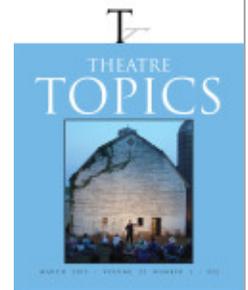
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Teaching *A Day of Absence* “at [your] own risk”

Brandi Wilkins Catanese

When I was an undergraduate during the early 1990s, I vividly remember absorbing the post-modern language of race and gender as social constructs. This vocabulary offered me the tools, as an African American woman, to respond to some of the “colored contradictions” of my own experience and my interpretation of the world around me by pinpointing the historically specific means through which identity categories are produced, articulated, and enforced at the social level. In conversations with friends, classmates, and acquaintances, a well-timed and -placed “but race/gender is a social construct” offered a refreshing reprieve from the politics of authenticity, and instead served as a call to deeper contemplation of the ways in which we felt compelled to fashion ourselves into a (or maintain the fiction of some a priori) community. However, sometime between my undergraduate education and the present, another word has crept into the middle of this valuable phrase when some students use it in academic and casual conversation: “just”—as in, race is *just* a social construct. And with the incursion of this word, the opportunities for critical contemplation that the contingencies of race seemed to suggest, even demand, have been replaced with a permission simply to disengage from conversations about race at all.

In this essay, I would like to share an example from my own teaching of how race as “just” a social construct has encroached upon my classrooms and departmental communities. When I teach a course on contemporary African American drama, which begins with Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and ends with hip-hop theatre, I aim to generate conversations about how racial meaning is produced in and through performance, rather than simply by words on the page. One of my strategies is to try localizing the theatrical possibilities of the texts we read. Again and again, I ask my students (most of whom identify as performance practitioners of some sort) whether they could (or would want to) imagine a given text performed on campus within our Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies. What would it mean to go into one of our actual theatre spaces to rehearse and perform this play, or to watch one’s peers do so? Rather than asking them to think generally about what a production of a play we are studying might look like, I find that asking them to map a text onto the embodied spatial and cultural dynamics of our particular institution gets them to think more critically about what the meaning and cultural significance of the plays we read might be. For at least some of my students, this exercise is clarifying; for others, it produces the uncomfortable realization that the liberatory, utopic possibilities of performance do not find a home in every theatre with every play.

Douglas Turner Ward’s *A Day of Absence* is precisely the sort of play for which this question—Under what circumstances could we do this play here and now?—becomes essential: both the content of the play and the possibilities for its performance demand that audiences and production participants think about the absurdity of how race has been constructed throughout American history. First produced in 1965, the play is a reverse minstrel show that criticizes the simultaneous ubiquity and absence of blacks from the national imaginary. Even though America has long been framed (rhetorically and politically) as a white nation—a move that renders people of color discursively invisible—black people in particular are necessarily invoked as the “not-me” that lends coherence to this racially exclusive framework. In other words, the active disavowal of blackness and its value is a constitutive element of American whiteness and therefore of America. Ward scripts *Absence* as an

ironic play on this racialization of our national identity.¹ It emerges from a simple, fantastical premise: the titular absence is that of a town's entire black population for a day. The chaos that ensues belies the standard racist claim that America would be better off without its black citizens, and instead reveals their centrality to all notions of order that structure American life. Ward's critique registered most clearly at the time of its debut by spotlighting the service sector through which black labor literally animated Southern American society. Over four decades later, the racialization of domestic labor politics has shifted,² and yet black labor continues to play a prominent role in US culture: whereas blacks once worked to create the material conditions for white leisure, blacks now work to provide its soundtracks and televisual backdrops. Teaching this play in the twenty-first century offers the opportunity to think about the persistence as well as the evolution of the power dynamics against which Ward wrote and about the text's enduring viability in performance, not just as dramatic literature. In the remainder of this essay, I want to consider two distinct though convergent issues that this play—especially as a text on university campuses—raises: first, the theatrical and pedagogical implications of our American popular cultural turn to race as “just” a social construct that needn't be taken very seriously, and second, the ethical and political contexts of the work we do in educational theatre.

The Dismissive Turn

How does one teach the intersections of race and performance in the San Francisco Bay Area, specifically at UC Berkeley, a place whose supposed progressive pedigree (as, among other things, the home of the Free Speech Movement) is so overdetermined as to risk foreclosing the possibility of rigorous and expansive conversations about how discourses of race and performance intersect? This question becomes even more complicated when the opportunity for knee-jerk liberalism confronts what I shall refer to as the “dismissive turn,” an interpretive move away from race because it is “just” a social construct. One can passively concede that Ward was correct to condemn racist Southern culture in the 1960s without engaging in deep analysis of the systems through which this racism was maintained. In the case of *A Day of Absence*, the dismissive turn is profoundly antithetical to the argument of the play: both its content and the possibilities for its theatrical realization rail against the multifaceted un-“just”-ness of the conditions of performance and performativity that blacks endured in this country, both as a legally enslaved and subsequently disenfranchised people and as anathema to national identity. In other words, the way that blackness is constructed—through the labor blacks perform and through the naturalization of certain social roles that legitimized inequality—is neither of little consequence nor morally just. Consequently, Ward's recruitment of minstrelsy and its sociohistorical baggage is devastatingly clever: whereas blackface minstrelsy relied most often on the absence of blacks to provide whites with the opportunity to define blackness for their own social and political purposes,³ the use of whiteface in *A Day of Absence* allows Ward to define and criticize whiteness, and the crisis induced by the supposed absence of blacks—when combined with the actual presence of their performing bodies under the white greasepaint—theatrically demonstrates the impossibility of imagining or representing American whiteness outside of some relationship to blackness.⁴

One could almost teach *Absence* by focusing on the preliminary stage directions alone. Ward first indicates, “The time is now. Play opens in an unnamed Southern town of medium population.”⁵ This simultaneous specificity (now) and generality (unnamed town) seem to invite all readers and audiences to recognize the racial machinations of their own communities in this fictive space. Or do they? In order for this invitation to endure, time must trump space. The possibility that Ward's “now” extends from the 1960s into the twenty-first century must supercede the cultural baggage that fixes the Southern United States and its racial politics as part of some past that we, as a country, have overcome. Most of my UC Berkeley students subscribe to this latter view and feel themselves to be millions of miles from the South, past or present. In reading this play, they might align themselves with the New Yorkers who comprised the audience for its premiere, at a comfortable spatial (and

therefore ethical) remove from the world Ward has created. *Absence* could become a play that is “just” about the South, and indeed, for some of my students, this is a different dismissive turn that denudes Ward’s racial critique of its vigor and relevance to their experience of American society.

After locating the play in (every) time and (almost any) space, Ward turns his attention to the embodied realities of production. He requests a minimally materialized theatrical world devoid of set pieces and all but the most essential of props. The absence of these visual and material elements serves several connected purposes: it prevents the story from being attached too closely to any one sociohistorical location; this, in turn, invites, allows, and requires audiences to flesh out this theatrical world for themselves, supplying referents from their own sociohistorically contingent imaginaries; and finally, this minimalism allows his desired actorly conceit to feature most prominently in the production’s visual register. Ward writes: “Play is conceived for performance by a Negro cast, a reverse minstrel show done in whiteface.”⁶ It is important to note that Ward actually cites two distinct performance precedents: I have already indicated some of the utility of repeating and revising the tropes of minstrelsy, but whiteface has its own broader history. Marvin McAllister writes about the complicated, polyvalent significations of black actors in whiteface (paint); most basically, he defines whiteface minstrelsy as “blacks performing white privilege,” an “extratheatrical social performance in which people of African descent assume ‘white-identified’ gestures, dialects, physiognomy, dress, or social entitlements,” a form “that not only masters but critiques constructed versions of whiteness.”⁷ Connected to racial passing though not exclusively requiring epidermal subterfuge, whiteface minstrelsy subjects the orchestrations of race-based privilege to intense scrutiny in the effort to master the formal properties by which one demonstrates membership in the dominant culture in order to reap its benefits.

McAllister goes on to define the “stage European” as a “theatrical cousin to minstrelsy,” involving “black actors performing whiteness through white characters.”⁸ Actors in Ward’s play should be understood as self-consciously doing both: the performance of white privilege comes from the black performing body presuming to use theatrical space to define and indict a racial Other, while the stage Europeans are the named characters in the play. Ward understands this duality when he “urge[s]” black actors “to go for broke, yet caution[s them] not to ham it up too broadly. In fact—it just might be more effective if they aspire for serious tragedy.”⁹ In this way, Ward aspires to reveal race as an unjust social construct that negatively affects both blacks and whites. The absurdity of white dependence on black labor reveals itself through the tragic shock that the disappearance of that labor produces. However, it cannot be said that Ward doesn’t have a sense of humor about his message: lest his desired casting protocols be read as invidious reverse discrimination, he concedes: “Logically, [the play] might also be performed by whites—at their own risk,” and indicates that following such a decision, the “[o]nly qualification needed for Caucasian casting is that the company fit a uniform pattern—insipid white; also played in whiteface.”¹⁰ With these instructions, Ward makes clear that the de-naturalizations of theatrical and social whiteness are essential to the play’s meaning. Even white performing bodies must give up their unmarked status and be made strange.

After laying out these performance principles, Ward scripts a fast-paced “satirical fantasy.” Taking the black community’s absence as the play’s animating event enables Ward to depict a host of ruptures in the fabric of the virulently racist, segregated South: white families disintegrate (in one instance because the mammy’s absence reveals a couple’s inability and disinterest in taking care of their own child), civic life grinds to a halt (because the lack of “nonessential” workers turns the offices and factories into ghost towns), and, most importantly, the ranks of several prominent (white) families and political and social institutions (including city hall and a local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution) are thinned as many racially impure people are outed by their disappearance. Each of these categories of absence contributes something to Ward’s meta-critique of American racial politics: even the intimate social unit that is supposed to produce and protect whiteness as racial difference (i.e., the mono-racial nuclear family) cannot function without black assistance; furthermore, claims of blacks’ laziness and of their failure to make any worthwhile contributions to

American society can only result from a stubborn insistence on ignoring blacks' integral presence in the cultural, domestic, and economic infrastructures of society; and finally, the "infiltration" of blacks into elite family structures and institutions reveals the permeability of supposedly natural and secure racial distinctions and the impurity of whiteness as a racial category even within efforts to isolate it as a category of privilege and power.

The last time I taught Ward's play, my asking "Could we produce *A Day of Absence* on the Berkeley campus today?" elicited one of my most surprising responses to this question. I expected students to express more concerns about the time than about the place of twenty-first-century UC Berkeley, to express sentiments similar to the stinging criticism Alvin Klein published in the *New York Times* back in 1993, calling *Absence* "a 1965 play direly in need of an excuse in 1993."¹¹ Instead, when a student answered that we couldn't do the show on the campus today, he said it was because he didn't think we could cast it: in his mind, a white cast in whiteface was untenable—in spite of Ward's permission. "Oh," I replied, "so you don't think there would be enough black actors willing to perform this piece today?" (What *not* to do when teaching African American drama: presume to know what your students are thinking because they are thinking as you do.) "Not exactly," he said. "I don't think we could find enough *talented* black actors to be in it." Because he did not see many black actors perform in our departmental productions, he assumed that, on a campus of tens of thousands, there weren't so many as eight black actors with the skill (and interest and availability) to pull this show off. Little did I know that one of his peers would seem to prove him right a mere ten weeks later.

Localizing Pedagogy

"Collateral damage"; "ancillary spectators." These are the phrases I wrote in the little notebook I kept in my purse while I sat in the theatre waiting for the second half of the director's workshop—an annual spring event in which students enrolled in our second-semester directing course present twenty-minute showings, usually of selected scenes from a preexisting play—to begin. More questions than declarations, these phrases were reminders to myself of some issues I wanted to reflect upon when this experience was over. I had remained in my seat during intermission, reading a book, when suddenly I noticed a person enter the theatre through the doors to my right, survey the room, and take a seat in the audience. He was a barefoot young white man wearing what were meant to read as KKK robes and headgear. Seeing him shocked me, and as (I believe) the only black person in the theatre, I wondered what reaction other audience members would have to his presence.

I had already known that I would be seeing a performance of *A Day of Absence*, done by white actors in whiteface, at this workshop presentation, so this was not the surprise; instead, I was responding to the implicit racialization of the spectatorial community that this directorial choice effected. A director's decision to break the fourth wall in performance always has interpellative force: rather than maintaining the fiction of audience members as passive observers, this rupture activates—or imposes—the particularities of a given audience upon the production. This may manifest in terms of racial or gender identification or political sympathies, for example, but it always recruits certain sensibilities into the logic of the production. In this instance, the broken fourth wall seems to have presumed and required a normatively white audience. The ability to send someone in KKK regalia *into the audience* to sit, undisturbing and undisturbed, relied for its success upon:

- An audience with no visceral relationship to the Klan's brand of terrorism. (Would anyone whose personal experience controverted this assumption simply be collateral damage?)
- The phenomenon of a "Berkeley exceptionalism" that would defuse the threat of this representation. Audiences were meant to feel safe in the knowledge that in Berkeley in 2006, the Klan could not possibly exist (at least not in such audacious fashion), which would allow the artifice of this man's presence immediately to be clear, and further, that the regional and

temporal distance from the Klan’s heyday implied a critical distance that would produce an ironic, critical consciousness toward the show.

- The lack of any critical mass of black spectators, because, really, how would a theatre full of black people respond to the presence of the KKK, even in Berkeley in 2006? (Did such an assumption render me an ancillary spectator if I were unwilling or unable to view my race as *just* a social construct that should be compartmentalized?)

The director presented select scenes from Ward’s play, and while he did use white actors in whiteface, he also materialized the literal absence of black people from the production, at times using recorded dialogue on an empty stage in blackout (rather than white bodies onstage), with a spotlight searching the audience for the missing blacks. During these moments, I sat in the theatre frozen with dread, waiting for the spotlight to rest upon me, to disrupt my anonymity and expose me as a nonnormative spectator. Fortunately, this exposure never occurred. My greatest surprise, though, was that in this time and place, the play wasn’t as funny as I expected it to be.

My prior knowledge of this production came from both my colleague who teaches the directing course and from a former student of mine who was friends with the student-director. A young African American woman who identified as an actor, she e-mailed me “in outrage!” when she learned of the white, male director’s plans. In particular, she noted the unintended irony of the absence of black actors: whereas the play tried to suggest the folly of believing that blacks were “inessential” to the workings of local and national social systems, this all-white production seemed to prove it true: we don’t even need black people to stage this critique of anti-black racism! While this certainly was not the director’s intent, when the young woman asked why he wasn’t casting black actors, he reportedly offered the following responses: 1) he believed that the inversion of performance conventions could actually add to the critique that the piece offered by demonstrating its lasting relevance, even after the victories of the civil rights movement ostensibly affirmed the legitimate presence of blacks within US society and culture; 2) given the pressures of the semester, there was not sufficient time to search outside of the department for black students who might be interested in being involved in the project; and 3) given that race was just a social construction anyway, what did classifying actors as “white” or “black” really mean?¹²

To be fair, the director did not try to gloss over his casting choices; instead, he attempted to politicize them with his program notes, which quoted both Douglas Turner Ward’s casting directions and the language of another Ward—Ward Connerly’s Proposition 209—but because these quotes were juxtaposed without prejudicial (or contextualizing) commentary, audience members were free to interpret them as they wished: Was the inclusion of these two pieces of information an effort to impose colorblindness on the audience, to point out the continuities between the national disavowal of blackness that *Absence* stages and the disavowal of blackness that Proposition 209 had mandated within the University of California system, or to suggest 209 as the intertext for this performance’s criticism of the absence of blackness not just from national and statewide conversation, but also from the UC Berkeley student population itself (thereby justifying the inevitability of the director’s casting choices)?

For those readers outside of California who may not be familiar with this history, in November 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209, which banned the use of racial preferences in all selection processes (e.g., hiring, admissions) in the public sector. The University of California system was one site of strenuous protest against this proposition, fearing that its passage would severely hamper its ability to create a diverse student body. Indeed, in a post-209 environment, UC Berkeley, for example, has seen its African American student enrollment decline precipitously. The incoming freshman class of 1997 was the last one admitted before 209 was enacted; it included 257 black students, comprising 7.19 percent of the freshman cohort of 3,573. The following year, black freshman enrollment dropped to 126 (3.37 percent), and in fall 2007 stood at 136 out of 4,225 (3.22 percent).¹³ Race may not be a biological fact, but it is still accurate to describe blackness as a category of exclusion from sites of privilege. Post-209 UC Berkeley both provides a data point with

which to refute efforts to frame race in dismissive terms, thereby proving the continued relevance of Douglas Turner Ward's structural critique, and it also forms the ethical context to which we must attend when introducing material that highlights and condemns the ways in which America's fundamental racial binary has been produced.

In order to conclude my reflections on this abbreviated production of *A Day of Absence*, I must also disclose that the director was a former student of mine. In fact, his first exposure to Ward's play came in my class in a previous semester, in which I posed the question of whether the play could succeed in our department—and on the campus in a broader sense. One student returned the question to me, curious to know my answer, because I had confessed my own desire to perform in the play (how I would love to be Mary!), and I said that regrettably, I didn't think it could be done on the campus in the current racial climate in which students of color already feel simultaneously invisible and subject to a pernicious surveillance that questions the legitimacy of their presence on campus. I feared that the astringency of the satire might end up generating hostility toward black students for making a criticism that seemed to rely upon mocking white people (as beneficiaries of white privilege) rather than correctly generating hostility toward the unjust circumstances that white privilege had produced.

Upon learning of the director's plans, I had conversations with my colleague who was his directing instructor for the semester, and we encouraged the student to anticipate some of the reactions that his presentation might elicit. One concern I expressed was precisely the opposite of the one I articulated in saying that black actors couldn't productively undertake this show on campus: the director was taking "[his] own risk" that white actors in whiteface might end up simply staging a "post-racial" return to blackface minstrelsy, mocking black people's efforts to criticize white society rather than inhabiting the criticism of white society itself. Ventriloquizing Ward's critique with white performing bodies, even if a sense of race's social construction seemed to make a place for white people within racial discourse that they might not otherwise have earned, came with responsibilities to think very carefully about how he defined the "success" toward which he aspired with his production. As his instructor, my colleague tried to keep the director's attention focused on how the politics of reception would have to influence his creative work: not by dictating certain representational strategies over others, but by reminding him of the active role the audience plays in constructing the meaning of a given production, even from their seats in the house.

Ultimately, what this production revealed to me is that the framework of educational theater is deeply beholden to a locational politics that structures meaning. Locating this performance within the Bay Area isn't enough, locating it on the Berkeley campus isn't even enough. The cultural politics of our own theatre department, in which black students are at least as underrepresented as they are on the campus as a whole, offers the most immediate context within which Ward's text as pedagogical opportunity must be read. More specifically, this experience exposes the important differences between "teaching African American drama" and "teaching African American (drama in and as) performance." This is a distinction that my departmental colleagues and I grapple with constantly as we try to view our curriculum holistically. It is a relatively easy matter to "diversify" our syllabi in lecture or seminar courses to ensure that we expose our students to playwrights and theorists from a variety of aesthetic, cultural, and racial traditions. Taking a social-constructionist approach to race works wonderfully well in primarily sedentary classrooms where words on paper are the tools to which we first turn in our efforts to unearth the meanings performance can generate. Somewhat tautologically, classroom discourse handily explains the discursive formation of race. Even as we hold in mind the fact that these texts are intended as instructions for theatrical undertakings rather than as purely literary endeavors, there are limits to our ability to engage plays three-dimensionally when they appear in courses that are intended primarily to develop and evaluate students' skills as critical thinkers and writers. I make this claim while also wanting to heed E. Patrick Johnson's insightful argument in the concluding chapter of *Appropriating Blackness*, in which he discusses the utility of embodied performance in the study of African American literature, through which

literature [is] exposed as an ideological construction of racial boundaries (both those seen as constructed and those experienced as real) [and] the body also becomes a site of discursive signifying practices that simultaneously dismantles hegemonic notions of race, class, gender, and sexual identity and exposes the constructed nature of such demarcations.¹⁴

Johnson himself recognizes that what he advocates is a strategy that serves as a complement to other pedagogical practices in the literature-based classroom. The aims and challenges attendant to teaching African American (dramatic) literature in a studio classroom or a production are entirely different. Diversification of syllabi and classroom experiences often seems to rely upon the presence of students and/or instructors of color who authorize embodied engagement with performance texts. Put simply, a white instructor could teach a classroom full of white students a very productive course on African American theatre history, but a white instructor leading a classroom full of white students through an acting class focused on black performance styles would be subject to scrutiny that belies our supposed dismissive turn away from race as just a social construct that no longer warrants our attention. Instead, it reveals a different dismissive turn that views what we do on college campuses as “just” educational theatre. This dismissive turn sometimes exploits the constraints of educational theatre (our responsibility to provide training and performance opportunities to as many of our students as possible regardless of race, gender, physical ability, attractiveness, and so on) in order to avoid questioning how (and to whom) we are accountable for the work we do. We focus upon answering to our students as consumers of our product (an education in a major with a practicum component) rather than as cultural readers.

So often, we think of educational theatre as a site of almost limitless opportunity: freed from the commercial pressures that structure much professional theatre (determining everything from what gets produced to who can plausibly be cast in which roles), many of us—myself included—want to believe that theatres on college campuses are places where the perceptual imperatives of the mainstream need not always apply and a spirit of experimentation flourishes, particularly regarding casting choices. We would like to think that casting a young Asian American woman as the elderly King Lear exposes and challenges the somewhat arbitrary ways in which discourses of age, gender, and power are mapped onto bodies, even as we know that many audiences would instead read such a casting decision as an experiment authorized more persuasively by the educational context of the show than by postmodern precepts of identity. The convergence of these two dismissive turns and the freedom that they might provide, not only from market pressures but also from responsibilities to any politics of representation, rely upon dismissals that emanate from an ignorance or disavowal of both the institutional imperatives and the material circumstances within which we operate.

Educational theatre is unquestionably accountable to its own market-driven values: simply put, we produce shows that we think our student acting pool (our tuition-paying customers) can handle, or for whom we think the distance between their current skill sets and the demands of the production would be useful. Only after these criteria are met do we think about what the message of a particular play might offer the students who will come to see it.¹⁵ Nevertheless, productions are curricular rather than extracurricular undertakings and require us to theorize the student (as) body: how we understand our students’ embodied learning practices responds to and informs the philosophy that shapes our curriculum as a whole, influencing everything from the proportion of studio-to-lecture courses, to the opportunities for earning honors in the major, to the designations of core versus elective coursework. And implicitly, as it is probably clear by now, I believe that these theorizations of students’ bodies through curriculum design have racial suppositions embedded within them. What types of bodies are we prepared to teach? How will we welcome the situated knowledges that our students bring with them into the different types of classrooms we operate? How can we translate the racial sensitivities and spirits of inquiry that we cultivate in one sector of the curriculum to others?

All of these questions aspire to understand how we as educators and practitioners negotiate the sliding scale of affiliations that we all manage, from the departmental all the way up to the global, particularly when we want to use theatre to engage in social critique. What strategies must we employ in order to ensure that our efforts to assert African American drama's longstanding contributions to important conversations about privilege and power are as meaningful for and legible to our audiences as we want them to be? The answer that is emerging for me is that we must recognize the teaching of African American drama as an exercise in site-specificity. While there is a wide body of literature theorizing site-specific performance that moves beyond the purview of this essay, a brief description generated by a Performance Studies international working group will suffice here to explain what I see as the affinities between this performance mode and the pedagogical strategies that most productively situate African American drama and/as performance within higher education:

While all performance is de-facto situated, some performance is explicitly so. Postmodern site-specific performance can in part be understood as *a remedy for ahistorical and decontextualizing modernist approaches*. Site-specific performance is very often performance-as-study: it is research intensive; it produces and/or gathers local knowledges.¹⁶

Such an understanding of site-specific performance (and E. Patrick Johnson reminds us that teaching is always a performance) disallows dismissive turns that reduce rather than elevate race as a social construct within classroom discourse or avoid considerations of representational power that are implicitly attached to the "authority" of teaching and producing theatre within the elite spaces of higher education.

There can be no one approach to teaching the same text that transcends institutional contexts. What we might develop instead are principles of inquiry that encourage instructors to tailor their approaches to African American drama to the specific communities within which they work. To my mind, appropriate questions include:

- What are the racial demographics of my institution?
- What are the racial demographics of my department?
- What are the racial demographics of my specific course, and the proportion of majors (predisposed to accept the theoretical precepts of our field and its attitudes toward race) to nonmajors?
- If students from any constituency are over- or under-represented within my department (or course) relative to their presence on the campus as a whole, what might explain this disparity (e.g., cultural biases toward or against the arts, economic pressures, the reputation of the department among students, and so on)?
- How visible are students of color on this campus and on our stages, both quantitatively and qualitatively? How might this (hyper/in)visibility affect students' responses to representations of people of color in the texts that will be read in this course?
- What is the relationship between this institution and its surrounding community? What role does race play in this relationship?
- What do my answers to these questions tell me (and my students) about the construction of race in our immediate environment?

The almost infinite combination of responses to these questions produces an almost infinite number of approaches to teaching African American drama in ways that will allow its formal and conceptual contributions to American theatre to be understood and appreciated in a specific time and place. And in that spirit, let me be clear: I wholeheartedly support my former student's right to have directed Ward's play in the manner he did, and I hope that he learned a great deal from doing so. However, his decisions reminded me of the ripple effect that instruction in one (type of) course has upon other facets of a departmental curriculum and the way students experience it. Therefore, I

for one will take these questions back to my classroom very carefully, and will be revising my lecture notes before the next time I teach *A Day of Absence*.

Brandi Wilkins Catanese is assistant professor in the departments of African American Studies and Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her first book, an examination of colorblindness and multiculturalism in black performance, is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press.

Notes

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1. Ward emphasizes the national rather than purely regional stakes of his play with his “Production Concept,” in which he asserts: “This is a red-white-and-blue play—meaning the entire production should be designed around the basic color scheme of our patriotic trinity.” See Douglas Turner Ward, “*A Day of Absence*,” 22.

2. In fact, a 2004 film, *A Day without a Mexican*, uses the same conceit to focus on Latino labor politics in a different south—that of Southern California.

3. As Eric Lott suggests: “The black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening . . . Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them.” See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 25.

4. For example, Toni Morrison’s notion of “American Africanism,” in *Playing in the Dark*.

5. Ward, “*Day of Absence*,” 21.

6. Ibid.

7. Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How To Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour*, 7, 15.

8. Ibid., 51.

9. Ward, “*Day of Absence*,” 21–22.

10. Ibid., 21, 22.

11. Alvin Klein, “Theater: ‘Day of Absence’ Offers Fantasy on Prejudice.”

12. Strictly speaking, my depiction of these answers is hearsay based on my former student’s recollection of her conversations with the director.

13. University of California, Berkeley, Office of Student Research, <<https://osr2.berkeley.edu/newfroshtrend.html>>. It is important to note that these statistics are imprecise and reflect only those African American students who elected to self-identify as such.

14. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 244.

15. I don't mean to suggest a total insensitivity to questions of social content, but rather that a play with a really important message will not be considered unless and until a department believes it can be cast within the student acting pool: for example, a department with no singers probably won't do a musical, regardless of how important or entertaining its message might be.

16. Performance Studies international, Working Group on Site-Specific Performance, <http://psi-web.org/texts/wg_ssp.html>. Emphasis added.

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