Acts of Provocation: Popular Antiracisms on/through the Twenty-First Century New York Commercial Stage

Stefanie A. Jones

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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ACTS OF PROVOCATION: POPULAR ANTIRACISMS ON/THROUGH THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NEW YORK COMMERCIAL STAGE

by

STEFANIE A. JONES

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Stefanie A. Jones

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

David Savran

Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Peter Eckersall

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Kandice Chuh

Robert Reid-Pharr

James Wilson

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Acts of Provocation: Popular Antiracisms on/through the Twenty-First Century New York Commercial Stage

by

Stefanie A. Jones

Advisor: David Savran

This is an abolitionist feminist study of the role of liberalism in the twenty-first century political economy. It takes as its object New York City bourgeois cultural productions (in particular Broadway theatre and the New York Times) from approximately 1984 to 2009. It offers insights into important yet widely-misunderstood features of turn-of-millennium US society: class, art, political practice, and war. In order to understand liberalism’s political and economic agenda, I look at how these objects are pitched in the struggle over racism. Sometimes when we say “liberal” we mean it in the philosophical sense, with particular attention to liberal humanism. At other times, we mean “liberal” to refer to contemporary US Democratic party politics. When this dissertation examines the role of liberalism, it uses “liberal” in both of these senses simultaneously, even though liberal political practice does not always perfectly conform to liberal humanist philosophy. I examine the calculus of inequalities and hierarchies that are an inherent, structural part of both of these definitions, the particular way in which the defense and uplift of some is used to justify the oppression of others, concomitant with the disavowal of this very relation. This unique formation of liberalism (as hierarchizing with disavowal) takes on particular power in the realm of performance.
This dissertation is ultimately about bourgeois gatekeeping and the performance and practice of class (an always already racial class) as a phenomenon in racial capitalism, with a particular focus on the liberal bourgeoisie of theatre and its role in the formation of social structures. It goes beyond a critique of white behavior or whiteness studies, to discuss class behavior as a whole. Around the turn of the millennium, this class struggled over defining antiracism in order to delineate appropriate political behavior and shape popular political practice. Through the relationship between these antiracisms and their enactment within increasingly more impactful institutional arenas, I shed light on both stalwart and novel hierarchies in turn-of-the-millennium distributions of symbolic, economic, political, and military power.

This work traces one project of *New York Times* theatre critics deployed around August Wilson and three musicals (*Avenue Q*, *Hairspray*, and *Wicked*) as sites of struggle within this field of racial capitalism, and the positions and capital that the liberal bourgeoisie maintained or gained from these struggles. Chapter One provides historical background as a depiction of the field leading up to the changes around 9/11, and, in preparation for later chapters, establishes the importance of the *New York Times* in making theatre’s meaning. It draws from legitimated archives of theatre history in order to establish my methodology before I turn it, in later chapters, to untraditional archives of theatre history. It also is the only chapter not to focus on a Broadway musical; instead, the theatrical objects that are the focus of my critique are the *New York Times* theatre critics’ reviews. I read these reviews in the context of August Wilson’s work and the culture wars to explore the Times’s exercise and ongoing acquisition of symbolic power. I argue that this symbolic power was used to define and delimit appropriate political action on a contemporaneous political-economic issue of theatre: colorblind casting and arts funding for
black theatre companies. This chapter establishes, for the rest of the dissertation, the importance of the *New York Times* in the operation of popular political ideology and practice.

Chapter Two examines the social relations of the musical *Avenue Q*, in particular its hit number “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist.” In addition to reproducing racial hierarchy and deferring radical political action, the musical positions the act of consuming a commodity as the only permissible political action to resolve the racial hierarchies that result from that commodity’s production. This logic is echoed in the marketplace for housing in the Brooklyn neighborhood Bedford-Stuyvesant. Expanding “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” within that context, I argue both that there is a shift in the site at which commodity fetishism operates, and that the racializing nature of economic exploitation remains a central component of the twenty-first century liberal economy in practice.

Chapter Three works through the social relations of *Hairspray* to examine the significance of “postrace” to popular political practice. *Hairspray* utilizes “postrace” to generate a nostalgia for political activism that can only be fulfilled by the consumption of black culture, such as the musical *Hairspray* itself. This nostalgia is made appealing by providing unfettered access to audience identification as both victim and hero; this access is linked to both black culture and a universalized white protagonist, yet recreates rigidly racialized roles. This postrace logic, especially the appeal to the victim-hero, was taken up by the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign and its associated media support, with an important distinction: the campaign provided an outlet for material political action. The reading of campaign materials alongside *Hairspray*’s “postrace,” however, reveals how the campaign strongly delineated the Democratic Party and Barack Obama as the only viable form for that material political action to manifest. In other words, *Hairspray*’s popular antiracism accounts for how Barack Obama was
positioned as the only possible antiracist candidate in 2008 despite Obama’s political alignment with racial capitalism.

Finally, in Chapter Four I take on the complexity of race and racism disavowed through greenness in the musical *Wicked*. The show structures “If You See Something, Say Something” as popular antiracist action, and hails its deployment for the defense of security in the name of representing oppressed others. Tracing a history of popular participation in policing and security, I place the musical within this context to account for the expansion of this participation in both geographical scale and ideological scope after the turn of the millennium. Finally, the musical’s popular antiracist practice provides an illuminating framework for understanding the appeals by which US counterinsurgency policy works to shape popular political practice abroad. US counterinsurgency connects the practice of participating in surveillance and security to both a representational imperative and to its global production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. The consequence of *Wicked* and counterinsurgency, I argue, is the production of global popular participation in the US’s racial security regime.

In the Conclusion I clarify the stakes of antiracist political practice and interrogate theatre’s promises and limitations for achieving racial and economic justice. I work both to pay legacy to some of the material costs of bourgeois cultural production, and to delineate productive future directions for research and action.
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**Introduction: On Theatre, Racial Capitalism, and Popular Political Practice**

“In our society, if we are not constituted [as a force against the power bloc], we will be constituted into its opposite: an effective populist force, saying ‘Yes’ to power.”

While theatre studies, and musical theatre studies in particular, has increasingly concerned itself with the social and identity category “race” in the past two decades, the field’s interactions with the institution of racism and the antiracist struggles with that institution are underarticulated. Race, not as essence or identity but as a hierarchically-organized field, remains a vital force in the distribution of political and economic capital in the early twenty-first century. Stances in the field intersect with and shape symbolic, economic, and political fields; the consequences from these interventions reshape racism as the field of race’s persistent but not inevitable structure. These projects build and break bodies, craft and curtail desires, distribute resources, and otherwise direct, on a variety of scales, the “production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”

While the institutions of the state agglutinated around the knowledge projects of official antiracisms after the racial break, this top-down narrative of the production of knowledge is insufficient to describe the social practice of antiracism as part of everyday life.

From *Hairspray* to *Hamilton* and beyond, early twenty-first century Broadway productions themselves took up racism as their subject matter, becoming a model in the marketplace of cultural production for generating profit from the subject without alienating audiences. The musicals that I examine (*Avenue Q*, *Hairspray*, and *Wicked*) are widely

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disseminated and consumed. Their stances on racism are affective, discursive, and, ultimately, material; I explore the symbolic, economic, and political capital that bourgeois institutions and institutional actors after the turn of the millennium gained from the popularity of Broadway’s antiracisms, and the way that these struggles shaped political possibilities in the United States. These plays are both influences on and insights into contemporary public life.

As politics, the popularity of these stances makes them inimitably democratic: they are politics of and from the people, even if theatre is not as widely consumed as social media or reality television. Indeed, a project need not be taken up uniformly by the majority of a nation’s people in order for it to be significant and politically defining. At the same time, I do not mean to celebrate democracy as a radical solution to racial capitalism; this work is predominantly a critique. Rather than celebrate the practice of democracy, this study recognizes that the popularity as well as the political potential of these works is shaped by the strictures and limitations of really existing democracy in the US today, which makes manifest, maintains, and strengthens familiar hierarchies of race, gender, class, and ability despite the consequences of these hierarchies for the majority. In interpreting the material consequences of these projects, I draw on Theatre, American, and Performance Studies; archives of popular and bourgeois culture; and political economic critiques, particularly black revolutionary Marxism and abolitionist feminism. I argue that mass, popular, antiracist sentiment in the early twenty-first century US is being actively directed towards liberalism by bourgeois institutions and actors using “popular antiracisms.” By “popular antiracisms,” I mean widely-circulating and relatively-concretized notions of how to take political action to resolve racism, ideas that also contain stances on what mass political action is necessary, permissible, and possible. In the process of this argument, I

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disrupt the *New York Times*’s claims to political neutrality, turn traditional readings of widely-celebrated “political” Broadway musicals (*Avenue Q, Hairspray,* and *Wicked*) on their heads, and expose key disavowals by which liberalism maintains racial capitalism.

**Theatre and American Cultural Studies**

Commercial theatre’s history, audience, and form all make it a pivotal site for participants to engage with defining racism and antiracism. Blackface minstrelsy is perhaps the theatre form most clearly acknowledged as racist, and American culture’s historical debt to that form back to the early nineteenth century is well documented.\(^5\) Today, theatre uses racism as dramatic conflict to both provoke and comfort the audience, providing a contained site for the audience to practice its relations to and resolutions of racial conflict. While cultural works contain the contradictions of social experience in solution,\(^6\) Broadway, striving for works that appeal to its particular audience demographic, regularly lines up these struggles with bourgeois, white, and liberal racial capitalist institutional investments.

Theatre provides a venue across political lines for practicing relationships to and encounters with racism. If, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, literature is a privileged


place for knowing difference, theatre is a privileged site for practicing difference, always complicated by the material presence of bodies, of people. Racialization creates myths to govern bodies, and when those myths are set down on the page they can more easily be extricated from the messy way in which people always take them up. In other words, while characters in a novel may be entirely fabricated, the actors and their bodies are always a real element in the constructed world of the performance, even if they recite words written by someone else. The presence of human bodies in performance provides no pure representational luxury; the form of theatre and performance is intimately social cultural production as well as material cultural production. When audience members of any race experience a performance, or encounter characters on the stage, they must contend with playwright, actor, character, and the real-life body politics of that space and encounter. Performance is a nuanced and often contradictory sphere of suspended and unsuspended disbelief, of embodiment, representation, reality, and decision. In the struggle to define and delimit, to make meaning out of this necessarily multiple sphere, is an opportunity for the scholar of American culture to understand how culture does work: not merely what it seems to do or what its creators intend, but what consequences it generates. In particular, commercial theatre makes material its implications through interactions with its audience well beyond the moments of consumption. This, then, is more a study of how theatre structures than of how it is structured (although these modes are always already entwined).

8 I use “does work” throughout to reference the concept from the physical sciences. In physics, work (W) is the result of a force (F) from a specific source (1) that creates some amount of displacement (d). The equation that represents this relation is \( W = F \cdot d \). In other words, to suggest that culture does work is very different than to discuss the forces that culture might exert. Having a force (exerting energy) itself is not sufficient to be defined as work; “work” only results when that force creates a change in position in the field.
The form of theatrical production makes it a unique site for understanding the dynamics of culture and white supremacy in the United States. Both the shape of a theatrical text (as opposed to other works of culture), and the nature of its live presentation in Broadway houses today, have certain structural implications that make it particularly conducive for taking up the practice of racism. For example, the drive of dramatic plot structure typically depends on a conflict developing over time and reaching resolution, and this is especially true for much of Broadway. The emphasis on conflict means that when theatre takes up race it easily asks questions about racial conflict (instead of, for example, racial essence, or racial experience, although, again, there are many exceptions). Within many of these works, then, racism serves as fodder for dramatic conflict. In addition to the conventions of theatrical plot structure, the movement within the temporal axis of a theatrical work (the audience’s engagement with the work, and the narrative changes depicted over a certain period of time) means that processes of conflict and negotiation are more felicitous to the theatre than in more static forms such as painting or photography.

Theatre’s live performance and audience make it a nucleus of negotiation over racial representation and the meaning of racism and antiracism in the twenty-first century. In theatrical works, conflict over race is inextricable from plot conflict, with the promise of some sort of resolution and denouement (of the play, of racism) always less than three hours away. With this inevitable resolution looming overhead, the live audience is encouraged to observe racial hierarchy in general as moments of explicit racial discrimination within a plot. Indeed, “moments of racism” are structurally highlighted because, as moments of conflict, they necessarily serve as major cogs in the play’s machinery. Yet few plays depict structural white supremacy as explicit subject matter. By removing the larger motive force around eruptions of conflict over race these
works position individual and interpersonal responses to racism as superior for their “neutrality,” even as they obscure and disavow the actual political positions they take with these responses. “Challenging” topics such as racism promise broad, profitable appeal for the theatre industry: analyzing their reception (as I do throughout) reveals that these plays highlight the titillating confrontation of moments of racism, shocking and provoking even (and perhaps especially) when they are anticipated because “dangerous” or “touchy” subjects have been broached. The shock of provocation, in the examples I discuss in this dissertation always divorced from a socio-structural frame of racism and a material understanding of antiracism, means that moments of potential racial conflict are individually driven, as unpredictable and without pattern as to be random. These “moments of racism” threaten to appear randomly in quotidian life and as random threat are thus ubiquitous; they can arise at any time. Consumers are explicitly positioned as privileged viewers, encouraged to see themselves as uniquely well-suited both within and outside of the theatre for observing and judging difference (constructed as the source of conflict), and the solutions to this difference, even though this may be, for many of the members of Broadway’s predominantly white audience, their first “conversation” about race and racism to feature “real, live people of color.” Because of theatre’s ephemerality, critical responses to and interpretations of the theatre are vital ways by which this class makes meaning from these works.

Racism as subject becomes a privileged domain of the theatre-makers and of theatre-goers, structured and resolved by the plots of these particular works even as mimesis and representational convention create differentials in labor and symbolic power that delimit the possibilities for theatre to serve as an actual site of debate or political engagement. For example, in the US theatrical economy actors are expected to commit to their characters; they are not free to engage with the terms of the play as though it were a conversation. When actors of color play
characters who take positions on the meaning of racism and antiracism, they lend authority to a particular side in the struggle without getting an opportunity to engage in that debate themselves. Their participation is particularly weighty because of the semi-public nature of performance: they imitate positions for a typically large audience, which understands its own responses to the performance as part of a collective group response. The resolutions of these works provide guidelines for appropriate responses when racism breaks in on the lives of those not previously inured to it, inviting its particular audience to stand their ground or risk the violence of exclusion themselves. These beliefs become material when they are taken up as practices.

Theatre provokes in order to appear neutral, obscuring its actual positions. While confrontational positionalities in what historically have been considered lowbrow popular forms (like rock ‘n’ roll, football, or hip-hop) invite audience members to pick a side and identify with it (such as with particular wrestlers in professional wrestling matches or Biggie and 2pac in the 1990s East Coast-West Coast hip-hop rivalry), no one wears t-shirts emblazoned with “Team Michael and Veronica” or “Team Alan and Annette” at a production of God of Carnage. As with lowbrow popular forms, middlebrow popular producers play both sides in order to increase their appeal and profitability instead of taking political stances (picking a position on material power hierarchies and defending it). In lowbrow forms, oppositional positions increase the number of potential consumers. If you do not like the New York Jets, there are always the New York Giants. Elect to be a Minnesota Vikings or Chicago Bears fan, and you do not stop watching the football games when your rival team plays; rather, your participation in a specific fandom encompasses animosity for the Green Bay Packers and opposing them still generates ad revenue for the National Football League.
Unlike audience behavior for lowbrow forms, appropriate audience behavior in the theatre involves avoiding the allegedly unintelligent and unseemly practices of taking a side associated with fandom. Theatre’s audiences exercise enough cultural capital to understand theatre as a place of presenting conflicts. Additionally, they understand that the conventions of a well-behaved audience member entail quiet attention during the play, and mandatory applause after it is over. These audiences also wield enough literary training to prioritize the “message” of the playwright or director over the stance of a single character. Each of these factors structures middlebrow audience members to consider both sides from a distance. This distance from association with one character or another (even if that distance is not maintained throughout the production) buoys up whatever conclusion theatre-makers intend, or whatever conclusion audience members draw, with the illusion of political neutrality. At the same time, middlebrow theatrical works do of course suggest, shape, and promote political ideologies through their structural and affective resolutions. In other words, how the play builds its conflict as well as how it falls at the climax and denouement is always inflected with value systems which are themselves political, even if those values are moderateness, apathy, and political inaction. Critical reception aids and even enables both these values and their disavowals.

This is not an exclusively theatrical phenomenon, nor a new one for this cultural form. As Stuart Hall explores, the very definitions of as well as manifestations of “popular” culture are used by various competing parties to serve their own interests in the struggle for socioeconomic dominance.9 In theatre, for example, David Savran takes up this feature of popular culture in *Highbrow/Lowdown* to explore positionings around jazz.10 Savran concludes that “serious”

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9 Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular.”
upper-middlebrow theatre in particular “reassures theatregoers out for ‘an experience’ that their most dearly held assumptions and prejudices may be examined but not seriously challenged.”

When commercial theatre provokes, middlebrow audience members can position themselves as deliberately above the fray. By taking up provocative issues, Broadway creates and affirms a purported neutrality on those issues that is in fact an endorsement of a very particular status quo. This dissertation argues that this status quo is a struggle for the expansion of racial capitalism, in the form of shifting white supremacist capitalist logics that maintain and expand dominant group capital.\(^1\)

The success of Broadway shows with stances on racism and antiracism is a diverse phenomenon: any particular Broadway season might exhibit a range of political stances, and this remains true after the turn of the millennium. Yet while not all Broadway shows are liberal, liberalism has nonetheless been the dominant shape of the field of Broadway production since at least the 1920s. The racial politics of the major New York Times theatre critics and of each of the shows I work through are non-identical in content as well as structure, and for this reason might seem oddly matched. Similarly, the institutional spheres within which these shows and their audiences come to have consequences might at first seem like an odd collection: newspapers, housing markets, election campaigns, and government defense practices may at first seem to have very little linking them all together. Yet popular antiracisms come into being as such when they are taken up more broadly as political practices, and I have deliberately addressed institutions of various scales to examine the range of ways that theatre’s antiracisms operate in twenty-first century social and political life. As the purposes that popular antiracisms serve vary institutionally, so do the ways that they are precipitated. And despite this institutional diversity,

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 268.  
\(^{12}\) Robinson, Black Marxism.
and despite the distinctions between August Wilson, *Hairspray*, *Wicked*, and *Avenue Q*, popular antiracisms are increasingly valuable to bourgeois institutions in the time period under investigation. Without addressing these pieces as part of a whole, a significant if diffuse class-based strategy, liberal popular antiracisms will continually recruit well-intentioned popular antiracist sentiment, energy, action, and labor to serve rather than destroy racial capitalism.

**The Broadway Class**

As Savran notes in another study, “at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Broadway remains the most doggedly middlebrow sector of the U.S. cultural economy.”

Indeed, commercial theatre has a very specific audience demographic with respect to social class, suggesting Broadway’s unique position within racial capitalism after the turn of the millennium. The Broadway League’s audience demography study of 2012-2013 paints a very clear picture: 68% female, 42.5 years old on average, 78% white, 74% with a completed college degree and 36% with a graduate degree, average annual household income of $186,500. In contrast, the US Census reports that in the US the “median household income was $51,939 in 2013, not statistically different in real terms from the 2012 median of $51,759.”

The 2012-2013 Broadway season saw a total attendance of 11.57 million tickets. These statistics are even more stark in the Broadway League’s demography of 2011-2012 season audience for North American

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tours of Broadway shows: 70% female, 50.5 years old on average, 89% white, 78% with a completed college degree and 30% with a graduate degree, and 46% with an annual household income of more than $100,000. These shows were also popular, drawing “nearly 13 million attendances.”

Large-scale commercial productions appeal strongly to this class of wealthy, well-educated, white women, whether in official Broadway houses, or on tour throughout North America. Next we must ask how this relatively exclusive audience (even by rough estimates, less than 10% of the US population) might be understood as popular.

Considering theatre’s form and audience invites a return to Hall’s exploration of popular culture for this answer. In literature in Theatre Studies, when Broadway is defined as “popular” it is either to elevate non-Broadway works (by putting such theatre in opposition to popularity, which is linked to the profit-motive, mass production, and an anti-artistic commercialism), or to justify and defend Broadway’s legitimacy through a connection to “the people.”


\[\text{18 Ibid. n.p.}\]

\[\text{19 Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular.”}\]

\[\text{20 For example, John Bush Jones finds musicals to be particularly representative of social issues because they reflect genuine people’s culture, and takes this stance on defining the popular at the very beginning of the book. Jones notes, “As a form of popular entertainment for fairly broadbased audiences, throughout the twentieth century musicals variously dramatized, mirrored, or challenged our deeply-held cultural attitudes and beliefs.” Jones, Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 1. Steven Adler recreates this division within Broadway between musicals and straight-plays, noting, “musicals are the popular mainstay of Broadway. They offer the greatest opportunity for spectacle, easy entertainment, touring sales, and ancillary income from souvenir programs and cast albums. Straight plays have been a tougher sell on Broadway for several years, and even the few unbridled successes typically run for much shorter periods than hit musicals.” While Adler attempts to take up a back-and-forth on “art” and “commerce” throughout the text, a hierarchization of some Broadway works as artistic in opposition to the “merely” popular persists throughout Adler’s text, and is evident here in the critique of musicals’ profitability as “easy” versus the recognition of profits for serious plays as indicative of}\]
use of “popular” to describe Broadway is a critique, in the second use popular success (and the accompanying associations with the “legitimate” masses) is meant to defend these commercial productions (and their investors) from any criticism. These struggles mirror the first two of Hall’s definitions of popular culture (as top-down consumer culture, or as genuine folk culture), which Hall ultimately dismisses in favor of understanding popular culture as a site of class struggle. In these political-economic terms, we might formulate Broadway theatre as a site of class struggle, appealing to the popular yet with limited accessibility. (In supplement to arguments about physical, economic, geographic, and cultural accessibility, we can simply note that, literally, there are a limited number of tickets.)

Complicating Broadway’s popularity goes hand-in-hand with this text’s other major use of popular: “popular antiracisms.” If Broadway has limited accessibility and its audiences are populated predominantly by the elite, how popular are the antiracisms in which it traffics? This is a key query since I assert that the popularity of these notions is a major feature of how racial capitalism (re)asserts itself democratically. Yet the “masses” of people are not in a position to define or defend these techniques of responding to racism at a politically significant level; expressions of the futility of participation in traditional US political structures are so commonplace as to be cliché. Nonetheless “the people” still actively take up and circulate these ideas in quotidian ways that buttress the ideologies and structural consequences of racial capitalism. This is the consequence of bourgeois gatekeeping.

As the Broadway League’s statistics demonstrate, theatre audiences are much more likely to be the bourgeoisie: the gatekeepers whose institutional power not only defends the dominant class but also delimits and shapes what is available to the masses, ultimately strongly influencing

popular response. And class interest is intimately political interest; the bourgeoisie has “since the establishment of modern industry and of the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway.” While there are certainly distinctions to be made within the category of the “bourgeois” (perhaps especially amongst the US bourgeoisie), theatre’s apolitical disavowals are the very projects by which the bourgeoisie obscures its functioning as a class. Nonetheless when I analyze, throughout this study, how theatrical works create certain arguments about how US society should respond to racism, I do not mean to suggest that such messages are universally embraced nor uniformly circulated. Instead, bourgeois gatekeepers define the terms of public discourse about antiracism in such a way that exercises relatively significant control over certain US politicoeconomic processes in the contemporary age. As a class, these writers, producers, investors, campaign-donors, business-owners, and educators conduct their own (often narrow and incestuous) public debate that sets the terms for “popular” participation in political debate, while most people are kept out of Broadway houses as much as they are kept from being US Senators or authoring either Buzzfeed.com or New York Times articles. Instead, the vast majority of US Americans (who are typically absented from academic discourse in the humanities because of their dearth of archival presence) are much more likely to discuss with family and friends instead of with other gatekeepers; to buy instead of to profit off of sales; to submit applications instead of make hiring or admissions decisions; to read and watch the news instead of create it; and to cram beliefs and opinions (hewed according to institutional terms) into one or two of a handful of pre-determined boxes that also determine what there is available to share on their social media sites. When they add comments or addendums (legitimate popular political thought), they have the opportunity to

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inform and influence only their followers, not the content of the articles, any future discourse, or the broader public. It is in defining these metaphorical boxes, the institutional spaces where the majority is permitted to practice politics, that institutions take mass antiracist sentiment and shape it into political action aligned with extant hierarchical values. These are when popular positions on racism and antiracism become “popular antiracisms,” and these are the limits of democracy in practice: a precise formation of bourgeois authority deployed to defend racial capitalist interests.

**Shape of Study and Research Materials**

This is a study of the social formation of political performance (meaning both plays that are about social issues and also the enacting or not of political change), and the role of bourgeois audiences in that performance, in the early twenty-first century. As neither the bourgeoisie nor the popular is a concrete formation, this is also a historical study of the changes to class-based political performance after 11 September 2001. Both the events of that day and the media and political aftermath of those events significantly shifted the US public’s relationship to and demands of the racial field. The symbolism accompanying the violence of that day lent unprecedented significance to the positions of those quick to respond. The USA PATRIOT ACT, terrorism and the “war on terror,” and the accompanying popular emphasis on policing and military intervention as necessary for survival was a major phase shift in how US Americans approached their role in “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”\(^\text{22}\) While the US’s sense of vulnerability shifted, so too did our role in distributing premature death and the mechanisms by which we practice that distribution. Although it is by no means as concrete a teleological divide as this periodization might imply, I nonetheless use this date to mark the

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changes that accompanied the turn of the millennium as an era of US history. The Broadway class had to find new ways of retaining its position in the shifting struggles over race and capital after the complex of related race-inflecting events that center around that date.

I focus on the Broadway musicals *Avenue Q*, *Hairspray*, and *Wicked*. The primary limitation shaping how I studied these shows was the temporal proximity between my objects and the time of writing. In addition to being no more than 15 years old, these plays all have significant ongoing production lives: on Broadway, on national tours or as film remakes, or as local productions in regional or school theatres. As such, these works are still structures in solution and their significance and their institutional interactions are still in flux.\(^{23}\) For example, although *Avenue Q* opened more than a decade earlier, FBI Director James Comey cited the show’s hit song “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” following the police murder of Staten Island resident Eric Garner, in order to assert the neutrality of security and policing forces.\(^{24}\) And New York City police commissioner Bill Bratton echoed this speech to downplay NYPD complicity in racialized violence.\(^{25}\) Because these shows continue to make meaning, they are only beginning to be studied. Stacy Wolf’s *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*,

\(^{23}\) “We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies.” Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132, emphasis in original. Williams goes on, “for structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available.” Ibid., 133-134, emphasis in original.


which takes up *Wicked* as the main object of two chapters, is a field-leading example of research on popular interactions with current productions. Nonetheless, for the most part very little scholarship exists on these shows. I consider secondary scholarship when available, but for the most part depend on primary data. I had the opportunity to see two of these shows in person: I saw *Wicked* on national tour at the Ford Center for the Performing Arts in Chicago, Illinois on 19 March 2008, and *Avenue Q* on national tour at the Overture Center for the Arts in Madison, Wisconsin on 26 October 2008. I viewed *Hairspray* through the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Library for Performing Arts, which was also a source of much ephemera for all three shows. These performances, and my notes and recollections of them, informed my research project as a whole. When specific details of a particular performance are key to my analysis I supplemented this primary research with informal videos, descriptions, reports, and comments from Internet fan sites and social media sites. These videos, comments, and social media sites, though often not useful in a citational way, were invaluable to guiding further research, creating a sense of how knowledge about Broadway shows circulates in the twenty-first century, and generating meaningful questions about the ephemeral performance itself. I also considered, when available, the immediate ephemera of the Broadway production: the gifts in the gift shops, playscripts, coffee-table and souvenir books, newspaper articles and critical reviews, marketing materials both in archives and in circulation around New York City, and widely-circulating fan responses such as those memes and fan art that trickled out of fan-specific sites and into general-interest internet culture. Finally, many newspaper articles, critics’ reviews, and marketing materials were accessed through the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library for Performing Arts, the New York Public Library’s databases, and the databases at the Mina Rees Library at the CUNY Graduate Center.
By working through these performances alongside the bourgeois institutions with which they interact and in which they are embedded, I put them in their cultural and ideological contexts. I draw from a diverse array of specifically non-theatre contemporaneous data in order to anchor these productions in their material history. Instead of a traditional material history of the theatre, however, which might have focused on the profits, expenses, employees, and owners of the theatre industry itself, I have deliberately turned to the other political-economic spheres within which theatre is imbricated. I addressed institutions of various scales to examine theatre’s broad consequences, the range of ways that bourgeois liberalism operates. As the purposes that popular antiracisms serve institutionally vary, so too do the objects that I rally for evidence about these negotiations. In Chapter One, I look at *New York Times* as itself an institution and the practice of critical reviews; in Chapter Two, I put demographic data from the US Census and the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York Graduate Center in conversation with media maneuvers in and beyond the *New York Times* to examine gentrification as bourgeois practice. In Chapter Three I examine the practice of electoral politics through speeches, newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and the most iconic image of the 2008 Obama campaign, the *Obama Hope* poster. Finally, in Chapter Four I take up both the Department of Homeland Security’s “If You See Something, Say Something” marketing campaign, and the policy accumulated in the US Government Counterinsurgency Guide as co-constitutive of the circulating ideologies of state and popular security politics.

While these points of context and comparison shift in order to demonstrate the various scales by which antiracisms are linked to popular political practice, I always turn back to the Broadway works that contain the full logic of these popular antiracisms as structures-in-solution. As I have worked through this project at numerous conferences, in seminars, and at other
presentations of this work I am regularly confronted with the question: Why should we expect anything other than racial capitalism from Broadway? In short: so what? Although I acknowledge that there is no outside to racial capitalism and thus appreciate the cynicism of this critique, it nonetheless creates a false binary within the realm of cultural production. By dismissing Broadway itself as the source of the problem, such critiques turn to other sources of cultural production with the hope of salvation. Instead of seeking which form of theatrical production can “solve” racial capitalism, I suggest that one of the strengths of analyzing Broadway musicals is that they serve as a clear model for critiquing the role of cultural production in racial capitalism in the first place, which is always conflicted, a repository as well as a final resting place of hope for change. This is not to suggest that all cultural production is necessarily bad. But making theatre is not the same as making politics, and, as David Savran delicately and passionately reminds us, “can lead to real political and economic change only through the most impossibly tortuous of routes.”

Rather, cultural production on any sizeable scale is always deeply intertwined with extant infrastructures of the social; if their ideologies are not felicitious, the cultural production would never have reached the scale of “public culture.”

Instead, we should resist liberal normalizing and acceptance of these antiracisms on the one hand, and academic dismissal of the significance of bourgeois cultural production on the other. This means finding the persistence of oppressive political-economic forms remarkable and worthy of academic inquiry, and understanding them as always in the process of being produced. And in fact, it means insisting on the significance of the means of production of these politics, of seeking their immediate “how.” When we begin from the position that the persistence of racism is remarkable, we denormalize it, which is essential work against the normalizing logics by

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26 Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 100.
which white supremacy, settler colonialism, and other forms of racial capitalism have been so flexibly persistent. It is poor scholarship and disappointing politics to accept extant racial capitalist hierarchies as disinterested social norms simply because they have been around a while. The cultural productions I take up here bring together unique ideologies and unique audiences, both of which are vital components of popular politics in practice. Indeed, the theatre is centrally important because, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, it “directly experiences the immediate sanction of the bourgeois public, with its values and conformisms.”

Rather than a throw-away object, Broadway theatre is vital to understand the full operations of the contemporary political economy.

Methodology: Towards the Critique of Racial Capitalism

Conceived by black feminist thinkers in the 1890s, further flourishing in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and shaped by subsequent generations of women-of-color feminists, intersectionality is a rich philosophy of both experience and of the material world. In 1981, bell hooks traced the origins of black feminist social theorizing to the 19th century, examining the theoretical and political work of Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Amanda Berry Smith, and Sojourner Truth. Throughout these speeches and writings, and continued significantly in and beyond hooks’s work, black feminism functions as a theory of intersectionality, a way of expanding a single-narrative or even an additive frame of oppression. Patricia Hill Collins stresses the importance of seeing “black feminist thought as a critical social theory.”

Crenshaw demonstrated in the text that coined the term intersectionality, “intersectional

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experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism,” emphasizing this theory as a way of understanding the modern world. Beyond recognizing a unique individual perspective (though often reduced to that), this school of critical theory is actually the source of a variety of interventions in philosophical considerations of power, capital, and justice. Centering women of color when considering philosophical questions provokes a radical historicization of power, one that understands white supremacy and the patriarchy as mutually-constituting elements of a whole.

Intersectionality, then, addresses not only the specific lives of black women who have been “socialized out of existence,” but the specificities of human identities in general as the result of a multifaceted, yet mutually-constituted matrix of relations organized according to various inequitable power distributions. Hill Collins’s insights illuminate this world-organization further: “any matrix of domination can be seen as an historically specific organization of power in which social groups are embedded and which they aim to influence….Thus, regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of the matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities.” With both humans and capital organized according to a complex of material interests (forming what Hill Collins identifies as a matrix of domination) that is historically specific and that can change over time, this black feminist

31 See, for one recent example, Nancy Fraser, Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis (New York: Verso, 2013).
32 hooks, Ain’t I A Woman, 7.
33 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 228.
philosophy challenges the false *a priori* at the root of previous critical theorizations of justice and political economy.

Informed by the deep intersectionality of fields depicted by black feminisms and women of color feminisms, I examine widely-successful twenty-first century Broadway musicals whose plots prominently feature positions on antiracist politics. I analyze the calculus of relations of bodies and capitals (typically oriented around arrangements according to race, class, and embodiment, although also often shaped according to gender and sexuality) that each work disavows with its stance on antiracism. My work is also informed by studies of racial capitalism which continue the legacy of understanding from intersecting fields. The revolutionary Marxism of scholars such as Cedric Robinson, Nikhil Singh, Robin Kelly, Ruth Gilmore, Lisa Lowe, and many others depends on a socially-inflected historical materialism informed by the deep nuance demanded by intersectional feminism. I work from abolitionist feminism (the unification of intersectional feminist interests with such materialist critiques of racial capitalism) and Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of culture to craft a similarly deep and rich understanding of the social in my historical materialist methodology. The “popular antiracism” precipitate, formed when theatre’s social hierarchies and ideologies are deployed within popular political practice, provides insights into the ongoing persistence of racial capitalism in solution. The institutions within which popular antiracisms are put into practice in turn provide further insight into

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bourgeois struggles over the popular. Critiquing the stances of “popular antiracisms,” then, is a method of abolitionist feminist dialectical materialism.

**Popular Antiracisms**

Jodi Melamed argues that the United States racial formation after World War II was “a formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity whose driving force has been a series of successive official or state-recognized US antiracisms.” 36 These official antiracisms consolidated and disseminated both global capitalism and the US state. Like Melamed’s book this study “focuses on the material politics of antiracist knowledges;” 37 instead of turning to top-down state-sponsored knowledge projects, my study takes up popular antiracist practice and the mechanisms by which this practice is made to serve racial capitalist interests.

Rather than focusing on the ontology of race, this study uses a sociological approach, in particular Pierre Bourdieu’s understandings of fields, to tease out the relations that form the material politics of racism and antiracism. Michael Omi and Howard Winant point towards (but do not quite arrive at) a field approach when they define the US’s racial formations. 38 Ruth Wilson Gilmore uses a field approach to define the institution of racism: “As the example of racism suggests, institutions are sets of hierarchical relationships (structures) that persist across time undergoing, as we have seen in the case of prisons, periodic reform. Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” 39 In their separate studies Steve Martinot 40 and George

36 Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 1.
37 Ibid., 1.
Lipsitz also emphasize racism as relational. If race is the field, and racism the persistent hierarchical relationship that governs that field and defines group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, this then reveals what the field of race struggles over: the power to so differentiate such groups. Antiracisms, then, are non-dominant positions within that field, positions which are taken by asserting that a different order should govern the field, positions claiming authority over life and death by staking that life and death should be distributed according to different rules. But there is a nonidentity between claims staked and positions taken: this study delves into the gaps between radical-seeming claims and the positions actually taken, and illuminates the subsequent shape of the field, which remains relatively rigid. At times in the dissertation I refer to these as “racial politics:” attempts to position oneself by defining the stakes and governing hierarchies of the field.

While “antiracism” has often served as an umbrella term for radical scholarship, art, and activism, Melamed demonstrates how some antiracisms have been utilized to change but not eliminate the hierarchies of “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” Indeed, with official antiracisms serving the production of global capitalism, which is always racial capitalism, Melamed demonstrates how some antiracisms in fact strengthen racial hierarchies. This reinforcement makes staking positions in the field of race increasingly essential (and profitable) for racial capitalism. Race, like any field, has the perpetual potential for shifting based on which players engage it, and how. Official antiracisms strive to buttress racial capitalism against material antiracisms, which are political projects specifically shaped to deconstruct the hierarchization that governs the field’s production as such. A fundamental

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assumption of this dissertation is that there is ongoing work for material redistribution designed to upend racial capitalism, “material antiracisms” against which both official and popular antiracisms struggle. Elite institutions and the state are not the only players in the field. Both race radical traditions and popular culture, often enhanced by populist commitment to and dissatisfaction with official antiracisms themselves, influence large swathes of the population to desire the end of racial hierarchy. This energy is directed towards various politics by the competing interests in the field; indeed, such force also produced the oppositional resurgence of explicit white supremacy. While “antiracism be[came] a nationally recognized social value” after World War II, by the early twenty-first century it was also a popular value, a kind of “common sense” of political action. The specific ways in which this common sense was and continues to be delimited, particularly towards liberalism, is the result of bourgeois interventions such as those that I depict here.

Popular antiracisms are projects where an antiracism (a stance on the field of race) is linked to a stance on popular political action. The “popular antiracisms” at the heart of this study act as ideological political projects, defining and delimiting political action (what I sometimes call “real” or “appropriate” politics). They also produce again the hierarchies (many of which are unfortunately familiar) of bodies and groups based on race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality. In the process, they permit bourgeois institutions to capitalize on a predictable set of behaviors and preferences that are increasingly commodifiable. While I call these antiracisms “popular” in order to emphasize the social structures within which Melamed’s institutions and epistemological frames must be produced and to address the ways that people and classes

materially interact with institutions through political practice, the designation is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Like the practices they describe, “popular antiracisms” should be considered as always already moving away from the “popular.”

Popular antiracisms are also the stances by which bourgeois institutions capitalize on widely-distributed desire for the resolution of racial hierarchy. By “bourgeois institutions” I mean gatekeeping institutions which regulate who is permitted to enter into the bourgeoisie, the gatekeeping class. The definition is tautological because of the nature of the bourgeois form. The bourgeoisie elevates (generates distinctions) for the purpose of gatekeeping those distinctions for themselves. This is the class of policing: livelihoods, legitimacies, resources, beliefs, cultures, knowledges, actions. Not identical to the diverse popular desires circulating in solution, popular antiracisms are the bourgeois antiracist projects into which some critical mass of those desires are made to fit. As such, they are a partial measure of the popularity of certain antiracisms, but they also create that popularity as they position themselves.

Any study of “the popular” is a messy and imprecise one. The term itself, variously indicating “folk” and “commercial,” is ultimately a tool used for class struggle. Yet any contemporary cultural studies scholarship necessitates the acknowledgement that structures alone do not define human existence; that people are not “cultural dupes” who must inevitably take up capitalism, but political actors shaped by habitus and field, engaging in constantly shifting realms of oppression and hierarchy. As Angela Davis reminds us, “freedom is a constant struggle.” While radical political action is continually diverted to hegemonic ends, learning this is perhaps the liberating act. Another way to look at this is that as radical political stances

45 Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular.”
become increasingly wide-spread they are also always at risk of (and in the process of) being diverted to serve hegemony. That should not stop us from this work, but it should, perhaps, change how we work. This is the space from which I take up “the popular”: belief that it is our power, the power of real, live, average people, that produces our social formations, and that it is thus our mass responsibility to shape them to the tenets of justice.

Structure and Chapter Breakdown

The goal of this dissertation is to illuminate the racial capitalist projects of the white liberal bourgeoisie after 9/11, and explain how they are deployed to cope with some of the contradictions introduced by popular support for racialized war/the war on terror. Throughout my analysis I posit that theatre makes ideological interventions that shape political desires and actions that ultimately reproduce racial capitalism. Each chapter is centered around and named after a “popular antiracism,” and focuses on a piece of theatrical cultural production that positions itself through its racial politics. I deconstruct each work’s definitions of race, racism, and antiracism, and then place it within its social and ideological context to illuminate the broader impact of how its racial politics shapes the practice of political economy in the twenty-first century. Through the relationship between these antiracisms and their enactment within increasingly more impactful institutional arenas, I shed light on both stalwart and novel hierarchies in turn-of-the-millennium distributions of symbolic, economic, political, and military power.

After this introduction, I turn to Chapter One, which is somewhat distinct from the subsequent chapters. It provides historical background as a depiction of the field leading up to the changes around 9/11, and, in preparation for later chapters, establishes the importance of the New York Times in making theatre’s meaning. It draws from legitimated archives of theatre
history in order to establish my methodology before I turn it, in later chapters, to untraditional archives of theatre history. It also is the only chapter not to focus on a Broadway musical; instead, the theatrical objects that are the focus of my critique are the *New York Times* theatre critics’ reviews. I read these reviews in the context of August Wilson’s work and the culture wars to explore the *Times*’s exercise and ongoing acquisition of symbolic power. I argue that this symbolic power was used to define and delimit appropriate political action on a contemporaneous political-economic issue of theatre: colorblind casting and arts funding for black theatre companies. This chapter establishes, for the rest of the dissertation, the importance of the *New York Times* in the operation of popular political ideology and practice.

Chapter Two examines the social relations of the musical *Avenue Q*, in particular its hit number “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist.” In addition to reproducing racial hierarchy and deferring radical political action, the musical positions the act of consuming a commodity as the only permissible political action to resolve the racial hierarchies that result from that commodity’s production. This logic is echoed in the marketplace for housing in the Brooklyn neighborhood Bedford-Stuyvesant. Expanding “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” within that context, I argue both that there is a shift in the site at which commodity fetishism operates, and that the racializing nature of economic exploitation remains a central component of the twenty-first century liberal economy in practice.

Chapter Three works through the social relations of *Hairspray* to examine the significance of “postrace” to popular political practice. *Hairspray* utilizes “postrace” to generate a nostalgia for political activism that can only be fulfilled by the consumption of black culture, such as the musical *Hairspray* itself. This nostalgia is made appealing by providing unfettered access to audience identification as both victim and hero; this access is linked to both black
culture and a universalized white protagonist, yet recreates rigidly racialized roles. This postrace logic, especially the appeal to the victim-hero, was taken up by the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign and its associated media support, with an important distinction: the campaign provided an outlet for material political action. The reading of campaign materials alongside *Hairspray*’s “postrace,” however, reveals how the campaign strongly delineated the Democratic Party and Barack Obama as the only viable form for that material political action to manifest. In other words, *Hairspray*’s popular antiracism accounts for how Barack Obama was positioned as the only possible antiracist candidate in 2008 despite Obama’s political alignment with racial capitalism.

Finally, in Chapter Four I take on the complexity of race and racism disavowed through greenness in the musical *Wicked*. The show structures “If You See Something, Say Something” as popular antiracist action, and hails its deployment for the defense of security in the name of representing oppressed others. Tracing a history of popular participation in policing and security, I place the musical within this context to account for the expansion of this participation in both geographical scale and ideological scope after the turn of the millennium. Finally, the musical’s popular antiracist practice provides an illuminating framework for understanding the appeals by which US counterinsurgency policy works to shape popular political practice abroad. US counterinsurgency connects the practice of participating in surveillance and security to both a representational imperative and to its global production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. The consequence of *Wicked* and counterinsurgency, I argue, is the production of global popular participation in the US’s racial security regime.

In the Conclusion I clarify the stakes of antiracist political practice and interrogate theatre’s promises and limitations for achieving racial and economic justice. I work both to pay
S A Jones

legacy to some of the material costs of bourgeois cultural production, and to delineate productive future directions for research and action.

“August Wilson has once again shown us how in another man’s freedom we find our own.”
— Frank Rich, New York Times

This chapter takes up New York Times critics’ reviews as claims about racism and antiracism to illuminate vital patterns for understanding how August Wilson’s Broadway success coexisted with the liberal retrenchment of racial capitalism. In the mid-1980s to 1990s, the New York Times capitalized off of a popular antiracism I call “My Black Friend” to distinguish itself as a gatekeeper of the political-economic sphere. During this period, theatre critics’ reviews tied an antiracism, a stance on the shape of the field of race, to a class politics, a stance on popular political action. By claiming these stances the Times disavowed the class and race positions these claims helped it achieve. Empowered to make distinctions material, Times critics were careful to steer mass demand for the end of racial hierarchy toward liberalism, with its claims to social transformation and concomitant endorsement of racial capitalism. As a result, the Times’s negotiations over racism and antiracism provided the opportunity to exercise gatekeeping to restrict access to, and accumulate capital for the bourgeoisie. Identifying the precise operations of this structure both explains how the New York Times’s liberalism secured popular legitimacy (symbolic capital), and begins this dissertation’s project of illuminating and historicizing the political economic projects of the turn-of-the-millennium US bourgeoisie.

The key to this formulation for the Times is familiarity with and personalization of blackness, and as such I call this popular antiracism, “My Black Friend.” The title of this notion stems from the commonplace assertion in response to accusations of racism: “I’m not racist. I

have a black friend.” Such a claim appeals to the significance of both “black” and “friend” for authorization as “not racist.” “Black” is purely representational: in the deployment of this popular antiracism, a single reference to blackness can and should stand in for every other situation related to race. And “friend” in this formulation is noteworthy precisely because its implied familiarity, trust, and personal connection grant exceptionalism. Because the relationship with a black friend is affective (it is about how one feels) as well as displaced (the black friend is never present when this is asserted), it supersedes facts and reasoning. It does not matter if others “feel” differently, because this “black friend” is intimately trustworthy, while other opinions, despite any factual support, come from an untrustworthy and/or non-black other. The “black friend” in this expression does not placeholder for a multitude of blacknesses so much as it erases that multitude under the power of a single exceptional representation. African-American playwright August Wilson (1945-2005), author of the Pittsburgh Cycle, serves as a key example of this relation in the 1980s and 1990s. The Pittsburgh Cycle, written between 1979 and 2005, consists of one play representing black life for each decade of the 20th century. In the 1980s and 1990s, the New York Times utilized August Wilson as this single exceptional representational figure in order to claim authority on contemporaneous political-economic issues of race and racism.

Fictional figures can and do serve as the referent in “I have a black friend.” The presence of people who are black or are perceived as black on the stage facilitates the illusion of intimacy. The black “friend” can be either be actor or character, but the character, a mythological figure of the stage who is brought to life by the authority of black actors, is a particularly tempting subject as this chapter explores. Figures from television or movies are also made intimate, particularly through the directorial gaze. TV shows like the nationally syndicated “Oprah Winfrey Show”
(televised from 1986-2011), particularly with the premise of revealing intimate secrets and sharing hidden truths, and biracial buddy movies such as Lethal Weapon (1987), helped establish a popular familiarity with blackness as a national cultural project. In addition to fiction, the appeal of “My Black Friend” is evident in the political arena during this time; a sense of intimacy and familiarity with blackness (as well as actual black friends and colleagues) buoyed Bill Clinton’s two elections as President, despite Clinton’s own racial capitalist political stances.2

Many scholars have theorized the political value of friendship. Jacques Derrida traces the history of forms of friendship in Western thought from Aristotle to Nietzsche, with particular attention to the political possibilities offered by friendship.3 Similarly, Michel Foucault envisions friendship as richly full of potential for new forms of pleasure, love, and ways of life.4 But the structure that is revealed through “My Black Friend” is not actually about real world friendships and their political or quotidian possibilities. Someone who uses the expression “I have a black friend” does not necessarily have a black friend; they may, but it is just as likely that they have in mind a black acquaintance, a black colleague or coworker, a black employee, a black celebrity, a black figment of their imagination, or another form of significant or regular encounter with a person they perceive as black. Nonetheless, studying the popular means taking these expressions seriously as semi-public eruptions of a structure of feeling which becomes precipitated (and thus

2 While Clinton’s narrative of growing up playing with black children was widely circulated in speeches, interviews, and campaigns, the most famous articulation of what was broadly felt during Clinton’s terms came when Toni Morrison called Clinton “the first black president. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children’s lifetime.” Morrison “Comment,” The New Yorker, October 5, 1998, accessed on April 21, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/10/05/comment-6543. For more interviews and speeches exploring the phenomenon of Clinton’s closeness and popularity with African Americans, see DeWayne Wickham, Bill Clinton and Black America (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).


legible) as a popular antiracism when bourgeois institutions structure themselves around it. “My Black Friend” as popular antiracism, then, reveals much more than its quotidian counterpart.

Rather than providing insights into the ontological possibilities of friendship, this analysis works in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu to frame “friendship” as an object of struggle, a concept with which people position themselves in various fields. Regardless of whether or not there actually is friendship with a black person, referencing this concept grants unprecedented symbolic power, an authority that legitimates political stances. In short, such an expression is a stance in the field of race that can be deployed to achieve a position in the symbolic field and the political economic field.

Commercial theatre on Broadway, and the critics of the New York Times, offer a compelling class-based case study for this investigation. Vastly, although not exclusively white, liberal, and bourgeois, Broadway is distinguished by its cultural politics as well as its position. I explore the specifics of the racial project the Times theatre critics deploy around August Wilson and demonstrate how “My Black Friend” shapes the field of theatrical production as the liberal bourgeoisie used it to negotiate for their own interests during the upheavals of the culture wars. As this chapter explores, when the New York Times positioned itself in the field of race by staking claims to familiarity with blackness via August Wilson’s work in the 1980s and 1990s, it legitimized its own economic interests and political stances, and secured its position as theatrical authority. Yet Broadway’s bourgeois liberal interests made it vital to disavow its utilization of “My Black Friend;” indeed critics positioned themselves against one another by pointing out each others’ unsavviness in explicitly proclaiming their “black friends.”

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5 During the Wilson/Brustein debate, discussed in the conclusion, one critic takes another to task for “bragging about how many black people he has known,” a literal invocation and disavowal of
To ground this introduction, I want to provide one early example. In 1987, lead New York Times theatre critic Frank Rich\(^6\) found August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* compelling because of its unique “verbal music, emotional heat, and considerable humor in the small details of its canvas,” meaning, the details of the characters, language, and world that Wilson created. By spending time with Wilson’s “canvas,” Rich implied, one could grow deeply familiar with the world of blackness.\(^7\) This promise, as well as the implied closeness and authenticity of friendship and familiarity, are central to how the Times constructed Wilson’s appeal throughout these two decades. As the chapter will explore, Rich’s advocacy staked the pleasure of Wilson’s works in their universality and familiarity. With this intimate yet broadly-legible familiarity, Times critics granted audiences legitimacy, authorizing the audience to engage in a politics of “My Black Friend” through how the characters should make the audience feel. Wilson can, as Rich continues in both description and invitation, “mak[e] an audience feel that it, too, has pulled a chair up to the table of history, to partake intimately of an epic feast.”\(^8\) The analogy of consuming an intimate feast is telling, however. bell hooks identifies this consumption-oriented desire for contact with blackness as consistent with racial hierarchy and anti-black racism;\(^9\) Rich’s language of an “epic feast” could serve as an example of the culture of consumption that hooks analyzes. Indeed, Saidiya Hartman and Brandi Wilkins Catanese explore the specific ways in which representation on the stage serves as a particularly powerful site of such contact, one

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\(^6\) Frank Rich was the *New York Times*’s controversial chief theatre critic from 1980-1993.


\(^8\) Ibid.

rich with a history of white supremacist domination that emerges through coercive relations of visuality, performance, and ownership.¹⁰

**A Roadmap**

I begin by contextualizing the *New York Times* and Broadway in the period just before the turn of the millennium. In order to understand how antiracism in this period was put to hegemonic ends, this chapter addresses how reviews of Wilson’s works constructed three elements. First I examine how theatre reviews depict race (and in particular blackness) as culture that was essentially musical and dangerous. I also address how racism is defined as discomfort with or lack of appreciation for black culture, and finally how reviews construct antiracism as intimate familiarity with this essential blackness. This complex of stances constituted a claim about the field of race, the staking of which successfully positioned the *Times* as an authority within that field. Although disavowed as such, by delineating the proper responses to racism the *Times* also delimited popular political action. This chapter then turns to the August Wilson-Robert Brustein debate as a moment when that disavowal faltered, revealing the *Times*’s moderate liberalism as positioned against materialist interventions in racial hierarchy. Finally, a brief epilogue transitions this history into the new millennium by acknowledging changes in the symbolic power of criticism revealed through responses to Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*.


The *New York Times* was certainly the most important print news source in New York in the 1980s; with other newspapers looking to it for guidance,¹¹ and because a national edition

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launched on 18 August 1980, it was also increasingly important across the US. Among its competitors it was the most cosmopolitan source for the serious, upper-middle-class liberal New Yorker interested in theatre. With the decreasing number of dailies since the 1950s, the *Times*, despite New York City’s extensive theatre scene, was one of only a few local papers to offer theatre reviews. Other newspapers offered theatre reviews but they cultivated very different tones in their reviews.

As discussed in the Introduction, Broadway theatre around the turn of the millennium appealed strongly to a distinguished class of wealthy, well-educated, white women, whether in official Broadway houses, or on tour throughout North America. While audiences were certainly not identical before the turn of the millennium, Broadway ticket prices and production costs (and gross margin) started their stark climb in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In another indication that theatre audiences of the early 1990s were shaped similarly to audiences today, successful Broadway productions in this time period also took on or retained many of the distinctive qualities with which they are associated today: rising ticket prices, large scale productions, big-name producers, long runs sprinkled with celebrities, a link with familiar film

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content (particularly, after 1994, with Disney’s productions), and nostalgia for the past “golden age” of Broadway including its associated depictions of social issues.\(^{17}\) Through symbolic negotiations (critics’ reviews and other cultural reflections) the *Times* established itself as an acceptably liberal authority on racial politics and retained its position within this economy.

Broadway criticism of the 1980s was part of a theatrical environment of demands for material redistribution, although those demands were limited to redistributing the material resources of theatre through employment (such as through the end of inequitable hiring and payment practices), and through increased opportunities for playwrights and actors of color and the implied increase in representation that would accompany these changes. For example, substantial critiques of exclusionary hiring practices spurred the Actors’ Equity Association (AEA), the professional actor’s union, to implement the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP). The NTCP, which emerged out of a 1986 Nontraditional Casting Symposium that famously featured James Earl Jones as Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, was the result of a significant amount of on the ground advocacy and exploration by members and leadership of the Union. Indeed, the NTCP was not Actors’ Equity’s first post-’60s initiative to address employment opportunities for actors of color. AEA also created a Script Advisory Committee in 1980 to read scripts and suggest opportunities for nontraditional casting; it both conducted negative publicity campaigns and sued a number of productions for systematically excluding Latino actors (notably productions that were set in Latin America: Betty Neustat’s *The Price of Genius*, set in seventeenth-century Mexico, and *Goodbye, Fidel*, in

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
twentieth-century Cuba); and it censured productions set in feudal Japan that were cast without AAPI actors, all well before the *Miss Saigon* controversy.\(^{18}\)

In contrast to these material demands, *Times* reviews practiced racial liberalism as appropriate antiracist politics: they defined race as culture, asserted black universalism, and claimed a familiarity with blackness as central for understanding Wilson’s works. This was the familiarity with blackness that the *Times*, under the flag of its chief drama critic Frank Rich, reserved to distinguish themselves, and utilized to delimit radical political action. For most of the 1980s and 1990s Frank Rich, popularly known as the “Butcher of Broadway,” served as the chief drama critic and wielded exceptionally controversial power. Perhaps no other theatre critic was as reviled as Rich. Immediately treating Rich’s history in film criticism with suspicion, the theatre community’s initial distrust of Rich as NYT theatre critic deepened during a series of miserable seasons on Broadway. “Speculation had it that his reviews, which were distinguished by their sarcasm, were killing productions. Suspicion soon turned to fear.” Part of the suspicion was Rich’s politics; Rich’s reviews reflected on contemporary themes in a way that was unabashedly liberal. Eventually Rich moved from the theatre column and secured a *New York Times* columnist position writing “cultural op-eds” “perfectly tuned to the voice of Manhattan liberalism.”\(^{19}\) Dislike of Rich was an open secret, one which regularly flared up via attacks from other theatre-makers: critic Robert Brustein, playwright David Hare, and producer David

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Merrick all engaged in well-publicized attacks on Rich’s power.\textsuperscript{20} Still, this animosity indicated not that Rich’s power was necessarily exceptional, but that \textit{New York Times} critics’ reviews were a highly-contested site of meaning-making for Broadway’s bourgeois audience during this time period, and thus rich with symbolic capital. The \textit{Times} led by Rich would take a significant role in defining liberalism as the Broadway-class-appropriate response to African American theatre and to racism, along the way guiding this class of readers to authorize prominent news corporations as politico-economic authorities.

This period is often identified in scholarship as the “culture wars.” Hazel Carby vitally reframed the 1980s and 1990s culture wars as the “multicultural wars,” asserting the continued significance of racism and white supremacy during this time despite the multicultural projects and proclamations of the academy. In numerous essays Carby critiqued the transformation of cultural politics into the defense of textual and embodied representation, highlighting how during and beyond the culture wars “cultural forms have a social mobility and accessibility that is denied to the majority of black people.”\textsuperscript{21} This period was defined by a substitution of representation for politics, the singular exceptional representational figure of “My Black Friend,” as I will explore. Carby also repeatedly demonstrated that multiculturalism was significant to “liberal, as well as conservative, opposition”\textsuperscript{22} to ongoing demands for material redistribution. In the 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism was not the solution to racism but the very process by which racial hierarchy persisted in the face of such demands. In a similar vein, Jodi Melamed expanded on Carby’s foundational interventions by rehistoricizing the “culture wars” as part of this period’s state-sponsored antiracism: the transition from racial liberalism to liberal

\textsuperscript{20} Fitzgerald, “Rich, Frank,” 491.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{22} Hazel Carby, \textit{Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America} (New York: Verso, 1999), 247.
multiculturalism. Like Carby, Melamed noted that the cultural politics of liberal multiculturalism serve as “counterinsurgency against the robustly material antiracisms of the 1960s’ and 1970s’ new social movements.”

Melamed critiqued the politics of liberal antiracisms, in particular emphasizing how these antiracisms serve to promote US capitalist agendas and the political status quo, and becoming the very vehicle by which racial hierarchization is furthered.

Melamed works through the official antiracisms of the culture wars in a high-stakes site: at college campuses. Within this site, activist demands for “third-world colleges, Black and ethnic studies departments, La Raza studies, Asian American studies, and Native American studies were attempts to seize the authorizing power of the university as a massive racializing institution where knowledge was produced, validated, and bound to effect power.” In response, liberal multiculturalism supported a positive pluralism through curricular and canon reform.

While demonstrating that these racial politics are central to the state’s project, Melamed does not insist on a unilaterally top-down implementation of official antiracisms; rather, institutional actors are key to how these structures are supported and disseminated. Taking up this rehistoricization of racial capitalism, I ask how white bourgeois liberalism addressed noted contradictions between liberalism’s new philosophy of pluralism and the continued dominance of white bourgeois liberals within a racial capitalist order. I examine critical negotiations over the work of one African American playwright, August Wilson, in that bastion of bourgeois symbolic power, the Broadway theatre, to reveal the means by which specific US participants supported and implemented the political changes of the post-Keynesian political economy. I find

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 94.
26 Ibid., 111-7.
that in theatre, liberalism persists strongly through the antiracist frame the *New York Times* uses to appeal to and regulate popular antiracist sentiment.

While Frank Rich, as head drama critic, was most powerful within this context, I address the *Times* as a whole because other more minor figures (such as Mel Gussow, Enid Nemy, and Samuel G. Freedman, among others) also took part in the *Times*’s project of sanctifying August Wilson along a variety of fronts. In addition to hundreds of reviews and articles on specific shows, artists, and seasons, throughout the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, the *Times* also offered occasional pieces on the state of the field of black theatre. These articles examined and helped define African American theatre on Broadway. In these pieces, the *Times* addressed discourses of racism and antiracism to flex its symbolic authority and advance its political and economic position. I first examine these articles because they are particularly revealing of the shifting priorities that defined the context of August Wilson’s success and the *New York Times*’s response to racism on the Broadway stage.

The first such contextual piece is Mel Gussow’s “Blacks on Stage: The Progress is Deceptive.” Likely spurred by the AEA’s 1986 Nontraditional Casting Symposium, this reflection on the state of black representation on Broadway was written by Mel Gussow in early August of 1986.27 Gussow’s piece painted a genealogy of black Broadway and then reflected on potential future directions. It began by listing black performers and black and interracial plays on Broadway and Off-Broadway in recent years. Gussow continued, “however, the progress, such as it is, is deceptive,” noting critically that this inclusion was limited to musicals, “classics” and certain individual performers. Gussow’s truncated black history also neatly revealed what black theatre mattered to critics and artists in the 1980s: starting with Lorraine Hansberry and Jean

Genet, Gussow mentioned Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins only in passing before moving quickly on to James Earl Jones’s rise to fame, downplaying or skipping almost all of African American theatre history. Gussow also emphasized the importance of interracial casts and downplayed black theatre companies by noting only a few of the latter which barely “remain,” but emphasizing the significance of “integrated casts” at Yale Repertory Theater (Yale Rep), Milwaukee Repertory, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and in Joseph Papp’s productions broadly. Gussow identified structural problems (such as the lack of opportunities for black playwrights and black actors outside of musical theatre), but whenever an explicit acknowledgement of racial hierarchy was expressed was careful to keep to quoting others; racism was too much “opinion” to be authorized by the critic’s purportedly neutral voice of reporting. In a similar vein, Gussow downplayed the significance of explicitly pro-black Baraka, Bullins, the Negro Ensemble Company, and the New Federal Theatre, while highlighting theatre makers noted for their “crossover” successes: Hansberry, Genet, Yale Rep, and Joseph Papp. In doing so Gussow both defined social acceptability (as neither the explicit acknowledgement of racism, nor as pro-black) and asserted Wilson’s potential as part of a history of socially-acceptable black plays.

Gussow remained “neutral” in response to the then-upcoming Nontraditional Casting Symposium (identifying it as simply “part of an affirmative action program”), which came up in response to material demands from interview subjects Douglas Turner Ward (seeking increased productions of black plays) and Debbie Allen (critiquing the reduction in number of successful black actors since the 1960s). Overall, the article obscures the stakes of the field; it is unclear if the problem with the field is the need for more roles, for more shows, or for nontraditional casting choices. Instead of taking a position, Gussow concluded the article by turning to Ossie
Davis, who revealingly critiques the rise of individualism in the theatre (calling it “theater on a hit-and-run basis; everyone [today] goes out with his own pair of dice”) while asserting the need for hope for the future.\(^\text{28}\) This confused ending exemplifies a struggle between various responses to racial hierarchy in the theatre. How could Broadway best answer the call of the 1960s: by including only certain individuals (as Davis critiques), by changing its aesthetics (as the Non-Traditional Casting Project suggests), or by undertaking deliberate projects of material redistribution (more productions, with more roles for more actors, as Allen and Ward demand)? Yet not taking a side did not mean Gussow was “neutral.” Though Gussow worked with and through the New York African American theatre community to cull these responses, the article’s conservative genealogy of black theatre coupled with its indecisive stance on future directions was an ultimately conservative defense of Broadway’s status quo.

The next contextual piece I will examine is from the middle of June 1987. Eric Pace’s article “Blacks in the Arts: Evaluating Recent Success” differed significantly from Gussow’s in its terms.\(^\text{29}\) Instead of explicitly considering different methods of responding to racism, Pace’s state of the field article was framed around various opinions on why black performances were increasingly popular. In moving away from a consideration of how theatre should respond to racial injustice, the article’s structure asserted an answer to that question: by moving away from structural to individual responses. To summarize, Pace spent most of the article celebrating acceptance and individualism (a bootstraps ideal), reflecting on how black and white artists and scholars have changed their own “attitudes toward the arts and involvement in them.”

Supplementing the artists’ and scholars’ missions for self-improvement was a similar goal for the

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
audience. While white audiences might feel guilt and regret over “decades of enjoying [black] performances while discriminating against the individuals,” the solution the article proposed was distinctly to eliminate the latter half of this formulation, not the former. Pace capitalized on actor James Earl Jones’s popularity to support a discussion of colorblindness; Jones claimed that black performance’s “broad appeal” was in its universally “American” nature. Perhaps because of this alignment in favor of colorblindness as a strategy for overcoming individual discrimination, this article brought much less nuance to the idea than did Gussow or the AEA.\(^\text{30}\)

Tolerance, colorblindness, and individualism were key and overlapping themes this piece used to explain black popularity, which simultaneously stood in as techniques for responding to racism. The most important formulation for the article, the factor that links these three overlapping techniques, is the anti-political content of broadly successful works. For example, Pace highlighted “The Cosby Show’s” popularity, in the process juxtaposing “comfort” to being “threatened [by] provocative material.” Exploring one example, the article noted: “it is not that black performing artists are abandoning their heritage. The distinctive gospel intonations in Whitney Houston’s sounds clearly affirm her roots. Yet at the same time, those [songs] contain no confrontational or polemical material, which might have limited the large audience that exists for her singing.”\(^\text{31}\) Popular black performances could be authentic and distinctive, but could not and should not be significantly provocative.

While this example was in pop music, the conclusion of the article returned deliberately to theatre. To wrap things up, Douglas Turner Ward and Arthur Mitchell (then director of the Dance Theater of Harlem) expressed their frustration in individualized terms with extant

\(^{30}\) Ibid. A sociologist, speaking of “The Cosby Show,” is delighted that “the public accepted [Bill Cosby] as just a person, accepted his right to be colorless.”

\(^{31}\) Pace, “Blacks in the Arts,” 1.
“prejudice,” “frustrations[,] and rejections,” while Jones (the wildly popular star of August Wilson’s *Fences*) took by far the most conservative stance, asserting that the “agitprop” theatre of the 1960s “insulted” “white audiences” to the detriment of black theatre’s popularity. With theatre figures Ward, Mitchell, and Jones affirming individualism in the final comments, theatre’s significance (among the various discussed pop forms) was highlighted. What theatre in particular brought to popular culture’s representations of blackness was a celebration of individual self-improvement, as well as deliberate work to comfort white audiences by insulating them from avowedly political content. At the same time, this extended a disavowed political position: instead of weighing a variety of structural responses, Pace moved the reader towards individualism and modeled a superficial neutrality to obscure interestedness. The issue of Broadway’s role in responding to racism was again raised explicitly in the *New York Times* not even a year after the AEA’s symposium, to very different effect. Spurred by the more radical demands for material redistribution made by the AEA around non-traditional casting, the *Times* moved to a more centrist liberal (though again superficially neutral) stance.

The final contextual article I look at shows that this shifts even further by the next “state of the field of black theatre” *Times* article, in 1988: Jeremy Gerard’s ““Broadway Is Offering Black Theatergoers More Reasons to Go.”” This article is such a celebration of the presence of black on Broadway that it is practically an advertisement. Emphasizing inaccurately that, “Broadway has more offerings for black theatregoers than at any other time in memory,” Gerard was nonetheless careful to comfort non-black readers. “That’s not to suggest that these shows have only limited appeal; indeed, attendance figures indicate that a broad range of people have been seeing them.” In particular, Gerard emphasized business practices that could be used to

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32 Ibid.
attract more diverse audiences; most of these were marketing recommendations. The piece concluded with an assertion that these plays were not black but rather were “American treasures.”33 By this point, the Times had firmly established its stance on racism: disavowing the business of Broadway as a site of political and economic negotiation, it asserted racial representation as a pleasurable, consumable offering for potential customers (white and black alike). The Times would promote these values through affinity with popularly circulating desires for interracial friendship.


The personal biography of American playwright August Wilson, including upbringing, influences, aesthetics, and personal racial identification, is well-documented and celebrated.34 Most famous of Wilson’s contributions to American theatre are the collection of plays on black American life in each decade of the twentieth century. Between 1984 and 2007, nine of these ten Pittsburgh Cycle plays made it to Broadway (all except 1982’s Jitney).35 Wilson’s works were a distinctive feature of the turn-of-the-millennium Broadway era. The New York Times was central to instituting this distinction, using a variety of techniques to establish their political economic authority while canonizing Wilson.

Among the many ways the *New York Times* responded to August Wilson in the 1980s was to underline Wilson’s plays for their perceived uniqueness to the theatre scene. Wilson was highlighted when describing a season as “unusual,” as well as in a review establishing Broadway’s deep “need” for regional theatre, implying a lack. Wilson’s works were celebrated as gauges of “daring” or “eclectic[ism]”; they indicated for critics that regional theatre offered a “deeper and wider” selection of plays than usual that was promising for Broadway’s future. This tactic served to capitalize on what these reviews in fact mass-produced: Wilson’s difference. The values ascribed to Wilson’s work—unusual, eclectic, daring, different, wider, needed—delimited blackness even as they posited norms against which Wilson’s work was placed, in the process affirming critical control over categorization. Broadway without Wilson, by contrast, was usual, average, boring, same, narrow, and unnecessary.

In addition to reviews that positioned Wilson’s work as abstractly different than the then-current Broadway scene, many responses were more specific: that difference was something ambiguously black. These reviews spoke about what Wilson’s plays say about “the black experience from the inside” without making significant claims to defining blackness. The earliest *New York Times* review to include an assessment of a Wilson piece (on *Ma Rainey’s...*
Black Bottom in workshop at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center’s National Playwrights Conference in 1982), described the play as revealing “the blacks’ perception of their place in America.” Later reviews found this piece a “paradigmatic drama of black aspirations,” and a “funny, spicy” “black American experience” that is undefined but must undergo “exorcism.”

Joe Turner was “a journey to the heart of…blackness,” while Wilson’s works as a whole represented the “American black odyssey.” In a similar vein, numerous reviews emphasized identity, without defining or describing it: Piano Lesson was said to exemplify “identities as black Americans,” while Fences was on “issues of identity and aspiration.” Whatever blackness and identity actually were, the impact of seeing them explored was enticingly and dangerously significant: Wilson’s works were “searing,” “devastating,” a “whammy,” they detonated “bombshells,” and an “explosion.” These descriptive words are both threatening and enticing, as conflict is a central convention of the theatre. In addition to the implied danger, they also worked to ultimately comfort the audience. For example, one review noted, “Mr. Wilson has

lighted a dramatic fuse that snakes and hisses through several anguished eras of American life. When the fuse reaches its explosive final destination, the audience is impaled by the impact.⁵⁴ Despite the violence of the imagery, the audience was of course not physically injured by shrapnel. The critics who praised these shows deliberately hailed the audience’s anxieties about comfort and black theatre to demonstrate that they themselves had emerged unscathed from the feared confrontation. These critics were proclaiming their successful confrontation with what became (through their writing it so) a common fear. They survived, and they also gained something: both a unique understanding of blackness, and a unique experience in the theatre worth the ticket price. The danger and their survival of it gave them the legitimacy of familiarity with blackness. The danger that was referenced signaled to the audience that these plays could speak to contemporary issues (unlike more “frivolous” African American musicals), yet the critics also indicated that these works did not “dangerously” implicate audience members as real-life confrontations about racism (or some African American theatre of the ‘60s) might have. The potential risk, excitement, and provocation of Wilson’s works were differentially distributed, however. For those who are not privileged by white supremacist capitalism, moments of racial confrontation do not explode randomly. They simmer omnipresently, “awake as a rumor of war” to appropriate Maya Angelou, at times heightened or boiling over, but governing, guiding, spitting, and hitting with quotidian regularity and more or less quiet acquiescence from those who hold these systems in place. The risk of potential confrontation over racism was only novel for, and thus exciting enough to generate such interest in, a predominantly white and comfortably bourgeois audience. Yet this fabricated danger is also what threatened to become ubiquitous, something that needed to be defended against. And of course the dangerousness of blackness is

an all-too-familiar formulation in this era of widely-publicized police murders of black people, particularly black men and boys.

Wilson’s reviews from the time observed a generic “blackness” far more than they tried to define specific features of that blackness, demonstrating at least a limited awareness of theatre’s complicity with creating and disseminating stereotype. In addition to the overwhelming sense of menace, only a few, foggy characteristics of blackness emerged when these critics discussed the black experience. Very early on, Wilson’s writing itself was “juicy,” Wilson’s characters were tragically “driven mad by despair and unearned self-loathing,” or they were perpetually searching for their “identity,” and regularly struggling against “assimilation.” Their past was untouchable, “dark and distant.” Indeed, characters frequently seemed “timeless.” For one Rich review, whiteness was the present while blackness was a past that was “spontaneous,” familial, and about the search for identity. “Identity” was occasionally given abstract shape, such as this backhanded definition around one of Wilson’s characters: “blackness is of an intensity that threatens to swallow up the universe - it’s [their] metaphysical condition, not merely the complexion of [their] skin.” At times the meaning of blackness was only revealed relationally. For example, when competing for a Tony Fences was described as “deeply personal” and able to “move theatregoers to catharsis,” unlike the “brilliant, coolly impersonal study” of its competitor Les Liaisons Dangereuses; blackness then, was neither brilliant, cool,

55 Ibid.
nor impersonal, but intimately personal. Still, while most of this content of this fabricated blackness was ambiguous, vague, and noncommittal, *Times* critics did sometimes play the essentialism game: Troy Maxson of *Fences* was “a natural athlete;” black people were “disinherited,” and some of them were “afflicted by violent passions.” It was actually Wilson who was much more likely than critics to make essentialist claims about these plays at this time, venerating the “value of beauty and poetry that was inherent in the way blacks spoke,” and reclaiming “the inner logic of their way of viewing the world of experience.” While these were explicit or implicit assertions about qualities of blackness, few of them carried the collective weight of the sense of menace and promise that existed across multiple reviews: a sense of danger staked not by Wilson but by *Times* critics became one of the most defining features of Wilson’s works.

If there was another definitive characteristic of these plays, a project as supported by the playwright as by the critics, it was the association between blackness and music. Above all, blackness à la Wilson was musical. It “hum[med] with the spellbinding verbal poetry of the blues,” and “float[ed] on the same authentic artistry as the blues music it celebrates.” Characters were “jazzy” and played “the powerful music that is wholly the black American’s

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62 Nemy, “Broadway,” 2. While this may stem from Wilson’s intention in creating the character, it resonates with enough late-20th century stereotype of African-Americans as naturally athletic that it warrants inclusion in this section.
64 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
own.”68 By emphasizing the musicality of Wilson’s representations of blackness, the New York Times critics (particularly Rich) established an appealing connection between these works and musicals, while simultaneously distinguishing Wilson’s serious plays from black musicals (particularly the 1981 Broadway hit musical Dreamgirls). The appealing description of this “music” helped encourage popular audiences to attend and relate, even as Rich was careful to distinguish the piece as more elite than musical theatre.

**Universal and Familiar: Critical Authority on Antiracist Politics**

Now that I have examined how the critics defined race around Wilson’s works, I will next take up their definitions of racism and antiracism and the interests that the Times defended through these definitions. After establishing familiarity with Wilson’s works, critics created a relation between that familiarity and universalism that established themselves as political authorities. This is not to say that Wilson’s works were not universal. We can celebrate Wilson’s noteworthy contributions to African American theatre, to American theatre, while nonetheless observing a deliberate project of, as David Savran has it, canonization by critics to their own benefit.69 The New York Times critics canonized Wilson in order to establish themselves as political authorities and to delineate appropriate liberal political actions.

The New York Times in particular celebrated and asserted Wilson’s universal appeal as the grounds for this canonization. One reviewer found that audience members both male and female, black and white, cheered for Rose in Fences.70 Another put Ma Rainey on par with Death of a Salesman, as “about the process by which any American sells his soul for what Arthur

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Miller calls the salesman’s dream. [sic] Yet another noted the universality of the struggle between generations. Early on even Wilson indicated hopes that critical recognition and audience support for these plays stemmed from their universalism. Regarding *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Dena Kleiman noted that the creators (including Wilson) thought “it an important piece for blacks to see” but also that “the play has a universal message about the search for self;” like Gerard’s piece discussed earlier, this article worked to keep the plays out of the niche market of black Broadway and establish them as widely appealing. And speaking about *Fences*’ popular and critical support when it won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Wilson noted, “I think they are responding to the humanity of the characters, recognizing themselves on some level. Of course, it is a black family. Maybe, for the first time, a general audience has been touched by blacks.” The sentiment resonated so strongly with the *New York Times* that they highlighted it in the same issue as their “Quotation of the Day” for 17 April 1987.

Wilson’s universal appeal and critical success was celebrated and affirmed with a variety of awards. Major awards included the Whiting Writers’ Award, as well as Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellowships. In 1984-1985 *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* won the New York Drama Critics Circle award for Best New Play, and a number of Tony nominations (although not Best

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77 Freedman, “A Voice From The Streets,” 36.
Direction of a Play). Fences won many more awards. In addition to the Pulitzer, in the 1986-87 season Wilson or Fences won the John Gassner Award for best American playwright, the best Broadway play from the Outer Critic’s Circle awards, the second highest number of Tony nominations for a straight play, the New York Drama Critics Circle best new play, and the Tony for Best Play and Best Direction of a Play. Fences star James Earl Jones won awards such as Best Performance in a Play from the Outer Critics Circle awards, the Drama League Award for “Most distinguished performance of the 1986-87 season,” Best Actor from the Drama Desk, and the Tony for Best Performance by an Actor in a Play; star Mary Alice won the Tony for Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Play. These awards served to secure the show’s legitimacy as serious theatre as well as to celebrate and disseminate it as a popular product.

The awards were a part of Wilson’s canonization. Times critics also worked to canonize Wilson through comparisons to other canonized playwrights, in particular Arthur Miller and

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Eugene O’Neill. From the first review, Wilson “works in the same poetic tradition as the man who inspired the O’Neill Center’s mission and who gave American theatre its past.” Like those of David Mamet and Miller, Wilson’s works are about “any American;” they also have the deep impact of Herman Melville. In one review Wilson is compared to Miller, Lorraine Hansberry, and Clifford Odets in almost the same sentence; in another, *Fences* is simply aligned with works as disparate as *Colored Museum* and *Dreamgirls*.

It is evident from the surprising breadth of these assertions and comparisons that this canonization is more about the work that the critics want to accomplish than about similarities in form. Of course, Wilson’s success is tied up with the commercial success of Broadway, but the critic’s interests in canonizing Wilson are actually politicoeconomic. As Melamed notes, official antiracisms structure spheres as diverse and wide-reaching as “law, public policy, economy, and culture” by producing and disseminating official discourses about, for example, “what counts as a race matter, an antiracist goal, or a truism about racial difference.” Similarly, popular antiracisms come about when audiences encounter institutions; they are the result of limiting available options for political action, utilized by institutional gatekeepers to direct mass antiracist sentiment to liberal racial capitalism. In this case, the *New York Times* is representative of the complex of media corporations that distribute information and that make up an institution commonly understood as “the news.” As an institution, the news exerts both symbolic and

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92 Freedman, “A Voice From The Streets,” 36. This review compares Wilson to both Mamet and Miller.
97 Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 11.
political-economic control, primarily by producing, manipulating, and delimiting the terms of the political. It is through the way that it presents its politics (either liberal or conservative) that distinguishes a particular publication or show as part of that institution; without the correct political stance a source of information is delegitimized as propaganda, entertainment, opinion, personal reflection, or elitism. Such distinctions are often made by the news institution itself, such as when Fox News calls a study on global warming liberal propaganda, or when a newspaper article places a critique or fact on even playing field with a contradictory opinion, or gives equal weight to opposing political stances and contains them within a “neutral” conclusion that includes both sides. Relatedly, information may be excluded from the news yet canonized by different symbolic authorities as scholarship, research, or science. In the specific case of reviews of Wilson’s works around the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Times controls what counts as theatrical criticism, as legitimate political economic critique, and as appropriate antiracist politics.

While the Times advances its racial liberalism as part of a superficial political neutrality, critics, nonetheless, reserve the right to make decisions on what counts as real politics for themselves, acting as gatekeepers who define and delimit the ways within which masses can and should respond to structural white supremacy. For example, Bernstein concludes that Wilson plays are “not expressions of black rage...[but] explorations of identity, quests for historical and spiritual truths among a people who have been twice uprooted.” This models the form of many other reviews: it takes the assessment and definition of black injustice out from the realm of black artists and their theatrical creations (which are then confined to being about an apolitical identity quest) and puts it into the hands of the critics (who assert and reserve for

\[98\] Ibid.
themselves the power to recognize and acknowledge oppression, and who do so on the most limited liberal terms). This is not to say that Wilson’s plays are not about a search for identity; rather, the New York Times delimits that as their only possible political meaning. This response limits public legitimation of popular understandings of responses to racial injustice to two categories: rage, or the search for identity. At the same time, bourgeois exceptionalism is a key feature of popular antiracisms. Here, the Times critics utilized “My Black Friend,” their intimate familiarity with blackness, to reserve for themselves the authority to observe and judge as privileged spectators, to decide what is just and unjust, and how to respond appropriately to injustice. These critics, unsurprisingly defending the sanctity and superiority of the theatre critic, mark out deliberately non-popular territory for themselves.

Times critics use this exceptionalism to engage in specifically racializing projects aligned with what Melamed describes as “racial liberalism.” In addition to equating race with culture, and enfolding exceptional African Americans into the exceptional realm of universalism, within the frame of racial liberalism literature served “to communicate the truth of black consciousness and conditions to white Americans.” Such a stance permitted the reduction of antiracist political action to individual consumption of culture. And if literature was more useful than sociology in this respect because of its emotional power, theatre functions as an even more powerful sphere where emotional impact is immediately affirmed and shared by the bourgeois audience members.

It is around these such projects that Times critics are often fairly explicit in positioning Wilson. Bernstein notes that together Wilson and Lloyd Richards have wrought

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101 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 22.
a theater that perceives the black experience from the inside, embracing it, evaluating it, transforming it from the status of tragic abstraction to the more complicated particulars of individual lives. The tradition of a black American theater is not a long one, going back only a generation or so to the work of such playwrights as Amiri Baraka. But while as Mr. Wilson puts it, the earlier black theater consisted in large part of black self-assertion, of “throwing out barbs” at white society, his plays examine the interior lives of ordinary black people seen over the decades.

Clearly, part of Wilson’s vitality to the theatre is that these plays can be positioned against the material demands of the Black Arts Movement (which is certainly not the actual origin of “black American theater”). Wilson is essentially different, both in generation and politics.

In addition to clearly positioning these works historically, and to suggesting the possibility of gaining intimate familiarity with blackness through them, the critics reveal something key about the hierarchization of the field of racial representation when they expose the disturbing fluidity that permits a conflation between author, actor, character, and blackness as all knowable, all intimately familiar. New York Times critics reveal this conflation on numerous noteworthy occasions. In a demonstrative human interest piece about the breakout star Charles Dutton, Enid Nemy draws an intimate connection between actor and character that stems from a troublingly racialized depiction of violence and justice.

“Ain’t nothing going to happen to me,” says Levee shortly before his world explodes in violence. It’s a line with deeper meaning than might be expected for Mr. Dutton, a 33-year-old graduate of the Yale School of Drama, whose performance is being hailed as “red hot” and “magnificent,” and who, overnight, has become one of the season’s most

talked-about actors. “Ain’t nothing going to happen to me,” Mr. Dutton recalls saying 12 years ago, before he was stabbed in the neck with an ice pick wielded by a fellow inmate at the Maryland Correctional Institution.\textsuperscript{103}

I quote from this at length to show the shape of this project; beyond emphasized key words or themes, the article is structured to demonstrate meaningful connection to blackness as a vital part of good theatre, a specific appeal to “My Black Friend.” This familiarity starkly delimits life possibilities for black people, such as actor Charles Dutton. In addition to literally reproducing Levee’s words in Dutton’s mouth when the latter is not acting, the structure of the article emphasizes this connection as significant in what makes Dutton a “magnificent” actor (and implicitly what makes “Ma Rainey’s” such an exceptional play). This article presents Dutton’s time leading up to and in prison as the fodder for a unique connection between actor and character. Another review of a production of \textit{Othello} at Yale Rep featuring Dutton in the title role reminds the reader of Dutton’s prowess in \textit{Ma Rainey}. Dutton “was so deeply in character that a skeptic might have wondered if his performance were an accident of circumstances.”\textsuperscript{104} Another article notes the special “intangible bond” that the ensemble members in “Ma Rainey” immediately developed with each other. Their almost natural group affinity is used to demonstrate how they are very much in real life like the “jazz group” they depict on the stage, although the majority of them had never before played an instrument and the show used taped music at multiple points. Like the group of collaborators they depict, the actors had an

“apparently effortless coordination and almost prescient relationship.” The racial familiarity of “My Black Friend” dissolves line between actor and character, in the process curtailing the actor’s potentials according to the limits of the world of the play.

In one of the earliest reviews of the first Wilson production to make it to Broadway, “Ma Rainey,” Frank Rich engages in a particularly egregious example of this conflation.

Mr. Dutton’s delineation of this tragic downfall is red-hot. A burly actor a year out of Yale, he is at first as jazzy as his music. With his boisterous wisecracks and jumpy sprinter’s stance, he seems ready to leap into the stratosphere envisioned in his fantasies of glory. But once he crash lands, the poison of self-hatred ravages his massive body and distorts his thundering voice. No longer able to channel his anger into his music, he directs it to God, crying out that a black man's prayers are doomed to be tossed “into the garbage.” As Mr. Dutton careens about with unchecked, ever escalating turbulence, he transforms an anonymous Chicago bandroom into a burial ground for a race's aspirations.

At the beginning of this paragraph on the actor, Rich has not specifically conflated Levee and Dutton: “this tragic downfall” could be that of either figure. The next sentence explicitly refers to the actor, and begins to attribute characteristics of Levee to that actor: music and jazziness. Yet the actors are required to play instruments on the stage, so it is still possible that Dutton might have had a jazziness on the stage. A similar vagueness operates for most of the next sentence: while the “wisecracks” were likely scripted, they might have been improvised given that some of the bandroom banter was; the “stance” certainly belongs to the actor. But this is a stretch; the writing is clearly meant to refer to both Dutton and the character Dutton plays. Indeed, ambiguity in the excerpt is abruptly foreclosed and the actor-character divide bridged by the end of this

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sentence: the “fantasies of glory” attributed to Dutton here are certainly actually Levee’s. And it is Levee who “crash lands,” and has a “poison of self-hatred,” but Dutton whose “massive body” is “ravage[d]” and whose “thundering voice” is “distort[ed]” by this. By the end of this quote, the conflation serves to make the actor the force of “unchecked” “turbulence” and destruction. The black body itself, the African American person present on the stage, is what permits the “transform[ation]” from the representational to the real, and in the process what is ultimately responsible for burying “a race’s aspirations.” Similarly, Rich attributes characteristics of Ma Rainey’s constructed blackness to the actress who plays Ma by eliminating the distance between the two figures. Rich notes, “Miss [Theresa] Merritt is Ma Rainey incarnate” before assigning Ma’s interpretation of the significance of the blues to Merritt. “In a rare reflective moment, she explains why she sings the blues. ‘You don't sing to feel better,’ Miss Merritt says tenderly. ‘You sing because that’s a way of understanding life.’” Rich’s observation about the band members that, “Gradually, we come to know these men,” might as much mean the actors as the characters. All of these examples demonstrate that the critics establish Wilson’s work as providing an unexpected insight into “real” blackness, and “real” black life.

It is not just the actors whose “true” natures seem to be revealed by Wilson’s plays. The characters are also positioned as revealing something intimate about all black people, about blackness broadly. Wining Boy in Piano Lesson, sits down at the piano and “plays the powerful music that is wholly the black American’s own.” And Fences serves as a key example in a Rich article reviewing the previous season, an article emphasizing how “the real world…made the theater year memorable, if at times painful, [with] the surprising extent to which that world

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107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
kept bursting through the playhouses’s walls.”  

Even articles outside of the Theatre section of the *New York Times* make such links, perhaps most ridiculously in George Vecsey’s comparison of baseball player Ray Dandridge to Troy Maxson. Wilson is also subjected to these conflations. One article starts a paragraph about generational differences with “The gap, if there is a gap, between [Wilson] and his characters,” before noting that Wilson “has absorbed the world of language and logic he has been portraying in his plays.” While identifying “seeking” as a theme in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Rich positions this as a project for Wilson as much as for the play’s characters. And Wilson’s language isn’t the careful craft of an artist but (according to Rich) a “vernacular” presented with what Freedman calls an “extraordinary acuity;” for Staples, Wilson’s language is at once geographically precise and broadly representative of blackness, “a naked vernacular language [brought] intact, a language from the streets of his native Pittsburgh—though it could be from anywhere, 125th and Lenox in Manhattan, Hough Avenue in Cleveland or the West Side of Chicago.”

Brent Staples’s review of *Fences* also conflates actor and character, and is particularly noteworthy for the relation between blackness, legitimacy, and class. In *Fences*, Troy Maxson was played by James Earl Jones, and Maxson’s wife Rose by Mary Alice. Writes Staples, “When Mary Alice finally takes a fist to James Earl Jones in the second act of August Wilson’s ‘Fences,’ what was suspected becomes solidly, startlingly clear. There are, we come to find two

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or maybe even three audiences at this play—and for some portion of them, this is not theater, this is life.” The writer, “a former critic,” identifies with that portion as a self-identified black male, and goes on to talk about the similarity between the critic’s own father and…not Troy Maxson, but James Earl Jones. It is Jones who is “so familiar [Staples] can faintly make out the odor of the man who has sweated all day.” And it is Alice, not Rose, who “pounds away at the barrel-chested Troy,” inspiring “some of the black women in the theater [to] vocalize or moan or nod or cry.” The audience knows these characters intimately, and this connects them, according to the critic, to the “tense stage encounters…between Troy and Alice.” These conflicts present moments when the bodily intimacy of the actors supersedes conventions of the theatre: “the air inside the theater seems to burn, leaving actors and audience signaling to each other among the flames.” These connections grant Wilson, the critic, and the audience special powers. Wilson’s work is somehow (through its language and actors) exceptionally real, and this realness is itself what makes these works so dangerous, edgy, and distinctive. “Wilson risks disapproval” in a work with “virtually no concessions to the middle class;” but it is this particular class position (not-middle…but maybe precisely middle) that permits Wilson to have “enfolded the universal in the particular, in a way that results in total accessibility—even if the audience response may not be typical for Broadway.” By so elevating *Fences*, Staples makes explicit the class interestedness of connecting the universal to the particular: ironically it is through a no-holds-barred yet upper-middle class depiction of a working-class problem to an upper-middle class audience that makes this work of theatre elite. Indeed, Staples strengthens this positioning against the “middle class” by referencing the genuinely popular audience. Critics who disagree with the power of Wilson’s works, Staples argues, do so either out of their “fear of and discomfort with the raw and the visceral,” or their “arrogance” and discomfort with “difference,”
which the audience’s behavior is meant to represent. Although not as powerful a figure as Rich, Staples secures authority both by so denigrating the class positioning of other critics, and by an explicit self-positioning as intimately connected with the characters and actors of this work. This permits Staples to uniquely interpret the black audience’s response (to speak for the black audience) and to legitimize Times readers’ familiarity with blackness. Yet the appeal to that familiarity is not necessarily any more legitimate for the black members of the audience that Staples identifies as the source of the audience’s behavioral “difference;” these audience members are not necessarily familiar with the lives of characters that Wilson depicts, as Staples’ own confused description of the work’s and the audience’s class demonstrates.\(^\text{117}\)

Such a construction of familiarity authorizes critics, readers, and some audience members with an intimate knowledge of other African Americans as a class, and makes critics in particular uniquely powerful. When interviewing Wilson about the blues in *Ma Rainey*, Freedman notes in the section of the article entitled “A Metaphor for Black Life” that at times “the blues becomes a language of blackness indecipherable to whites,” but at other times this music is “something more complex.” Nonetheless, Freedman is uniquely equipped to elucidate this “indecipherable” complexity through one character’s arc: Freedman notes that for “Levee—like many urbanized and middle-class blacks of the era—the blues represents the indignities of life in the rural South.”\(^\text{118}\) Thus the critic literally uses the familiarity of “My Black Friend” to instantiate their superior position: the play grants them an understanding of black music, and through that knowledge an understanding of black people, and in turn, then, an understanding of what is ungraspable about the play.

\(^{117}\) Staples, “‘Fences’: No Barrier To Emotion,” 1.
Thus far we have examined how critics gained symbolic power utilizing “My Black Friend.” Despite disavowals to the contrary, this symbolic power is not somehow neutral on racial capitalism simply because the critics take stances on racism and antiracism. The same *Times* articles that use connections between actors, characters, and blackness to gain authority and establish familiarity also engage in pointed maneuvers over definitions of race, history, and justice. One such example, Frank Rich’s first in-town review of Wilson’s first work to open on Broadway, is worth quoting from and analyzing at length.

Once the play has ended, [a] lyric has almost become a prophecy. In “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” the writer August Wilson sends the entire history of black America crashing down upon our heads. This play is a searing inside account of what white racism does to its victims—and it floats on the same authentic artistry as the blues music it celebrates. Harrowing as ‘Ma Rainey’s’ can be, it is also funny, salty, carnal and lyrical. Like his real-life heroine, the legendary singer Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, Mr. Wilson articulates a legacy of unspeakable agony and rage in a spellbinding voice. 119

In addition to emphasizing “Ma Rainey’s” magic (with its “prophecy” and “authentic artistry”), threat (it is “searing,” and might come “crashing down upon our heads”), and music (it is “lyrical” and connected to “blues music”), Rich conducts a powerful project with the last line. Alluding to white supremacy in the United States, Rich casts it as a past instead of present-day formation with the word “legacy.” In addition to thus delimiting its historical materiality, Rich constructs this history of white supremacy as affective, significant only because it causes “agony” and “rage.” Positioning this limited, affective past, as inarticulable renders it further immaterial, and invalidates real world articulations both of the political economic order of white

119 Rich, “‘Ma Rainey’s’ Opens,” 1.
supremacy and of possible resistances to that order (most famously, those of people like Fannie Lou Hamer and Malcolm X, as well as quotidian political articulations of the nature of justice and injustice). These minimizations of structural oppression and of the people engaged in political action to challenge this structural oppression are perhaps less surprising than the final move embedded in this statement: Rich positions Wilson and Rainey as uniquely capable of naming this impossible, affective history. By authorizing them as uniquely competent speakers (bestowing on them legitimacy), Rich is legitimized as the distributor of that capital. But Rich also works to make these artists the only figures that may articulate concepts of racial justice, even as critical interpretations such as Rich’s own delimit those articulations. Despite the impossibility of naming racial injustice, Wilson is magically (“spellbinding”) and uniquely able “articulate” the “unspeakable,” offering an acceptable interpretation of a history of injustice and possible reactions to that injustice. Rich distinguishes certain artistic producers from the masses, and vitally from any other political actors, authorizing artists alone to craft the meaning of racial justice and injustice; simultaneously Rich is secured as even more of an authority on these subjects, defining their meaning by defining these works, and disavowing the critic’s power (and the terms of the field) in the process. While *Ma Rainey* is also about the history of music, it is Rich who is careful to define the “war about identity” as “more profound” than that between “two generations of black music.” And Rich’s final lines of the review assert, “Mr. Wilson can’t mend the broken lives he unravels in ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.’ But, like his heroine, he makes their suffering into art that forces us to understand and won’t allow us to forget.”

Material resolution or even resistance to racial capitalism is foreclosed, and remembrance and recreation of suffering by artists are put forth as the only acceptable political solutions.

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120 Rich, “‘Ma Rainey’s Opens,’” 1.
121 Ibid.
According to Rich, not only are Wilson’s plays good antiracist politics, but they are also structured as the *only* permissible form of antiracist political action. Such artistic implication in racial capitalism has already been critiqued. Saidiya Hartman disrupts liberal humanism to reveal how “forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity,”¹²² along with “sentiment” and “enjoyment”¹²³ were integral technologies of US white supremacy during and beyond the era of chattel slavery. While the methods of enacting violence may have changed by the 1980s, a dynamic operation between pleasure, humanism, and property remains. It is no coincidence that Hartman connects an economy of violent representations including the familiar and quotidian (in examples such as legal contracts and the minstrel stage) under the rubric of the “spectacular character of black suffering;”¹²⁴ such an economy does not just include but depends on the spectacle-of-suffering-as-politics that Rich describes. The properly white liberal bourgeois understanding of racial justice with which Rich concludes this review is one that is very carefully positioned against radical or material antiracisms. It embraces consumption of suffering black subjectivity as the only acceptable political response to the “upward redistribution of resources.”¹²⁵

In addition to foreclosing political action, *Times* reviews such as this one also foreclose radical cultural politics. While clearly profiting from the “spectacular character of black suffering,” Rich’s liberalism also prescribes a very specific relationship to history, one where not being “allow[ed]…to forget” affirms and buttresses the readers’ existing understanding of history (political order). Any potential for *Ma Rainey’s* to be telling a new story—about being,

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¹²³ Ibid. 5.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 3, 3-5.
identity, society, and the other subjects of bourgeois white art, including art itself—is erased, and with it any potential disruptions it might offer regardless of Wilson’s possible interventions into definitions of injustice and justice. Instead, the white bourgeois readers of the *Times* not only have their view of history affirmed but demanded; to *not* reassert their version of history would do a disservice to black “suffering.” By the *Times*’s project African Americans, then, “suffer” in order to validate the white bourgeois liberal position within hierarchies of symbolic and economic capital.

**Economic Power: Capitalizing on Diversity**

In the *Times*, the aforementioned assertions of universalism were sometimes paired with claims of the unique black experience. For example, Samuel G. Freedman wrote, “Wilson writes of the particulars of black life, elevating his anger to a more universal plane.” This came only a few lines before Freedman analyzed Wilson’s depiction of the black experience, finding that Wilson’s characters “confront[] blackness not as a function of pigment but as a condition of the soul.” More obliquely, a discussion of the upcoming season at Yale Rep (which distinguishes the works of Wilson and Athol Fugard from descriptions of the more “traditional” plays) by Brent Staples, one of the few African American reviewers in this decade for the *New York Times*, indicated that in *Fences*: “[Wilson] has found the universal in the particular without compromising the latter.” Critics maintained this seemingly contradictory formation between “universal” and “particular” in order to maintain and disavow white authority over and inclusion in the “universal.” As I explored previously, identifying the particulars of black life in these works implies that the writer has an intimate familiarity with blackness (perhaps from a relationship with a black friend), enough intimacy to know that the details that make this work

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126 Freedman, “A Voice From The Streets,” 36.  
127 Staples, “‘Fences’: No Barrier To Emotion,” 1.
particular are specific but are neither stereotype nor idiosyncrasy. This familiarity promises white voyeurism of blackness; when coupled with the comforting rhetoric of universalism it works to convince white bourgeois Times readers that Wilson’s works are worth their time and money. Simultaneously, the critics reserve their authority to define “universalism,” and do so to the continued exclusion and denigration of blackness. These assertions are the equivalent of painting these works as “almost white,” in the process affirming the economic and symbolic value of whiteness.

I will next explore how the Times responses to Wilson’s works demonstrate a disavowal of an increased importance of some measure of diversity to economic success in the theatre. Several examples exist in the archives. An early Yale Rep production of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom had the opportunity to tour because it was easier to finance than Sam Shepard’s Buried Child; it was the first Yale Rep production to tour.\(^\text{128}\) In a more explicit demonstration, August Wilson’s Fences was one of the plays highlighted as critics celebrated that Broadway “bounced back” in the season of 1986-87. That recovery was distinctly economic: with 41 new productions of plays, musicals, and “other theatrical attractions,” there was a 7.5% increase in attendance and an approximately 9% increase in gross box-office receipts. In other words, Wilson’s work was an exceptionally noteworthy contributor to Broadway’s economic success.\(^\text{129}\)

In addition, Wilson’s works stand as an indicator of the financial capabilities of black plays. In a discussion of the risks involved in staging works about Malcolm X, Freeman noted “If a relatively mainstream drama like August Wilson's ‘Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' lost its entire investment on Broadway despite rave reviews, then what commercial producer would risk


money on a play about Malcolm X?” While *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*’s lack of financial recoupment was a barometer of Broadway’s quality, *Fences*’ critical success was accompanied by significant economic success. Although *Fences* reviews in San Francisco were initially negative, “the show struck a popular note; by the end of its run, it was playing to enthusiastic, sold-out houses.” Popular taste here clearly informed critical reception, demonstrating the (disavowed) significance of market interests to critical responses.

Some such examples are particularly evident from the vigorousness with which they are disavowed. For example, Lloyd Richards, artistic director of Yale Rep and Wilson’s longtime collaborator, felt the need to distance Yale Rep’s productions from economic interests of Broadway in an interview in the *New York Times*: “We never prepare a play for Broadway….If the entertainment industry finds what we do to be useful, particular producers approach us with their initiative. Yale licenses it and retains artistic control, but does not raise money.” In particular, the article emphasized Wilson’s *Ma Rainey*, *Fences*, and *Joe Turner*, as well as *Blood Knot* and *Master Harold… and the Boys* by Fugard. Later, Richards would assert that the long production process that these works underwent before they found economic success was a “production-sharing process” responding to challenges that “were not economic” but artistic.132 But this “production-sharing process” paid off: by the end of its first year, *Fences* grossed $11 million, an amount that was “a record for a nonmusical” at that time.133

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One discussion in the *New York Times* characterized August Wilson’s success as part of a broader trend of black artistic and financial success in popular culture. Wilson was likened to such popular black performers as Eddie Murphy, Whitney Houston, and Bill Cosby (as well as Paul Simon’s “Graceland” tour).\(^{134}\)

The struggles waged around August Wilson are indicative of larger popular political projects of the time. The stakes of the popular canonization of August Wilson are the result of struggles for redistribution in symbolic and economic power through the field of racial representation, a struggle waged in the space between white critics and black playwrights and tied to the political authority to define racial justice. Exploring these strategies provides a historical supplement for the points Angela Davis raises when asking “How does the persistence of historical meanings of racism and its remedies prevent us from recognizing the complex ways in which racism clandestinely structures prevailing institutions, practices, and ideologies in this era of neoliberalism?”\(^{135}\) As Davis asserts, defining racism and antiracism is integral to racism’s “clandestine” political restructuring. The liberal theatre critic and their understanding of legitimate political action reigns. The positionings that *Times* critics take on the meaning of racial justice result in an elite placement of those critics as authorities on such definitions, redistributing politically-laden authority over the audience (the masses, our public understanding) from black activists (who gained significant symbolic ground in the 1960s) back into the hands of white theatre makers. While I do not mean to assert that Wilson’s prominence represents a total recoupment of symbolic power by the forces of white supremacy, these critics

\(^{134}\) Pace “Blacks In The Arts,” 1.

worked to reclaim lost territory, engaging in an offensive in the field of racial representation against ground lost to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

**Conclusion: The *New York Times*, Material Redistribution, and the Wilson-Brustein Debates**

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the *New York Times* deployed familiarity with blackness in order to justify and expand its own symbolic authority: on the meaning of Wilson’s works, on blackness, and particularly on what kind of political action against racism was legitimate. It specifically supported antiracist political action as the distinct realm of artists depicting identity and memorializing suffering, and delegitimized and erased all other forms of antiracist political engagement, particularly any material politics confronting structural oppression. While I have drawn these conclusions from careful observations of *New York Times*’s critical reviews from the 1980s and 1990s, these patterns are not merely my interpretation. The *Times* made its political and economic project explicit during a conflict over contemporaneous political-economic issues of theatre: colorblind casting and arts funding for black theatre companies. The disavowal mechanisms of “My Black Friend” failed around what is known as the Wilson-Brustein debate, revealing the *Times*’s liberal bourgeois interests.

August Wilson’s 1996 speech for Theatre Communications Group, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” is positioned in theatre history as the opening blow in a fight about black theatre and colorblind casting between Wilson and theatre critic Robert Brustein. The speech was published in *American Theatre* only a few months later; Brustein and Wilson responded to one another in a series of published essays as well as in a public debate entitled “On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion Moderated by Anna Deavere Smith.” With 1,500 theatre community members to watch and another famous theatrical figure (known for
evenhandedness) to facilitate, the performance of the Wilson/Brustein conflict provided
spectatorial fodder coldly distant from the false familiarity expressed in *Times* critics reviews of
Wilson’s works. Brandi Wilkins Catanese has brilliantly and meticulously dissected the politics
of both artists’ positions to determine “how race performs institutionally,” concluding that their
confrontation qua performance served to solidify rather than challenge a cultural impasse.136
Wilson’s demands for material redistribution in “The Ground On Which I Stand” were not
unprecedented; Wilson self-aligned with the Black Arts Movement. Yet, by taking a stance on
the political economic relations at play in contemporary theatrical production, Wilson disrupted
the “friend” at the center of the disavowals of “My Black Friend,” and shook up the status quo.

In “The Ground on Which I Stand,” Wilson argued against colorblind casting, against
black participation in white plays, and for the funding of black theatre institutions.137 Only one of
the 66 League of Regional Theatres (LORT) houses extant while Wilson made this speech was
an African American Theatre: Crossroads Theatre of New Brunswick, New Jersey. Wilson
argued for material antiracist political action, even if that material intervention was limited to the
realm of theatrical production. That is, Wilson’s demands were material even if they were not
demands for economic redistribution or political changes outside of the theatre. This argument
opened a contradiction in the *Times*’s permissible political action. On the one hand, as we have
examined above, the *Times* argued that artists such as Wilson were uniquely endowed with
political authority on antiracism. On the other hand, such political authority was granted to these
artists because their politics empowered white audiences through the depiction of spectacles of
black suffering. Indeed, Rich celebrated Wilson by noting that the playwright “has once again

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shown us how in another man’s freedom we find our own.” Wilson’s speech contradicted these political and artistic restrictions and disrupted the *Times*’s purported familiarity with blackness. With the *New York Times* so central to establishing Wilson’s prominence as a playwright (and with so much at stake in that formation), I continue Catanese’s analysis by paying particular attention to what the *Times*’s maneuverings in response to the debate reveal about its political economic agenda.

While much of the conversation raged in print between June 1996 and January 1997, the *Times*’s attention to the debate was tellingly minimal and delayed. In fact, the first mention of the Wilson/Brustein debate did not appear in the publication until December 1996. The upcoming event between Wilson and Brustein was listed as one part among many in the “On Stage and Off” column on 13 December; the rest of the column’s content included theatre’s inclusion on the TV show “Jeopardy,” Christopher Plummer’s return to Broadway, and a few cast changes in the New York theatre scene. The snippet, with the subheading “Face to Face on Multiculturalism,” noted the upcoming live debate, emphasized the combative nature of Wilson and Brustein’s arguments, and summed up their viewpoints in a few sentences. By combining this information with other minor theatre-related events, the *Times* considerably downplayed its significance. A few weeks later, critic Alvin Klein took up the content of the debate only as a set-up for discussing the upcoming theatre season in New Jersey; in this comparison Klein

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exposed an incredibly imprecise and abstract understanding of Wilson and Brustein’s positions. Clearly up to this point the Times worked to align itself with neither Brustein nor Wilson.\footnote{Alvin Klein, “Theater; What Janus Might See on New Jersey’s Stages,” \textit{New York Times}, January 5, 1997, Late Edition Final, sec. 13NJ, 11.}

The week before the live debate, which was sold out (1500 seats at up to $20 a ticket\footnote{Frank Rich, “Journal; Two Mouths Running,” \textit{New York Times}, February 1, 1997, Late Edition Final, sec. 1, 19.}), Paul Goldberger’s much more substantial thought piece finally parsed the terms of the debate for the Times’s readers. Beginning by identifying Wilson and Brustein as the “two real antagonists” and “extreme voices” on differing sides of a “racial divide,” Goldberger prepped the audience to reject the limitations of both positions as extremist. The piece tellingly depended on Wilson’s own exceptional success on Broadway to conclude that “like most cultural and political debates, the Wilson-Brustein fracas has quickly deteriorated into an either-or, whereas the reality is more of a both-and.”\footnote{Paul Goldberger, “Critic’s Notebook; From Page to Stage: Race and the Theater,” \textit{New York Times}, January 22, 1997, Late Edition Final, sec. C, 11.}

Wilson’s success, which the Times was so significant in crafting, was suddenly no longer worthy of celebration, but a tool against the argument for economic redistribution, suggesting that the Times was always predominantly interested in Wilson for political-economic reasons.

Goldberger’s article was neither neutral nor apolitical; it critiqued Wilson for not defending colorblind casting as “one of liberalism’s prize achievements in the theater, the recent trend toward ‘nontraditional,’ or colorblind, casting, which has opened up numerous employment opportunities for black actors.” And the aforementioned “both-and” compromise that Goldberger advocated was not “both” at all: Goldberger believed it necessary to maintain the existing aesthetic standards for which Brustein advocated, and had no space for Wilson’s separatism. “It is no longer possible to imply, as Mr. Brustein does, that race does not matter….But does that
mean that it has to matter quite as much as Mr. Wilson says it does?” Goldberger’s explicit liberalism is clearly aligned with Brustein’s (conservative) position in the debates, and against Wilson’s redistributive politics.

Vitally, the Times encouraged its readership to see the debate as a work of theatre in order to distance themselves from the political-economic reality to which it spoke. Goldberger wrote, the “rhetoric is worthy of a play in itself, and each side has been reveling in its hyperbole as the noise level has increased. But both men are too smart, and too politically savvy, to believe in the pure, unfettered and exaggerated positions they have been advocating.” By treating Wilson and Brustein’s positions like the plot of a play, Goldberger encouraged audiences to position themselves above the fray. Indeed, Goldberger suggested that a larger feature of contemporary drama hung over the debate: the conflict between Wilson as artist and Brustein as the critic who did not like Wilson’s work. Goldberger identified this as the real issue that led these theatre-makers to their extreme positions. The connection between the Wilson-Brustein debate and performance was used to claim that both sides were ultimately less invested in the political than they seemed to be, and to indicate that a savvy audience member would similarly know better. Even though the piece was published before the live debate, this downplaying of politics occurred simultaneously with the Times siding strongly with Brustein’s position. While the Times took and encouraged a stance against economic redistribution, the debate was structurally depoliticized, and Brustein and Wilson’s stances were marked as individual and apolitical.

Following the debate, William Grimes reviewed the evening. Grimes concluded that while both men were dogmatic, Brustein at least approached the evening as “good theatre.”
Brustein goaded, “we have provided drama if not enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{143} The position of the debate as theatre \textit{instead of} politics was maintained and affirmed in Frank Rich’s “review” a few days after “On Cultural Power.”\textsuperscript{144} Observing that, “both men narcissistically fiddle (and bicker) while the world of serious culture they share burns,” Rich, like the rest of the \textit{Times} critics, asserted Brustein’s victory “on most points.”\textsuperscript{145} Provocatively, and emblematic of the relations examined throughout this chapter, Rich mocked Brustein’s ignorance about black culture, which Brustein demonstrated in a variety of ways including by “bragging about how many black people he has known,” a literal invocation and disavowal of the popular antiracism “My Black Friend.” Like the earlier \textit{Times} reviews, Rich also concluded that this debate should be considered theatre, in this case, tragedy: “dreadful theater, as it happens, can be tragic too.” Importantly, “the evening’s subtext was as illuminating as its text was not. The very failures of Monday’s debate mirrored the cultural and racial divides in America right now.” In suggesting that the solution to Wilson and Brustein’s “tragic” failure to communicate was to cross “cultural divides,” Rich took Brustein’s position in the same breath as declaring such a position the neutral one within their “fight for their (and our) common cultural good.” Brustein’s position against economic redistribution was already structured for legibility and authorization from the 1990s \textit{New York Times}.\textsuperscript{146}

Catanese notes that the theatricalization of the debate “cultivated in their audience an appetite for [the] polar opposites,” but the \textit{Times} was careful to guide those opposites to the same

\textsuperscript{144} Rich reviews the debate even though at the time Rich was an Op-Ed columnist. Rich was clearly still the authority on August Wilson. Frank Rich “After 13 years of drama and farce. . . EXIT THE CRITIC. . . humming the music and settling the scores,” \textit{New York Times}, February 13, 1994, Late Edition Final, sec. 6, 32.
\textsuperscript{145} Rich, “Journal; Two Mouths Running,” 19.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
purportedly (and falsely) apolitical conclusion. Although it could rely on appeals to familiarity with blackness to do so, the *Times* reasserts its valuation of racial capitalism in the most explicit terms: black theatres did not deserve money because they did not adequately include nor compensate an inherently-deserving whiteness. Yet in future articles the *Times* guided the Broadway class to accept the outcome of the debate as justified increasingly through reassertions of “My Black Friend.” With one exception, all subsequent *Times* discussions of the debate use the moment to mark out careful narratives of compromise, neutrality, and universalism in the theatre. By the time Charles Isherwood reported on Wilson’s death, Brustein and Wilson were re-positioned as “friendly antagonists.” In this way, the *New York Times*’s familiarity with blackness was ultimately reclaimed, even as it continued to assert its authority to define antiracist politics.

As the debate itself indicates, by 1996, the colorblind casting that so threatened white theatre institutions around the AEA’s 1986 Nontraditional Casting Symposium had become not only non-threatening but a reliable source of philanthropic and governmental income for numerous regional theatres, almost all of which were predominantly white. The suggestion that

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black theatres, black companies, and black theatrical production deserved economic equity without needing to include white people to justify such funding became a radical antiracist threat to racially-hierarchical resource distribution. The debate drew out the New York Times’s political position, in favor of racially-hierarchical economic distribution, out from under the veil of disavowal. In response, the Times struggled to retain its symbolic authority in order to assert the legitimacy of its political economic position, and to reestablish its mechanisms of disavowal of its interests in the face of its opposition to Wilson’s material antiracist demands. Critics’ claims to neutrality and the Times’s extant symbolic dominance continued to validate this institution’s moderate liberalism, even when their definition of appropriate political and economic behavior was pitted against an earlier source of their authority on racism and antiracism.

Epilogue: Critical Reception of Topdog/Underdog and the Destabilization of Symbolic Power after 9/11

The extant profitable links between race and politics of the late twentieth-century were severed as the events of 11 September 2001 turned the practice of racism and antiracism in the United States on its head. If any play from this time period can exemplify the clarity and confusion of this break, it is Suzan-Lori Parks’s widely-celebrated and awarded Topdog/Underdog (2001). In addition to being developed during this key time period, Parks is in many ways August Wilson’s successor as well as contemporary. Parks was strongly influenced by Wilson, and was even slated to direct a posthumous revival of Wilson’s Fences, although the director was ultimately Kenny Leon. Topdog/Underdog ran on Broadway in 2002, the

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season between Wilson’s *King Hedley II* (2001) and the 2003 revival of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. And Parks identified Wilson as a “literary hero.”

In reviewing Parks’s influences, Christine Woodworth emphasizes that the “focus on the experience of African Americans connects Parks to August Wilson….Stylistically, Wilson and Parks are radically different as Wilson primarily employed a realistic approach…[and] Parks’s dramaturgy remains decidedly abstract, with the exception of *Topdog/Underdog*. Of all of Parks’s works, *Topdog/Underdog* was positioned as the most like August Wilson’s, yet critics’ popular antiracism “My Black Friend” failed to adequately capture this work. Indeed, the commercial and critical success of *Topdog/Underdog* arose from playwright Suzan-Lori Parks’s knowledge, exploitation, and critique of the significance of familiarity with blackness to Broadway at the turn of the millennium.

Parks revealed this knowledge in numerous earlier works, including “New Black Math,” where Parks says, “a black play aint playing your game, it might look like it's playing your game, but if it looks like that to you, then that just means you been played, honey.” While most reviewers identified *Topdog/Underdog* as realism, the similarity between the game that is so central to the plot of *Topdog/Underdog* and the game referred to in “New Black Math” is more than just coincidental. Elin Diamond reminds us that realism “operates in concert with ideology.”

Parks used the structure of 3-card monte to critique the ideology of the early twenty-first century theatre world by working against the critical diagnosis of realism and its

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associated expectation for intimate familiarity with blackness, in the process revealing the attendant violence of “My Black Friend.” If the 3-card monte forms the structure of Parks’s play, it is vital to begin by noting that the card game is a hustle, a scam. It is not a game of chance, as numerous scholars and critics identify it. The odds of winning are not one in three. The trick is to convince the target of the scam (in this play, and colloquially, the mark) that the game can be won so that they will bet. We can see that, like the title *Topdog/Underdog*, the name of the game is a misdirection. Calling the hustle “3-card monte” puts the focus on the three cards, on each individual hand, but the actual hustle takes three hands. A plant in the crowd bets on the first hand in order to draw the attention of the mark; this person may win or lose, but the round is played without a sleight-of-hand trick at the end. The second hand is the first the mark plays, putting down their money and committing to the game. This is evident from Lincoln’s patter: “One good pickll get you in 2 good picks you gone win.” It is also played “straight,” without a sleight-of-hand trick. The dealer wants the mark’s money, so the dealer lets the mark win. The third hand, the second pick for the mark, is the only hand with a sleight of hand or other trick. There are a number of different strategies that can be used to rig the hand, from replacing the winning card on the table with another card kept up the sleeve, to deceptive card throw moves or bet manipulation involving the sideman, a plant in the crowd.

The hustle is not constrained by the rules that appear to delineate it. Once the mark has put her money on the table, the dealer has already won. Lincoln says of the hustle “Theres 2 parts to throwing cards. Both parts are fairly complicated... what yr doing with yr mouth and what yr doing with yr hands.” The “talk,” “what yr doing with yr mouth,” serves as distraction, disavowal, and enticement, offering the promise of a grander success story in addition to

160 Ibid., 75.
professing the false rules. If the play is Parks’s hustle, the “talk” is the white noise or “surfeit of influence” that Sandy Alexandre identifies in this play, arguing that, “Parks attempts to make a claim for the ‘pure true simple state’ of her characters by holding their identities in critical tension with the ever-overdetermining factors of race, class, gender, history, and biography.”

The text inundates readers with the extra baggage of representative tropes that are particularly tied to myths of black masculinity to convince them they know Parks’s rules of the game: realness, inner turmoil over family and history, the struggle, the hustle, alcoholism, gun violence, sexism, sexual promiscuity, dishonesty, theft, poverty and precarious labor, etc. Indeed, scholars have already variously noted Lincoln and Booth’s emptiness as characters; their black masculinity is all vertiginous surface layers, with no essential nature. While Parks’s characters spout “the talk,” Parks is engaging in the “walk,” “what yr doing with yr hands.” It turns out that the black “identity” with which the audience might presume itself familiar is the black deuce (note that the deuce is a single card with two black spades on it) that is slipped off the table. The violence of theatrical criticism is revealed grasping for this missing black identity.

Ben Brantley’s first New York Times review was conscious of the deep theatricality of Topdog/Underdog yet found the brothers “ominously named,” and warned, “don’t doubt their capacity for wounding. They aren’t named Lincoln and Booth for nothing.” The critic’s suspension of belief was abandoned by the second act, which Brantley found to be more full of “naked confrontations.” Because of this Brantley concluded that Parks’s “point” is that “social

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identity, even when it’s impersonation, is destiny, and of course booth and Lincoln are fated to act upon their names.” Although faulting the “game” in which “these men are trapped,” Brantley still disavows theatre critics’ complicity in the violence and finds “the outcome…predetermined.” In a later review, Brantley still finds their names to imply “fatalism,” noting that the story is “a variation of sorts on the story of Cain and Abel,” and concluding that “poses and pretenses…somehow take you closer to the truth” of an “essence of the characters [that] is in their language.” Also in the Times, Margo Jefferson both replicates and complicates critical desire for black familiarity. While introducing the review of both Topdog/Underdog and Carl Hancock Rux’s Talk Jefferson proclaims, “more and more, I think, we want the ties between the word onstage and the world offstage to become more intricate and binding,” asserting an audience desire for access to authenticity and for intimacy and familiarity through the stage. Yet Jefferson doesn’t draw any simple conclusions about Lincoln and Booth’s identity from a presumed connection to a familiar, generalized blackness. Jefferson gets closest with more nuanced observations: “Like the South and the North, they are divided brothers; like Lincoln and Booth, they are actors in a theater of war.” While Jefferson does feel a kind of “intimacy” with their pain, there is no discussion of “inevitability,” “fate,” or “destiny,” no critically-prescribed solution to racial conflict that stems from this connection. Another Times review, this one by Don Shewey, is aptly entitled “This Time, the Shock Is Her Turn Toward Naturalism.” (In it actor Jeffrey Wright says “the play is perched on top of a historical inevitability….At the end of the play, is their destiny fulfilled, or were they supposed to do  

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something different and they missed?” Shewey avoids this revealing statement.)

While the *Times* was still the most powerful source of theatre reviews, many other popular sources from *Essence* to *Entertainment Weekly* to *Billboard* discussed *Topdog/Underdog*. The lengthiest reviews asserted their familiarity with blackness to establish themselves as authorities on theatre: they defined the play for readers, in the process producing violence against blackness as inevitable. Other bourgeois periodicals include *New York Magazine*, where John Simon’s dismissive review only identifies *Topdog/Underdog* as a comedy, and trivializes both racial representation and violence. While dismissing Lincoln’s murder as the indicator of melodrama, Simon vaguely connects the act of Lincoln impersonation with “symbolic import.” New *Yorker* critic Nancy Franklin follows this lead, identifying the piece as a work of “naturalism” and the brothers as “prophetically named.”

Despite self-awareness of how pieces like this appeal “especially to critics, because they invite us to indulge in the kind of metaphorical musings,” as well as of Parks’s self-conscious rejections of those metaphors, Elizabeth Pochoda still identifies the murder at the conclusion as something “we have been expecting,” precipitated by moves that are either the result of “some destiny or joke.” Writing in *The Nation*, Pochoda urged readers to “look close” within this “uncharacteristically conventional” “well-made play” as the means of finding out about “these lives [which] are the shit you don’t know about.” Critical claims to familiarity continue to produce violence.

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In the *New Republic* Brustein (that year a judge on the Pulitzer committee that nominated *Topdog/Underdog*) is torn between observations of the work and the power of familiarity through “My Black Friend.” In a review entitled “A Homeboy Godot,” Brustein identifies the play as “actionless” and the card game as taking up “perhaps too much” stage time, yet insistently categorizes *Topdog/Underdog*’s language as “naturalistic” and its themes as “domestic.” Brustein relies on Chekhovian realism to dismiss Lincoln’s murder as inevitable even as it “does not seem sufficiently prepared for or realistically motivated,” insisting, “on a metaphorical level, of course, the murder re-enacts the fratricidal drama of Cain and Abel, as well as the shooting of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth.”

In the academic realm, Jason Bush notes in an edited collection, “the symbolic weight of the links between the brother’s names, Lincoln’s profession, and the replaying of Booth’s murder of Lincoln” disturbs but ultimately still supports the plot’s “inevitable violent act.” Bush later ascribes to Lincoln and Booth self-identification with familiar black representational tropes. In *Theatre Journal* Una Chaudhuri does not try to pin down an essential identity for the brothers, noting, “A tragic irony of theatricalized identities (the brothers’, as well as ours) slowly dawned: You’re only really yourself when no one’s watching.” While Chaudhuri’s review is particularly nuanced, it still finds the representational baggage of the play to be “both personal…and public.”

In a note preceding the 2001 Theatre Communications Group edition of the text of *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks explicitly separates *Topdog/Underdog*’s Lincoln from *The America*

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173 Ibid. 76.

Play’s The Foundling Father (another black Lincoln-impersonator). Parks also connects the historical figure of Abraham Lincoln explicitly to The Foundling Father, but disconnects this historical figure from Topdog/Underdog’s Lincoln. And Parks denies any specific agenda in the assignation of names or jobs in Topdog/Underdog. Yet unsurprisingly, critics continued the practice of asserting their views through “My Black Friend,” regularly defining the play’s meaning by connecting its characters and plot to familiarly racialized formulations. The critics make the same leap as Lincoln’s boss at the arcade, who finds him more acceptable as the recipient of violence because of his name. Lincoln says: “I seen that ‘Help Wanted’ sign and I went up in there and I looked good in the getup and agreed to the whiteface and they really dug it that me and Honest Abe got the same name.” Similarly, critics constructed Lincoln and Booth as inevitable rivals, and thus Lincoln’s demise as inevitable, when they framed the brothers as extensions of the historical figures whose names they appear to share. History is neither neutral nor consequences predetermined, and the repetition of competition in this play reveals that critical reproduction of historical baggage for black masculinity is deadly.

Joe Roach said of The Foundling Father in Parks’s earlier The America Play (1994), “With his supply of fake beards, his stovepipe hat, and his stick-on wart, The Foundling Father plays Lincoln so consummately that the public wants him to be shot. He does not disappoint.” In deliberately absenting black essence, Parks revealed the politics of the critics’ desire for that essence: critical claims to familiarity, so distant from attention to material realities, cost black lives. By the early twenty-first century a wide range of critical sources attempted to utilize “My Black Friend” to pre-determine and justify who should die.

Before the turn of the millennium the *Times* claimed intimacy with blackness to gain symbolic power; solidified extant racial hierarchy by racializing blackness as dangerous and musical as well as knowable; gained a more elite position in theatre, racial politics, and the symbolic field because of its own performances of intimacy with blackness; justified its class politics as exceptional based on its elite position in the field of race (celebrated as the solver of race relations for the liberal bourgeoisie, it touted moderate liberalism as the solution); used its class position as bourgeois gatekeeper to refuse capital (symbolic, economic) for those who made materialist interventions into racial hierarchy; and thus rewarded agreement, penalized disagreement, and shaped the political practice of future bourgeois gatekeepers. The complex of relations represented here, “My Black Friend” as popular antiracism, is cyclical but not tautological. These fields (race, the political economic, the symbolic) do not merely overlap at this point in history; actions taken by the *Times* participated in multiple sets of relations simultaneously. While these relations defined the late twentieth century, the example of *Topdog/Underdog* shows that at some point around 2001, theatre critics’ utilization of “My Black Friend” came unlinked as a guarantor of exceptionalism in the realm of class politics.
Chapter Two: “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist”: Avenue Q, the Practice of Gentrification, and the Economy of Popular Antiracisms

“In fact, we all, white and black, carry various biases around with us. I am reminded of the song from the Broadway hit, Avenue Q: ‘Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist.’...Although the research may be unsettling, it is what we do next that matters most.”

Introduction

The previous chapter argued that a powerful liberal institution used appeals to antiracist sentiment to establish its symbolic authority in the US in the 1990s, and explored how it exercised that authority to define and delimit (aka to bourgeois gatekeep) the meaning of antiracist political action including around contemporaneous political-economic issues of theatre: colorblind casting and arts funding for black theatre companies. Chapter One’s insights into the symbolic role and unique strengths of a particular “popular antiracism” inform further explorations of the liberal political economy by demonstrating a non-direct yet nonetheless material triangulation between culture, ideology, and political economic practice. That is, I do not suggest that the message of a cultural production (in the case of chapter two, critical reviews) is directly copied into the blank minds of the perfectly receptive audience who then religiously parrot its contents all the way to the theatre, marketplace, and/or ballot box. Yet just because people are not “cultural dupes” and culture is not robotically produced and transferred solely in a top-down manner does not mean that culture is not a powerfully structured and structuring ideological force that, particularly at a large enough scale, methodically influences behavior according to deducible and measurable patterns. Understanding how the meaning-making power theatre shapes and is shaped by racial politics is necessary to begin to understand the shifts in

1 Avenue Q, quoted by the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, James B. Comey, “Hard Truths: Law Enforcement and Race,” February 12, 2015 address at Georgetown University.
political economic practice in the post-9/11 period. Broadway theatre uniquely provides insights into the broader material consequences of investing in liberalism as antiracism. By “broader material consequences” I mean that these shows provide insights into market performances and desires that reveal how the consumer operates as citizen, and the citizen as consumer. To explain these relations, this chapter focuses on the economy in practice.

While liberalism does not solely define the turn-of-the-millennium economy (that is, there are other forces in competition with it), it is a significant feature of that field and, through its “popular antiracisms,” it plays a major role in producing the mass support that maintains the economic relations of racial capitalism. Like pretty much any commodity in a capitalist economy, the production of liberalism’s antiracisms expands capital’s exploitative interventions; these antiracisms also provide a key means to negotiate and ultimately defer, derail, and resist radical challenges to racial capitalism. Overall, these two roles function together to define what I argue is an understudied liberal logic of the marketplace: a double-edged relation wherein the production and consumption of particular objects/commodities in the marketplace does the work of justifying the very hierarchies that such acts of production and consumption already (re)create.

While other cultural productions participate in this economy, Broadway theatre, in particular musical theatre, struggles explicitly to define the rules that shape the field and “directly experiences the immediate sanction of the bourgeois public.”2 As such, these works particularly reveal, once we are able to break through their disavowal mechanisms, the operations of power within and entangled with the field of racial capitalism.

A Roadmap

Working to move beyond the theatrical event itself, I trace one way in which *Avenue Q* expands capital’s exploitative interventions: changes in housing in Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy) between 2000 and 2010. While an obvious facet of *Avenue Q’s* economic impact lies in its immediate theatre-market interactions such as those entangled with the colorblind casting debate in Chapter One (who pays to see it, who funds its production and who profits from producing it, who is employed to create it, etc.), the show also functions in more subtle ways as parts of other, tangential markets. In these other markets the show’s “antiracist” and capitalist logics function as a key in the economic practice I describe, wherein consumption itself justifies its own requisite hierarchies. Housing in New York City is a powerful “other market” of the Broadway theatre.

Turning to “other markets” with which a cultural product is closely or distantly intertwined is risky business. The quantity and breadth of potentially intersecting markets is enormous. How to select a market that a theatre production “affects,” and how to define and delimit that market, when cultural products affect so many things that are so close together, is a daunting task. Indeed, particularly with any awareness of commodity fetishism, I find it difficult to imagine a good or service that is isolated from the rest of the economy. The demand for that product; the people whose desire constitutes that demand; the forces that produce, manipulate, and/or direct that desire; the people who profit at each stage; the chain of people who labor in the production and distribution of that product; the other products that enter that chain of production and distribution at various points, such as raw materials, and their role in production, distribution, and consumption; and so on: each such element connects what at first might seem an isolated product to the economy as a whole.

But rather than just selecting one tangential market at random, I take advantage of Broadway’s strongest geographical affiliation, New York City. Desire for the city is central to
many of the most successful examples of musical theatre. Even in just the post-war period, the list is impressive: musicals about or prominently featuring New York City include *On the Town* (1944), *Guys and Dolls* (1950), *Wonderful Town* (1953), *West Side Story* (1957), *How to Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* (1961), *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), *Hair* (1968), *Company* (1970), *Annie* (1977), *Rent* (1996), *Ragtime* (1998), *Avenue Q* (2003), *In the Heights* (2008), and *Newsies* (2012). In addition to being set at least in part in New York City, the shows also profited from and distributed the city’s appeal. Other shows, such as *Funny Girl* (1964), *Chorus Line* (1975), *42nd Street* (1980), and *The Producers* (2001), specifically appealed to the connection between the form of musical theatre itself and Broadway as a synecdoche for the city as a whole. New York City itself is a main figure in, and marketed by, musical theatre history.

In “Christopher Street,” a number from *Wonderful Town* (1953), the audience enjoys a tour-guide’s perspective on New York City: “On your right, Waverly Place/ Bit of Paris in Greenwich Village/ My, what charm, my, what grace/ Poets and peasants on Waverly Place…Such interesting people live on Christopher Street/ Look, look, poets, actors, dancers, writers/ Here we live, here we love/ This is the place for self-expression/ Life is mad, life is sweet/ Greenwich Village! Greenwich Village! Whee!”³ Linking the exotic and distinctly diverse promise of the city with the delivery of insider information to outsiders, “Christopher Street” describes what makes New York special. The city’s uniqueness is in particular celebrated through idolizing the unifying power of the poverty associated with the “before” in a rags-to-riches narrative, such as in this lyric describing a figure “known as The Wreck, football professional out of season, unemployed throughout the heat, living on nothing on Christopher  

“Avenue Q” first attracted my attention because of the widespread popularity of its racist song “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” and housing is a central element of how the musical, and this number, operates, as I will explore. The show depends on a variety of city-centric components, from the title, to the show’s brand itself which mimics the symbol of an MTA subway line. The “Avenue Q” of the title makes a reference to the Alphabet City neighborhood in Manhattan, and to Brooklyn, and is first and foremost about where its characters live. I look at the material politics of “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist”: how the desire for proximity to racial otherness that is promised through living in the city/the city’s housing market emerges as Avenue Q’s popular antiracism, and how this functions to attenuate radical challenges to the ideology of racial capitalism. The musical’s umbrella of irony disguises and provides the means to disavow its social relations, which are revealed through analysis of the relationship between plot structure and content. By structuring tolerance, universalism, and consumption as the outcome of the musical’s coming-of-age story, Avenue Q naturalizes certain political practices as mature, balanced, intelligent, responsible, informed, and generous. This position, aligned with liberalism against any explicit materialism, disavows the existence of any such
opposition even as it defines its opposition as immature, unbalanced, unintelligent, irresponsible, unfactual, and selfish. In other words, the musical specifically positions itself against radicalism, even while disavowing that such politics exist. The inevitable emotional engine of the Bildungsroman plot structure, by which the protagonist moves from immaturity into maturity, is enhanced by the performative power of musical theatre, rendering the musical uniquely able to solidify the appeal of these politics despite the show’s disavowals through claims to “irony.” It is this compelling pattern of social relations by which the practice of racial capitalism is socially reproduced despite broad familiarity with its hierarchies.

Indeed, the affinity between Avenue Q’s calculus of social relations and the social relations I observed first-hand arising from and guiding the housing market dynamics and demographic shifts following the 2008 crash in the Brooklyn neighborhood Bedford-Stuyvesant makes the musical a powerful example of the dependency between liberal antiracist political action and market expansion. The racial and economic patterns broadly understood as “gentrification” were by no means neutral expressions of a free market; they were shaped by political and ideological structures according to dominant race and class interests. Through the lens of the popular antiracism structuring Avenue Q, this single neighborhood provides an illuminating model of liberal economic practices in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The Desire for the City: Early Twenty-First Century Gentrification in Bed-Stuy

Gentrification in the early twenty-first century US was defined by the foreclosure crisis of 2008. During this crisis Baltimore’s City Council along with then-Mayor Sheila Dixon, famously sued Wells Fargo Bank for discriminating against African-American borrowers. Reports the New York Times, “In 2006, Wells Fargo made high-cost loans, with an interest rate at least three percentage points above a federal benchmark, to 65 percent of its black customers in
Baltimore and to only 15 percent of its white customers in the area, according to the lawsuit.” In the article a spokesperson for the bank defends their practices as “based on credit risk. We are committed to serving all customers fairly—our continued growth depends on it.” Ultimately, the city of Baltimore suit was settled to the tune of $175 million, less than 1% of the corporation’s profits from that year.\(^4\) Wells Fargo’s profit-making from racism remained undisturbed: its plan for growth depends on a formulation where “fairness” and “material redistribution to Wells Fargo from African-Americans” are deeply compatible ideas.\(^5\)

Racial segregation played a major factor in the mortgage crisis, scholars argue, noting that “subprime lending [was] the causal mechanism through which segregation influence[d] foreclosures.”\(^6\) One influential study argues that racial segregation is an important factor even while controlling for average creditworthiness, offering an important corrective to previous studies of the causes of the foreclosure crisis which considered race “mainly to attribute intergroup disparities in defaults and foreclosures to minority group members’ weaker economic position.”\(^7\) In other words, the racialized capital extraction of the housing crisis came not just from extant racialized hierarchies of capitalism that continued to passively result in the same


\(^7\) Rugh and Massey, “Racial Segregation,” 630.
hierarchical outcomes, but from an active political project of expanded racial capitalism that resulted in the “unparalleled levels of equity extraction” of the foreclosure crisis.  

While much public attention was paid to Baltimore because of the lawsuit, racial segregation was and remains a significant factor influencing lending practices in New York City. For example, a revealing 2000 New York Times article reflected on such practices in Brooklyn. This article found racial discrimination in banks’ lending decisions, independent of income, and that subprime loans increased 700% between 1993 and 1998. If the 1990s were a period of economic boom based on the increasing availability of credit, the terms of that credit are continually significant for how access to money translated into wealth. For white neighborhoods, homeownership was increasingly likely; for black neighborhoods, any potential wealth from buying one’s home was more likely to be redirected to these predatory lenders. This was no minor problem; for example, “the state’s largest home equity lender, the Delta Financial Corporation of Woodbury, N.Y.,” was sued by the New York state and the federal governments over its predatory practices.

This 2000 New York Times article emphasized that the source of the problem was the location of predatory lenders in black neighborhoods, and concluded that the black bourgeoisie

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8 Ibid., 644. Clearly, however, the authors are not considering the equity extraction of the transatlantic slave trade with the adjective “unparalleled.”
9 Ibid., 646.
10 The definition of subprime can vary. According to Broadwater, “Wells Fargo agrees to pay $175M,” np, it means “high-cost loans, with an interest rate at least three percentage points above a federal benchmark.” On the other hand lenders define “subprime” loans as loans to less reliable or less safe customers. Yet Baltimore city agencies understood “subprime” to refer to loans with significantly worse terms. The term itself, implying something that is below standard and thus insufficient, is a site of struggle.
could accumulate wealth if traditional banks would replace them. Yet by approximately 2004 something had changed: most of the subprime lending to African Americans was now coming from the very “traditional banks” that were expected to solve the problem (these were the changes that led to the Wells Fargo lawsuit).\footnote{In Morgenson, “Baltimore is Suing Bank,” from 2008, Wells Fargo is identified as becoming one of the top two Baltimore mortgage lenders since 2004. Although the exact time of the transition from subprime predatory lending to subprime bank loans for New York City is unclear, Baltimore serves as a useful and close analogy and suggest a period of 2004-2008 as key.} While institutional differences between white and black neighborhoods accounted for racially differentiated lending practices leading up to the turn of the millennium, subjective practices and approaches (taken up differentially within the same institutions which were now more equitably accessible to African Americans) created the same material outcome by 2008: disproportionate capital extraction from African Americans.

So far this comparison has been between two different \textit{New York Times} pieces from 2000 and 2008 that reflect shifts in lending in that decade. In addition to the material differences for which these articles account, there are also noteworthy differences in the tone of the \textit{New York Times}’s approach to race and housing, which suggest a change in the liberal ideological approach to racism and capital. In the earlier \textit{Times} piece, the banks themselves (particularly predatory lenders) were positioned as responsible when black homeowners defaulted on or were denied mortgages. In the latter article, however, the \textit{Times} placed much more blame on the borrowers. For example, while the first piece makes a point of naming predatory practices as such, and noting that these practices “force countless victims into bankruptcy and foreclosure,”\footnote{Lambert, “Analysis Shows Racial Bias.”} the second only calls these “lax lending practices” and makes sure to note that Wells Fargo’s subprime loans are “designed for less creditworthy customers” which borrowers “are more likely
to default on their loans.”¹⁴ This is particularly remarkable because the first article reports on a study conducted by a politician’s office while the latter reports on a lawsuit in the midst of a well-documented national foreclosure “crisis.” One would think the obvious partisanship of the first source would make the former article more reserved, and the latter less so. On the contrary, these differences reveal that by 2008 it was important for the *Times* to deny a structural component of racism and defend banking as such; it vitally framed a material racial hierarchy as the result of personal incompetence.

This powerful liberal news source reflected the political economic goals of liberalism in between 2000 and 2008. Liberal economic ideology in the first decade of the twenty-first century was not only felicitous but complicit with contemporaneous expansions of racially-hierarchized profit accumulation. The *Times*’s accounting for racism shifted from institutions to individuals; the consequences were the protection of “traditional” banks, the legitimation of the shape the market took after the crash, and the delegitimation of black borrowers. This disavowal occurred even as material redistributions of capital along racial lines were underway, and indeed, were being documented by these very newspaper articles. In the articles that educated the public about racial capitalism the *Times* also disavowed those very hierarchies as justified and defended the forces that produced them. Clearly racial politics (such as how the *Times* defined racism and antiracism) were vital to the bourgeois management of the specific contradictions presented by modern banking during the mortgage crisis.

Desire for the city is a constantly produced force with material consequences that extend beyond musical theatre. The calculus of social relations and logic of antiracism that define *Avenue Q* influence market dynamics for New York City itself, shaping financial speculations in

¹⁴ Morgenson, “Baltimore is Suing Bank.”
blackness. “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” and moving to the city as a means of antiracism also define the specifically-racialized process of capital extraction from African-Americans associated with twenty-first century gentrification of neighborhoods such as Bedford-Stuyvesant.

While numerous studies on twenty-first century changes in the housing market in Brooklyn account for increasing racial and economic disparities, they often take the desire for Brooklyn for granted. For example, one study is structured entirely around a presumed unique value for the borough, appealing in the beginning to “that untouchable but tangible Brooklyn vibe” and affirming in the conclusion that “Brooklyn is still a desirable place to live and many more will continue to come and settle based on the patterns discussed.” Yet without such a desire for the city, gentrification and its higher rents would not exist. Even public critique that finds the desire for Brooklyn remarkable does not try to account for it, such as one newspaper article from 2015 that noted, “It is hard to overstate the acquisition frenzy that hangs over Bedford-Stuyvesant.” Indeed, that neighborhood in Brooklyn is a stark example of the economic practice we see in and through Avenue Q.

Bedford-Stuyvesant (also known as “Bed-Stuy” or “Do or die Bed-Stuy”) is a neighborhood in north Brooklyn, New York City; since the Great Depression it was a predominantly African-American neighborhood. It gained fame and notoriety in particular through iconic cultural products of the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as Spike Lee’s Do the

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16 Ibid., 46.
Right Thing (1989) and the Notorious B.I.G.’s “Unbelievable” (1994). Although locals debate the borders, often referring to Bedford and Stuyvesant Avenues as the source of the name as well as the neighborhood’s borders, in the early twenty-first century Bed-Stuy extends in a trapezoid from Classon Avenue on the west and Flushing Avenue on the north, to Atlantic Avenue on the south, Broadway (and five blocks of Eastern Parkway) on the east/north-east. It underwent significant changes between 2000 and 2010, experiencing a decrease of almost 15% of its black population (5,936). Reports the Urban Research Center, “In Bedford, the White population had the greatest percentage increase of any of the major groups citywide—633% (an increase of almost 16,000 people), increasing the White population share in that neighborhood from 4% in 2000 to 25.5% in 2010.” The white population also significantly increased in neighboring Clinton Hill (from 15% share to more than 35% share) and nearby Prospect Heights (from 28.2% share to 47.2% share).18

Desire for the city is the socially-produced hinge on which rested great profit towards the end of the naughts. Indeed, scholars documented increasing white populations in Brooklyn neighborhoods including Bedford-Stuyvesant before the 2008 foreclosure crisis. Demographers from the Center for the Study of Brooklyn found that by 2008 the white population in the Community District representing Bed-Stuy had jumped from 2.6% to 12.6%, with a concomitant decline in black and Latino households (74.9% to 66.2%, and 19.4% to 17.2% respectively).19 In comparison to the earlier statistics, approximately half of Bed-Stuy’s white growth came between 2008 and 2010, indicating a drastically accelerated rate of gentrification after the foreclosure crisis. Mason et al. observed that within this time period “on average the newcomers

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(regardless of race) have lower median household incomes than established residents,"20 which strongly suggests that newcomers were more likely to be renters than homeowners. At the same time, Brooklyn remained highly segregated even in gentrifying neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy.

While an influx of white residents might at first have suggested progress to the authors, they found that “blacks [were] in decline in each of these Community Districts”21 and that “white households are displacing black households.”22 The authors worried, “Brooklyn is not becoming less segregated but the spatial patterns of segregation are changing. Given that whites are increasing in the very neighborhoods where black and Latino home ownership is continuing to be hard-hit by the foreclosure crisis, the pattern [of increasing inequality] found in this analysis is, unfortunately, not likely to change.”23 These concerns were prescient, as the Urban Research Center data bear out.

White people (consumers) claiming greater “shares” of historically black neighborhoods is not the only way that the real estate market extracted capital inequitably from black residents through gentrification. Another major form of extraction comes from the change in property values that are associated with gentrification, particularly so for gentrification spurred by the desire for the city as antiracism. For example, the New York Post reports on the record-setting $1.04 million condo (note: an apartment) sold in Bed-Stuy, whose buyers noted that “It reminds us of what the Lower East Side used to be like; that is why we bought there.”24 While the article is sharply written to generate disdain amongst locals, as many black homeowners sold their

21 Ibid., 46.
22 Ibid., 28.
23 Ibid., 46.
homes, property values were on the rise. And indeed many black homeowners who sold were
exploited in the process, through systematically low offers, to deliberately predatory buyers with
cash, or as the result of the commonly circulating fears of or real threat of arson; remember that
the New York Times identified an “acquisition frenzy that hangs over Bedford-Stuyvesant.”
While increases in property values in the neighborhood might be accounted for from
investments/improvements from the new owners, like repairs or added amenities, such
investments are insufficient to address the scale of rising property values, nor do they account for
the significant increase in rent charged to tenants, which climbed 15.6% just between 2011 and
2012. Developers and real estate companies, knowing the desire for this neighborhood’s
combination of row houses and black culture like any other good business owners know the
likely behavior of their target markets, raised prices before demand throughout neighborhoods in
North Brooklyn. Bed-Stuy and neighboring Bushwick both saw skyrocketing rents at essentially
the same time as the neighborhoods significantly closer to Manhattan, such as newly christened
“East Williamsburg,” Clinton Hill, Fort Greene, and Prospect Heights (neighborhoods to the
west of Bed-Stuy).

Much as Ian Baucom observes about the Zong massacre and the development of the
insurance industry, financial speculation in the desire for blackness produces sites of brutal
innovations in racialized exploitation. My investigation of the desire for the city here is a
means of explaining Neil Smith’s rent gap theory as a process of racial capitalism, of explaining

25 Bellafante, “In Bed-Stuy Housing Market.”
26 Ibid.
damn-high-bushwick-bed-stuy-article-1.1565790.
28 Ian Baucom, Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History
the increased rent gap in this neighborhood through a bourgeois approach to racism and antiracism. Capital (through the real estate market) speculated on the market value of blackness (through the valuation of proximity to racial otherness and oppression) in order to generate a high potential property value, a unique “best use” that delineated a large rent gap (by promising high rents). This generated profits for investors that supplemented those gained from subprime loans to and foreclosures on black homeowners in these same spaces; at the same time because gentrifiers valued blackness, gentrification provided its own ideological justifications for the racialized capital accumulation it produced. “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” as popular antiracism not only explains how gentrifiers came to be able to “live in harmony” next door to or in the same house as members of the group that was being forced out of the neighborhood, but also how such actions were justified as necessary, and as such, explains the disavowed operations of the real estate market itself.

Introducing Avenue Q

Often described as an adult version of Sesame Street, Avenue Q is the story of a young college graduate named Princeton moving to a working-class neighborhood in New York City and trying to learn how to be an adult. Princeton, the main character, is a yellowy-orange puppet with dark hair whose human operator (almost always a white person, such as John Tartaglia in the original Broadway production in 2003) is also visible on stage. Princeton was an English major and struggles to find his purpose, yet clearly comes from money and power. His story is told through his interactions with his love interests Lucy T. Slut and Kate Monster, his landlord Gary Coleman, and his neighbors Rod and Nicky, Trekkie Monster, Christmas Eve and Brian, and the Bad Idea Bears.

Avenue Q is perhaps the most thoroughly, obviously, and explicitly racist Broadway musical of the new millennium, yet it operates under the umbrella of irony and has thus deferred most critique. Only one piece of scholarship challenges the racial politics of the show. Shortly after the show’s opening, Daphne Brooks took up Avenue Q in the epilogue of Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910. In this piece, Brooks looked at the 2004 Tony Awards ceremony as a means of connecting the book’s subject, African-American women performing dissent and critical politics, to the theatre today. After acknowledging the African-American women who are on stage, perform, win awards, and/or are honored at the 2004 Tonys, Brooks takes on Avenue Q as the winner of Best Musical, comparing it to one of its competitors for that award, Caroline, or Change by Tony Kushner. While Brooks is moved by the celebration of black women at this event, Avenue Q’s upset reads as “a subtle yet insidious backlash” against the “multicultural conviviality” of the awards show’s program for the evening.

Brooks is explicit about the show’s position within the legacy of racist popular theatre. “Avenue Q’s critical and box-office success reminded the theatre world of the persistently marketable and ever-seductive appeal of minstrel culture at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Billed as a fast-moving, Gen X ‘puppet musical,’ Avenue Q transforms blackface costuming into ersatz Muppet characters who swap witty, satirical barbs about race, gender, class, and sexuality on the front stoops of their New York City apartment buildings.” Brooks expands further on the similarities to minstrelsy, noting that the show “trad[es] burnt cork for felt marionettes” to reflect minstrelsy’s “resurgent popularity” and increasingly institutionalized power with respect to

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31 Brooks Bodies in Dissent, 344.
32 Ibid., 345.
“Generation X” culture. Brooks attributes this resurgence to the post-Civil Rights-movement “educational integration and popular culture’s visible efforts to diversify,” as well as this generation’s preference for irony. Brooks differentiates minstrelsy from multiculturalism by echoing the popular press’s comparisons between Ave*Q*, Rent, and Sesame Street, but critiques Ave*Q* for retaining “little of the progressive, multicultural politics of either of [the other] landmark shows.” Brooks concludes with attention to the powerful performances of and by black women that stand in opposition to the representations in Ave*Q* at that Tonys ceremony, particularly highlighting Tonya Pinkins’s performance of “Lot’s Wife” from Caroline, or Change. Brooks distinguishes Ave*Q* ideologically and also temporally, highlighting its novel marketing strategy leading up to the Tonys: an ad campaign featuring the spoofed political slogan, “America’s Counting on Q!” This strategy enjoys two key features of a successful piece of twenty-first century musical theatre: commercial power related to an investment in advertising, and an appeal to some kind of carefully crafted yet ultimately inconsequential sense of political critique.

Ave*Q* premiered off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre, where it ran from 20 February to 11 May, 2003. It opened on Broadway at the John Golden Theatre on 31 July 2003, and ran there through 13 September 2009. After Broadway it transferred off Broadway to New World Stages where it is still running. The music and lyrics were by Broadway new...
Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx; the book was by Jeff Whitty. Robert Lopez in particular tapped into the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century, to judge by later successful works such as The Book of Mormon and the songs for the Disney movie Frozen. The latter positioned Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez on the list of Time’s 100 most influential people 2014.

The show was particularly successful economically. It was among the first in the 2003-2004 season to turn a profit. In addition to Brooks’s research, critic Robert Brustein also critiqued the show within a review of the Tonys ceremony that year. Brustein noted, tongue-in-cheek, that Avenue Q was “touted as an experimental breakthrough on a level with Rent or perhaps The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,” before deriding its critical success as the result of it being “a box-office phenomenon that returned its initial investment in record time.”

Competing against Wicked, Caroline, or Change, and The Boy from Oz, Avenue Q won Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, and Best Original Score in 2004. Achieving awards as well as newspaper recognition was important to extend the show’s run on Broadway and beyond, and thus to increase the return to investors. In the rest of the review Brustein railed against theatre’s “liberal self-infatuation” that “celebrates its [own] celebration of [diversity],” and passed judgment on musical theatre performers and pop artists who participated in the show.
evening. While Brustein critiqued some of the subjects that I will broach here, in particular identifying the connection between critical endorsement and profitable liberalism, Brustein’s approach in this brief review is inadequate for clarifying the show’s racial politics. Brustein reproduced racist stereotypes, created a false binary between popular and legitimate theatre works, and ultimately could not adequately address Avenue Q’s position within racial capitalism.

Avenue Q received positive reviews from a wide variety of sources. The New York Times lavished kindness on it, and it also received favorable attention from publications as diverse as Theatre Journal, Entertainment Weekly, Time, and U.S. News & World Report. The idea of the show, if not the show itself, quickly became part of twenty-first century popular knowledge and culture. For example, the journal Canadian Business referenced the show's song “Purpose” to frame a recently-elected liberal politician's goals for an upcoming term. I will address other examples around the circulation of “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist.” The numerous delighted reviews reinforced Avenue Q’s popularity and helped to establish it as a political work

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45 Tom Smith, Review of Avenue Q, Theatre Journal 56.2 (2004): 313-314. Lest we imagine that academy is exempted from this political economy, this review not only celebrated the pleasures of the most despicably racist parts of the show but found it fit to reproduce them within the review itself, continuing Q’s theatrical project off of the stage.
47 Kate Betts, “Puppet Regime,” Time, August 11, 2003, 62.
by continually asserting it as such. The show also heralded other shifts in theatre’s marketing, in particular the benefits of online ticket sales. Finally, the New York Times theatre critic Charles Isherwood participated in this frenzied appreciation, celebrating the show’s marketing campaign as “a pleasure in itself,” “evinc[ing] more wit and freshness than most new plays and musicals that opened on Broadway over the last year.”

Perhaps even more reflective of the changing market in the twenty-first century was producer Jeffrey Seller’s award from Advertising Age, which named Seller and Avenue Q Entertainment Marketers of the Year in 2005. The article about the award described remarkable features about the show’s advertising tactics: they reached out to “younger people” who were not typical “diehard theategoers” by doing bits on “radio ads…morning talk shows and other TV programs.” In addition, the article emphasized how unique it was that the “sense of humor” and “sensibility of the show” “was the best way to market” it. In other words, while marketing often generates a new creative message that creates a bridge between audience desires and the content of a cultural production, in this case the content of Avenue Q itself communicated its value to audiences; marketers did not necessarily need to add anything to appeal to a large number of potential consumers. Thus Avenue Q’s appeal on the marketplace was as much a result of the show’s creators as it was a result of the marketing campaigns of producers and

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53 Ibid.
advertising agency SpotCo, revealing a closer than typical link between audience desires and the content of the musical itself.

Appropriate political behavior was central to how the show spoke for itself. In this case, “appropriate” indicated appeals to the bold politics of “risqué” representations, as emphasized by certain parts of Avenue Q’s marketing campaign. Reproductions of the main advertising posters are included within the play script, along with several color photographs of the original Broadway and London productions. These advertisements consist mostly of large close-ups of certain characters; in the upper right corner is the show’s brand logo, and in a band along the bottom is information for how to obtain tickets, which features in small print a disclaimer that “‘Avenue Q’ has not been authorized or approved in any manner by The Jim Henson Company or Sesame Workshop, which have no responsibility for its content.” On the left two-thirds of the upper banner is a short phrase or joke related to the character that is depicted. One shows Lucy’s cleavage and lipsticked mouth; above her reads, “WARNING: Full Puppet Nudity.” Another shows Ron’s face with a raised eyebrow, disavowing “I am NOT a closested HOMOWHATEVER!” There are advertisements featuring Kate Monster and Trekkie Monster as well. These ads draw on the appeal of the show’s liberal politics, which are expressed predominantly in sexual terms: pro-sex and pro-pornography, anti-closet and anti-marriage. Yet while the show’s sexual politics can be expressed in and celebrated through advertisement, its racial politics cannot. There is no indication in the advertisements of the show’s hit song “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist”; it can only exist as humor in the performance setting. The

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racial politics of this number, including its disavowals, are best conveyed not in one representational still, but through the process of the song as it intimately experienced by the audience in the same room as the performers.

**Race, Racism, and “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist”: Avenue Q’s Calculus of Social Relations**

Investigating the logic of the social order created by *Avenue Q* takes extensive analysis; the show’s depictions of race, deliberately and thoroughly obscured, are fuzzier than in other disavowed representations such as animated cartoons. Yet a careful reading of the performance through abolitionist feminist dialectical materialism breaks through those disavowals to lay the calculus of social relations on the table. I first examine how the musical creates race, and then how it defines racism and antiracism. Finally, I turn to the consequences of the way these social relations justify racism and gentrification.

Racialization for the characters in the musical is accomplished through a constellation of factors including physical appearance, the nature and behavior of the character, performance style, and the embodiment of the performers and puppeteers. First, the puppets are of various colors. Princeton is a yellowy-orange puppet and although he is not explicitly called “white,” the indications that he is racially neutral make him so, as they do all of the puppets who are not monsters, regardless of their skin tone. The other puppets that are racially unmarked include Lucy, who is light pink, the blue puppet Rod, and the green puppet Nicky. Within the puppet world, a separate race of slightly-fuzzier puppets (called Monsters) exists; the audience can tell that Monsters are a race because of how other characters in the play subject them to racism, which I explore later. While the unconventional skin tones (blue, orange, etc.) of the non-Monster puppets somewhat untie race from skin color (although it is still tied to a “biological”
marker, having fur or not), the connection between race and skin color is strengthened by the puppeteers. In many productions the puppeteers themselves make up the racialization of their puppet characters: all the puppeteers present on stage in the original cast and original Broadway cast were white, for example, enhancing the associations between whiteness and non-Monster puppets.

In addition to the puppet characters, the play features characters who are depicted by non-puppeteer human actors on stage; these characters are all deliberately raced according to the appearance of the actors playing them in the original cast. They include Brian, who is not racially marked; Christmas Eve, who is marked as Asian-American; and Gary Coleman, who is marked as black. Taken together this character-actor alignment suggests a tight linkage between traditional biological markers of race (skin color) and the production of raced characters within the world of Avenue Q. The characters, puppets and non-puppets alike, exist in a world of stable racial identity rooted in biological markers.

\textit{Avenue Q}'s stable racial identity hinges on racist caricatures and a starkly invisiblized whiteness; the show strongly reasserts existing stereotypes and is thus fully aligned with white supremacist patterns of racial representation. This is most clearly demonstrated by the show’s casting practices in the early twenty-first century, which have involved regular instances of yellowface (racism which extends beyond the “mere” racist Orientalism built into the characters), when white actors are cast as the Japanese-American character who is named Christmas Eve. Comparing the performance I saw with a variety of production recordings and photos shared on social media and other online sources reveals that the tropes the directors use to create the yellowface effect vary from show to show. Sometimes actual yellowing facepaint is used; sometimes the actor wears an Orientalized costume (often a kimono); sometimes the white
actor playing Christmas Eve walks with mincing step and speaks with wide eyes and exaggerated facial expressions. The character itself conveys enough Orientalist stereotype that white people require little performative creativity to create the effect of yellowface, and white actors regularly embody the figure. Although the role is offensive regardless of the actor performing it, yellowface permits the continuation of racially-disproportionate casting practices. In addition to the literal act of yellowface, the casting around Gary Coleman often raises similar issues. Gary Coleman is often played by a woman, following the casting of Natalie Venetia Belcon, who originated the role. Although there is no need for alignment between sex and gender of actor and/or character, all the other characters are cast with actors whose apparent sex matches the character's gender. And “cross” casting Gary Coleman is not scripted nor does the character himself call for any particular critique of gender construction. In addition to risking stereotypes about black masculinity and femininity, Coleman is sometimes cast with a white actor. At these times, the white person wields a black puppet to substitute for Coleman, suggesting that, like with Christmas Eve, this production depends on circulating ideas and representations of race as much as or even more than the presence of racialized black and yellow bodies; white bodies, however, are always necessary.

Since this is an adult-themed Sesame Street, the audience is meant to understand that depictions of Gary Coleman (a character not named for but actually supposed to represent the African-American actor famous for performing in the TV show Different Strokes) and Christmas

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Eve are making fun of race and racism through “irony.”58 Yet they are first and foremost the performance of deeply stereotyped racial representations. Coleman’s lines (and his lines alone) are littered with dropped final “r”s and “g”s,59 and words like “yo,” “d’ja,” “ain’t,” and “don’tcha.”60 Coleman is “the butt of everyone’s jokes” and the show takes advantage of that opportunity, with both Coleman and Christmas Eve serving as the central sources of humor. Under the umbrella of irony, the actor, actress, or puppet playing Coleman gets to repeat Coleman’s famous line from Diff’rent Strokes, singing in the third number, “Try having people stopping you to ask you “What you talkin’ ‘bout, Willis?” (Beat. It gets old.”61 The other characters immediately sing “It sucks to be you,” acknowledging Coleman’s complaint, but the show and the audience still get the pleasure of the performance of stereotyped blackness.62 Irony becomes nothing more than the excuse that justifies pleasurable consumption and engagement. This trend continues throughout the show, as Coleman’s numbers each depend on the performance of stereotypical blackness. Coleman’s big Act I number is “You Can Be as Loud as the Hell You Want (When You’re Makin’ Love),” inflected with jazzy notes, brass, and sexually explicit lyrics which are meant to mark it as black music.63 Christmas Eve’s name, accent, pronunciation, and behavior are also egregiously stereotyped. Even as the musical celebrates an ironic awareness, it profits off of reproducing the same patterns of racism that it claims to

58 Brantley, “A Feeling You’re Not On Sesame Street.”
59 This begins from Gary Coleman’s first line: “I’m comin’! I’m comin’!” Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 10.
60 For example, in the number “Schadenfreude.” Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 112.
61 Ibid., 11.
62 Of course, not all audience members experience pleasure. Watching performances of racism can be extremely painful for many audience members, which possibility is often elided in critical responses and reviews.
ironize. Most troublingly, the irony of these numbers comes from the purported inversion of our already-anti-racist expectations. What the show ends up satirizing is what the target audience might call “political correctness”: not racism, but an attempted (albeit limited) project of racial justice. The humor in the song then comes not from satirizing a real-world truth such as racial inequality, but from affirming what is imagined to be the audience’s pre-existing ideas about how Asian and black people behave, ideas they have been unjustly prohibited from expressing. The satire in the show constructs everyone as indeed a little bit racist, and defends this position as central to the expression of individual liberties.

In addition and related to how the show forms race, it also practices a particular racial politics. Along with the context, characters, and casting is the play’s “message,” the racial politics that the text takes up that might not be ascribed to the creators (although in this case it certainly appears to be) but is nonetheless lovingly embraced by fans. However, the audience's acceptance is of the production as a whole; they rarely receive the sliced-and-diced version of racial politics that I conduct here. Instead, “Everyone's A Little Bit Racist” comes hand in hand with racial mimicry, liberal good intention, and egregious stereotyping. Race is re-formed with and by the “antiracist” politics of the piece; that is, the reformation of racial categories, hierarchies, and politics is part of “Everyone's A Little Bit Racist.” By close-reading the song, I explore in depth the several definitions of racism that this work frames, providing the basis for my subsequent critique of the musical’s antiracism.64

The structure of the song “Everyone's A Little Bit Racist” is slightly different than most other numbers in Avenue Q. It begins, like the others, with an encounter that sets up an idea, which leads to a sung exchange between two characters as they explore that idea. The sound is,

64 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 26-34.
like many other numbers, reminiscent of a children’s learning song such as those heard on Sesame Street. As such, its lyrics are simple and didactic; its verses are mostly spoken and they alternate with sung choruses that are catchy and repeated just to the point of becoming grating. Despite the confrontations described in the content of the song, overall it sounds not discordant but harmonious. The song is initially sung by Princeton and Kate, who are joined by Gary Coleman during the bridge; finally Brian and Christmas Eve join in for the conclusion.

Structurally, in each spoken verse the characters process an expression of racism. They discuss their disagreements and unify their opinions right before launching into the choruses, where they sing the song’s lessons about the true nature of racism, in harmony and in agreement. In this way, the verses are means of encountering problems and working through differences, and the choruses the means to achieve harmonious integration into the social collective. The song thus works through numerous ideas about racism and antiracism, and depicts a disavowed yet nonetheless very specific stance on racial politics in the process.

The first example of racism, at the beginning of the first verse, is associated with a commonly identified real-world microaggression (when white people ask people of color if they know or are related to other people of color because of proximity, familiarity, name, language spoken, skin color, or a variety of other nonsensical reasons usually thinly masking a variety of white-centric world views). In the song “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist,” Princeton asks Kate if she is related to Trekkie because they are both monsters. This encounter is structured to resonate with expressions of and responses to racism familiar to liberalism: Kate is shocked and asks if they “all look the same” to Princeton, uses the term “race” a few lines later, and, in a moment that is supposed to be comic, Kate calls monsters by the politically-correct moniker “people of fur.” Indeed, the musical constructs monsters as a race through the demonstration of familiar
racism against them. And this is one of several examples of how monsters are positioned as the most racially-oppressed group within the world of the play. Other moments include Kate and Trekkie’s descriptions of their oppressive school environments, and the language Kate’s boss uses when she fires Kate: “I should have never hired a Monster!...Your race is notoriously lazy.” Nonetheless, because of their distance from real-world racialization and a history of oppression, resistance, and community formation, the monsters are distinctly not racialized as black.

The first verse contains another example of “racism,” necessary to depict how both characters participating in the song are racist in line with the number’s title and message. It is an expression of “reverse racism:” Kate wants her monster school to only be for monsters and when defending this position refers to non-Monsters as “people like you” before cutting herself off with a gasp. Princeton is racialized as white throughout the show and this song continues the process by establishing Princeton as racially unmarked even though he experiences discrimination; even when Kate racializes him through this group identification, she interrupts herself before naming his race. Despite the work of these lines demonstrating that both characters are racist, the relation remains unequal: in opposition to making its racial “others” explicitly othered, the show refuses to identify the racial group Princeton is supposed to be a part of. Thus it constructs a colorblind world for Princeton where his race does not matter. Princeton’s ambiguously orange puppet-skin does not match the colors of any of the other puppets, nor (obviously) of the human puppeteers, so the audience cannot construct his racial group clearly. He continues to be constructed as the kind of white that is racially unmarked.

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65 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, *Avenue Q*, 77.
(unlike later moments of “racism” against racially-marked white groups such as Polish and Jewish people). I will return to analyzing the choruses towards the end of this section.

While the first verse features only Kate and Princeton, the second verse introduces a third participant, Gary Coleman. With Coleman’s entrance, the stage is no longer exclusively full of white people holding puppets because Coleman is often played by an African American actor or actress. The entrance of the black body into the discussion about racism/onto the stage provides the ultimate symbolic test for the song’s politics, in which a white liberal’s representational and moral power amongst other liberals is at risk. In such a situation accusations of racism, of course, are always unjustly wielded; a white liberal is never actually racist but is always misrepresented by the black person who is—unfairly—empowered to make such a misrepresentation. The threat of being “unfairly” called racist is not incidental; the staging has Coleman enter at a time when Princeton and Kate have paused from their song about how it is okay to be a little racist to swap a “black joke.” His entrance is sudden and unexpected; the stage directions indicate he literally “pops out from behind the fence.”66 For the audience this should create a moment of intensified anxiety (an anxiety that is surely building since the start of the risqué number), but the musical works to dismiss those tensions and keep the tone comic. Coleman’s first line as he suddenly appears on the scene, catching them in the middle of their illicit joke, is “Whatchoo talkin’ about Kate?” This is meant to be humorous; it is a performative “black joke” that the audience should and can certainly laugh at instead of the joke that Kate and Princeton were about to tell (a kind of scriptus interruptus for the playwrights that reveals their anxiety about the show’s performance). While any scripted black joke might lose its humor over time, or be subject to explicit deconstruction or a linchpin fomenting radical rejection, the joke of this performance

66 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 29.
(particularly because it centers that darling of Broadway, meta-theatrical humor, as a reference to another performance) is much more likely to remain funny. It is safer for the audience, yet it is inextricable from theatre’s significant history as a site of violence against and profit from blackness and black people. The performance of the actor playing Coleman is the punch line that lightens the mood; an audience member, unable to be singled out from the whole, feels safe to laugh at this black joke as part of the crowd. The show’s humor brings together audience members by appealing to a collectively-acknowledged unspeakable, yet serves to release tension for whiteness instead of universally.

While this functions through the performance of the second verse, the umbrella of irony also serves to make for a safe expression for the feelings of whiteness through the content of the second verse. Kate and Princeton’s whiteness is unified (yet still resists naming as such) here against blackness in response to being subjected to racism (just as Monster-based-discrimination was, earlier), as Princeton justifies his black joke by baiting Coleman to discriminate against Polish people. “Princeton: Of course you don’t [tell black jokes]. You’re black! But I bet you tell Polack jokes, right? Gary Coleman: Sure I do. (He busts up, laughing.) Those stupid Polacks! Princeton: Don’t you think that’s a little racist? Gary Coleman: Well, damn, I guess you’re right!” In this exchange, Coleman never gets to wield the symbolic power that he threatens; he does not get to make an accusation of racism until after he’s already been called racist himself and then affirms that accusation. Blackness’s symbolic power is turned to the purpose of policing blackness.

The third and final verse of the song introduces two new characters: Brian and Christmas Eve. The group laughs at Christmas Eve’s pronunciation of “recyclables” (an example of the

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67 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 29-30, emphasis and stage directions in original.
Orientalist accent the character is given that is supposed to entertain the audience), only to be reprimanded by Brian. The significance of the group’s racism is downplayed when Brian calls Christmas Eve “Oriental” and must be convinced that this is an offensive expression. Christmas Eve’s accent and pronunciation are made titillating and pleasurable for a good liberal audience that knows that laughing at this is wrong. Despite its celebrations of antiracism, the number does not challenge the US American theatre’s support (as an institution) of racial hierarchy through the production of anti-Asian racial stereotype. Instead it reproduces this dynamic (by literally restaging the same stereotypes under the guise of “stereotype”) and profits from the theatre’s institutional racism (the disparities in casting, audience, and funding, that permit the restaging of stereotype), so that when the show does call out racism it is individualized. In other words, while the third verse’s example of racism seems to be “laughing at people’s accents,” it actually is structured around individual insults.

As a collective, the group has now changed; they can take politically-powerful action against injustice, such as by confronting Brian’s racist language (somewhat ironically for this analysis, he uses the term “Oriental”), and pressuring him to apologize. Individual insults are established as the gravest form of racism, particularly in intimate relationships (despite the possibility that in the real world intimate relationships might function as spaces of working out difference and that the cruelty of strangers, co-workers or bosses, the public, and structures/institutions is significantly impactful). This part of the song also establishes emotional slights as the largest harms committed; importantly, these forms of racism are the ones that must be and can only be addressed with an apology. Political action can only be oriented around this individual encounter, meaning that the only acceptable anti-racist action is to apologize. Because

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68 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, *Avenue Q*, 33.
racism is universal, although we should be individually careful not to hurt each other’s individual feelings, nothing needs to actually change. This is the target of the song’s—and the whole show’s—politics: to establish structural and institutional racism as politically untouchable. Structural critique is too dangerous to white supremacy, and might upset the capital flows that benefit from such an arrangement.

This racial politics is strengthened through the end of the third and final verse, the last example of “racism” that the song depicts the characters working through. In the only part of the song that actually functions as satire, Brian calls Christmas Eve racist, and she agrees and then sings a brief solo. (This solo precurses her Orientalist final line, “Ev’lyone’s a ritter bit lacist!”) Over an Oriental riff, Christmas Eve sings “The Jews have all the money and the whites have all the power/ and I’m always in taxi cab with driver who no shower.” Princeton and Kate agree and Gary Coleman adds, “I can’t even get a taxi!” In this final example, the characters do not need to process the racism; they have all come to accept it as a universal human trait. At the same time, this verse demonstrates how the true racists are the people of color who acknowledge power structures. Christmas Eve names race and white supremacy explicitly, in particular by bluntly stating stereotypes associated with “Jews” and “Whites” without any of the other characters’ disavowals. This positions racism as universal (because even this Asian-American character participates in it) and also sets up her critique of whiteness, and thus critiques of racism by people of color, as grotesque and thus the real object of satire for the song. At the very moment when white supremacy is purportedly critiqued (perversely, through the unified group singing in agreement that racism does not matter), the song substitutes acknowledgements of white supremacy as the object of satire, and obscures that substitution. In “Everyone’s A Little

69 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 34, sic.
70 Ibid. Sic.
Bit Racist,” the real racists are people of color, who are ridiculous when they make generalizations about all white people. Even as savvy viewers acknowledge the ring of truth in such generalizations, they are not the racists because they have not spoken these generalization aloud in public.

The verses work through different and well-known examples of racism, in the process both trivializing racism and establishing it as universally experienced. This reduction of racism as a material critique is simultaneous with the recreation of stringent and traditional racial boundaries and racially hierarchical privileges and punishments. Within the very verses by which racism is dematerialized, blackness and Asianness are created as racist caricature, whiteness is invisibilized, and all of these representational paradigms are structured as just and deserved. The performance of “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist,” the process of working-through difficulty while maintaining extant power hierarchies, is key. The empathetic characters are not presented as irretrievably racist, nor as perfectly politically-correct. Instead, it is vital stage business for them to work through their racism; the play depends on them staging their resolutions to the internal conflicts that a good liberal must feel when being racist. This staged exertion does lots of theatrical work: it demonstrates character growth, advances the plot, and bonds characters, particularly the main love interests, Kate and Princeton. As they talk out together how they should all respond to racism (an idea that is originally Princeton’s, the play’s central wealthy straight white dude), their back-and-forth serves as a guide, a tool both characters and audience can follow to overcome racial conflict.

Unlike the verses, which depict the struggle for understanding and overcoming racism as/in progress, the choruses present more neatly packaged ideological messages to a harmonious and catchy tune. The first chorus, shared by Princeton and Kate, defines racism is “seeing” race.
While colorblindness is depicted as good, it is depicted as impossible in practice. Since, as I argued, the depictions of Asianness and Blackness reify race, yet Princeton is unmarked and thus distinguished as white, this first chorus suggests we give up attempting to be colorblind about people of color, but practice colorblindness only for whiteness. Therefore, every time one fails to practice colorblindness around people of color, they are being human, inevitably “a little bit racist;” but if they “see” and racialize whiteness, in discordance with the white “majority” rejection of seeing whiteness, they have committed a larger crime.\footnote{Continuing this perverse trivializing logic, an additional line notes that being racist “doesn’t mean we go around committing hate crimes.” Hate crimes, then, are bad (since it is okay to be a little bit racist, but it is not okay to commit hate crimes), but they are then not the result of racism. Racism is too innocuous to generate hate-crimes; they must therefore be caused by some other, more pathological motive force.}

This first chorus then moves from defining appropriate ways to “see” race, to defining appropriate ways to “express” race, to speak about race and racism. This chorus takes on ethnic jokes, asserting they are funny and pleasurable for everyone, as well as accurate. Expanding the trivializing project of the first chorus, this part delegitimizes popularly-recognizable complaints against racism in order to establish racism as universal. This chorus deliberately works against an imagined subject who does not enjoy the racist jokes (even after establishing the jokes as unquestionably pleasurable), reducing a politically-motivated reaction, always anticipated, to nothing more than the mistake of taking the jokes personally. While earlier in “If You Were Gay” appeals to the sanctity of individual personal experience serves as a strategy for straight people to deny the structures of homophobia, such individualized response (such as feeling offended) is here delegitimized for people of color or anyone who might oppose racist jokes. The song encourages the audience to not be insulted by racism, demanding that the listener “relax” in a way that suggests that it anticipates the protests of a racially-diverse attendance. While this
imagined subject might make it seem like the second chorus’s main function is to speak to people of color in the audience, the earlier positioning of that audience as white (through a hailing of whiteness in the line “everyone enjoys them,” where the subject is distinctly white even as and in fact because they are claiming universality) instead shows how this chorus functions quite differently. Instead of trying to comfort the offended and in the process prioritize those concerns, the song actually hails the politically sympathetic audience member. Acting not as a comfort it instead models a potential white response to similar encounters over racism, to being called racist for telling an “ethnic” joke: help the people who called you racist understand how the world really works. In other words, it is not that this song reaches and corrects an imagined mass of people of color who complain about racist jokes, but rather that it constructs the audience to act as a potential intermediary who can (and as we will see, do) use this to address the people of color or PC police they will encounter outside of the theatre.

The second chorus starts after Gary Coleman admits that he is racist. In this chorus, Coleman establishes racism as a universal human trait by affirming Kate and Princeton’s interpretation of it. Coleman trusts and accepts their interpretation of racism even though he is an older, stably-employed, much more worldly man, and they are two unemployed or soon-to-be-unemployed fresh-outta-college kids, which perhaps more than any other singular example encapsulates the audacity and self-centeredness of Avenue Q’s fresh-outta-college creators. After Coleman affirms that he himself has been racist, they sing: “Princeton: We’re all a little bit racist. Gary Coleman: I think that I would have to agree with you. Princeton and Kate Monster: We’re glad you do.” Coleman goes on, “All right!! Bigotry has never been exclusively white—
The “white” puppets cannot make this assertion themselves; if they did so, we would expect a character of color to appear and confront them. Rather, for this disavowal to carry weight with the audience it must be enthusiastically espoused by a person of color. In the next line, the three of them sing together “If we all could just admit/ that we are racist a little bit/ even though we all know that it’s wrong/ maybe it would help us/ get along!”

The repeated “we all” beckons a collective that includes the audience, who are also present in the space often with a real live black person (the actor playing Coleman). This universalizing construction, “we all,” flattens both individual and material differences, which becomes central to the song’s (and the whole musical’s) resolution for racism. With a black person joining the two white characters, this group lyric literally achieves as well as represents the interracial harmony promised by adopting the song’s particular politics.

The significance of interracial harmony to the plot continues to be supported by the song’s structure. After Coleman joins the group, the song’s soon moves to the bridge (Christmas Eve’s solo), representing a change in the characters that will eventually permit the song’s, and their conflict’s, resolution. The song closes with a fourth chorus sung by Christmas Eve, Gary Coleman, Kate Monster, Princeton, and Brian all together. They repeat the idea that acknowledging universal racism and cessation of “being so PC” will likely lead to “liv[ing] in—harmony!” They also break the fourth wall in order to directly implicate the audience in their group, and as a group of racists.

All told, racism really is “the sensitive subject of race” itself, and in particular the “PC” conventions that make racial stereotype unspeakable and make white people feel racial tension.

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72 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, *Avenue Q*, 31; note Coleman is the only one who gets two exclamation marks for this phrase. He’s very enthusiastic!
73 Ibid.
74 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, *Avenue Q*, 34.
This set of social relations models how the musical negotiates and ultimately defers, derails, and resists radical challenges to the ideologies of racial capitalism. “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” is a disavowal strategy that whiteness can use to both resist symbolic attack (by denying racism), and advance its own relative position. Not only does proclaiming “well, everyone's a little bit racist” make one’s own racism unimportant, it also establishes one as the more authoritative subject on the issue of racism, a differential in symbolic power. Yet, while celebrating the harmony that comes from evacuating the symbolic power from accusations of racism, the song simultaneously reenacts pop culture’s relationship with structural racism. This comes from the process of racialization in which the musical engages, and in particular from the way it creates the characters of color as the cause of their own problems in a manner consistent with anti-anti-racist action. For example, Christmas Eve’s accent, which it would be a severe elision not to make sure to flag as a racist caricature disavowed as parody, is also what keeps her from retaining clients, achieving success, and finding a better husband; the audience’s laughter at Gary Coleman’s down-and-out status mirrors the social structures that do not take him seriously and thus shape the quality of his life.

In conclusion, this close analysis reveals the major features of “Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist” as a popular logic of antiracism. Racism is trivial and unworthy of political or personal engagement. It is simultaneously a universal practice, and a mildly uncomfortable experience of temporary individualized moments of prejudice or of seeing race. These experiences are always outside of history; there is neither a cumulative impact, not any institutional racism worth combating. Thus all racisms are the same qualitatively and quantitatively. And because all experiences of racism are the same they deserve to be treated the same: with an apology and a shared laugh. At the same time, race is, and is as it should be. In other words, the song positions
features of Asianness, blackness, and whiteness not as stereotypes or social constructions, but as truths that deserve to be maintained within their current hierarchical relations, or that cannot be overcome sufficiently to alter those ultimately just hierarchies. Thus, those who are not white are solely individually responsible for the material conditions of their lives (although they may have bad luck). In turn, people in positions of power have no responsibility to address when people of color have bad luck; it is just how the cards came down, and it would be an unfair burden on those in power to expect this. Ultimately, if people of color are subjected to racism, which exists only as momentary individual expressions of relatively accurate prejudice and discrimination, it is acceptable because they are themselves the most racist, as everyone knows. The ideology that accompanies the performance of “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” is living together in harmony. Interracial harmony can only be achieved when people of color accept the appropriate roles, acknowledge the true nature of racism, and stop trying to use accusations of racism for their own personal benefit. The song constructs structural and institutional racism as untouchable by critique, utilizing its black and Asian-American characters to assuage and convince even as it espouses strict race and class hierarchies.

**Expanding Capitalist Exploitation: Racial Contact and the Practice of Gentrification as Antiracism**

Within and beyond *Avenue Q*, the popular antiracisms of the liberal bourgeoisie come out of this set of disavowed social relations. As the musical demonstrates, this first depends on admitting that “everyone’s a little bit racist.” This is, on the one hand, an antiracism that is against political transformation. Accepting racism is a means of getting comfortable with “the sensitive subject of race” (evacuated of institutional force), before moving beyond it. It is really about letting go of caring about the impact of racism in people’s lives, as the song’s emphasis on
racist jokes and language highlights. At the same time, these things can be moved beyond because the speaker is presumed to be benevolent, to already have good politics, and getting beyond “the sensitive subject of race” will permit the communication of this inherent goodness despite the strictures of PC culture. Antiracism, then, is really about sufficient contact with people of other races (and this view is strongly oriented towards white audiences, although not exclusively designed to appeal to them). While this contact is similar to the trafficking in familiarity with blackness utilized by “My Black Friend” as popular antiracism, “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” goes further. This contact with otherness demanded by “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” must be sufficient to provide the opportunity to get to know people of color enough to get beyond racism with them, to demonstrate one’s good intentions and politics while everyone works through their individual feelings of being offended. In this sense, “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” as antiracism universalizes experiences of offending and being offended to discount their material impacts and create a sense of a level playing field; this is distinct from but circulating in conversation with familiarity with blackness used to secure symbolic power in the relation “My Black Friend.” While many material antiracist political actions are discredited by “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist,” the vital antiracist political action that the musical demands is having sufficient interactions with people of other races so that you can explain yourself. It is no accident that the song wraps this up with “Maybe we could live in/ Harmony.” Without being able to live together, we cannot overcome the “sensitive subject of race.” This really is a vision of cohabitating, sharing a space without tension over material inequality.

Yet material inequality is a foundational component of the musical, made particularly visible by a world view that denaturalizes the lifestyle and material conditions of the bourgeoisie. In order to work against the invisibilizing of bourgeois codes, I read the musical and its
performance in contradistinction to working class alternatives. Despite the musical’s attention to his experience of poverty and oppression, Princeton is distinctly well-to-do. He dresses with the kind of class and prep that defines the school after which he is named, in a blue button-down shirt under a pale yellow sweater vest with a blue argyle pattern across the chest. It is not only his appearance, but his decisions and behavior that are classed. Early in the musical Princeton experiences a situation of nightmarish horror for most people: he moves to a new city and signs a lease (with the implied two to three times the monthly rent for a security deposit) only to find out that the job he moved for does not actually exist. Instead of fleeing his debts and obligations, turning to relatives or alternative housing options such as vehicles or shelters, seeking less-attractive or temporary work, selling his body or even just his possessions, moving out of doors, or committing suicide, Princeton immediately turns to the frivolous pastime of looking for his purpose. This drive, the motivating force of the plot, is the connection between desire, labor, and livelihood, as though one’s labor under capitalism should or could be justified by a higher moral standing that is central to what gives life richness, meaning, and value. Princeton’s is a rare and privileged response, one that indicates a class habitus of significant wealth as well as a material and psychological comfort that is definitive to the shape and popularity of the musical.

Princeton’s youthful desire to find his purpose is both mocked and idolized in the song “Purpose,”75 and moves the plot forward. Without his search for purpose, the result of a contradiction between Princeton’s bourgeois sense of life-shaping and his unsuccessful plan, little would exist to connect or drive the play’s conflicts and resolutions. Princeton’s actions to reproduce the heteropatriarchy stems from his single-minded focus on “purpose” as ironically antithetical to commitment. For example, without his search for “purpose,” Princeton would

75 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 21-23.
never break up with Kate after using her, leading her on, and playing a fairly significant role in the loss of her job. (And despite the show’s celebration of tolerance of homosexuality, it is strongly cis-heteropatriarchal in this main relationship: Kate wants only commitment although she knows and is working toward her life goals, while Princeton directs the relationship and, though he has a variety of rich opportunities, just looks out for himself). Princeton’s break-up amps up his desperation to find purpose, which in turn buys him more sex, strengthens his friendship with the residents of Avenue Q, and builds his knowledge of and intimacy with the “real” New York. Ultimately this same search for purpose leads Kate Monster to love him more despite his indifference and immaturity, and causes pretty much the entire (sloppy) second half of the show. A feature of the class habitus that disproportionately facilitates wealthier students to pursue and succeed at “a B.A. in English,” all of this is markedly well-to-do behavior. Avenue Q is a musical about the material class relations that are involved in seeking a higher moral meaning to life.

The plot also makes Princeton’s material privileges evident at a variety of other points. First is Princeton’s name, a reference to the Ivy League private college with the estimated minimum cost of attendance today at almost a quarter of a million dollars, and a savvy allusion to the class of the Broadway audience. Other markers include Princeton’s relationships to family, material goods, and labor: instead of being fired, Princeton is laid-off; before that his “parents

76 Ibid., 1.
77 With an annual tuition of $43,450, plus the minimum estimate of associated expenses calculated by Princeton University’s Financial Aid office, and assuming a four-year degree (such as a “B.A. in English”), the cost is $244,640. A practical estimate of room, board, and expenses, including travel and health insurance as recommended on the financial aid website, would make this at least $20,000 to $40,000 higher. http://admission.princeton.edu/financialaid/fees-payment-options. In addition, Princeton is amongst the highest endowed universities; in 2015 its endowment was at “the all-time high of $22.7 billion,” according to http://giving.princeton.edu/endowment.
sen[d] all of [his] stuff from home!” Even when unemployed he has access to credit cards, Internet, a cell phone, money to spend at the bar, furniture, carryout food, clothes, newspapers, magazines, books, television, and his own lethargy. Shortly after his job loss Princeton reveals that he is not yet impoverished but “almost broke.” This indicates that he is living on savings, the very definition of middle-class (which indeed seems to be a step down for him). Several references throughout the work indicate that his parents support him when he cannot or will not find work: he gets money from his parents that he spends on beer to make his friends (the Bad Idea Bears) happy, and as Lucy dumps him, she notes that he “leeches from his parents and can’t get his act together.” Princeton’s precarity is not material, and identifying with his struggles is not the same as understanding impoverishment. The Ivy-league educated creators of the show, and the relatively wealthy audience members, may have related to Princeton precisely because he is a temporarily-disadvantaged yet familiar figure of wealth and privilege.

Rather than personal and political transformation for its economically privileged main character, Avenue Q presents moving to the city as the correct antiracist political action, the choice that activates the proximity to oppression that makes possible “living in harmony” according to the tenets of its antiracism. Indeed, New York City is the central piece of Avenue Q’s appeal; as a musical and a Bildungsroman, the tenets by which its main character comes of age are made particularly enticing. The audience expects the musical to take a particular shape, and anticipates that the main character will advance as part of its happy resolution. Such a shape is enforced both by plot structure and the pleasures of song. Coming to understand Avenue Q’s

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78 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 19.
77 Ibid., 93.
80 Ibid., 36.
81 Ibid., 36-38.
82 Ibid., 116.
truths about politics is part of becoming an adult, of encountering, recognizing, and conquering the “real world,” which is represented by the city as a site of racial and class contact.

Avenue Q’s relationship to New York City is important to its market success. It notoriously failed in Las Vegas despite its touted “adult humor.” The show’s brand identity depends on a variety of NYC-centric components: the title, intertextual connections with other works set in New York, even the brand symbol itself which mimics the symbol of an MTA subway line. The title is an actual street in New York City: the Avenue Q in Brooklyn, Quentin Road, runs parallel to Avenue P (one block north) and Avenue R (one block south) between Stillwell Avenue and Flatbush Avenue through northern Gravesend, Sheepshead Bay, and Marine Park. At the same time the street name is also a joke about the Manhattan neighborhood Alphabet City, particularly humorous and relevant during the early years of the show before the explosion of Brooklyn’s popularity. This eastern-most portion of the East Village runs from Avenue A east to Avenue D and the furthest block is a bit of a walk from the nearest train station; an Avenue Q in Alphabet City would be 13 blocks further. In fact, it would be 13 blocks further than the neighborhood actually goes, with each additional letter of the alphabet emphasizing Princeton’s poverty and alterity (here, literally distance from the access), and the real location somewhere in the middle of the East River. The Q, of course, also references the Q in LGBTQ, for “queer.”

Wherever it actually is, the fictional Avenue Q is a block of New York City in a non-gentrified neighborhood, which is what gives the block its legitimacy, credibility, and authenticity within the musical. Princeton's move is connected to his past (through the number “What Do You Do with a B.A. in English?”) and his future (the number “Purpose”). In between

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83 Baker, “From Broadway to Vegas.”
84 For example, see http://www.mta.info.
these periods Avenue Q is a space of liminality for Princeton, in which his identity can be honed and he can discover himself. Yet it is not the space of his apartment so much as the city itself that is important for this transition. Living on Avenue Q brings him into contact with a variety of other people (such as when he meets the residents on the street, or uses Kate's bathroom) with whom he would likely not have had contact before. A literal incarnation is Gary Coleman, who serves in the musical as reference to both stereotype and a unique human being that marks this site (Avenue Q/the city) as extraordinary. There’s also the stereotyped Japanese-American character, albeit a stereotype with some characterological depth, who is meant to represent people who might exist on any such block in New York. But it is not as though Avenue Q becomes Princeton’s home or is even allowed to be anyone's home (other than Gary's, who seems trapped there by his material circumstances) because it is a space of abjection, and this is what structures the city as liminal space for Princeton. Such a dynamic is also true for the 1996 musical Rent, although within a different historical and geographic context. Poverty, whiteness’s racial others, and abjection are linked to form the liminal space of the city for Princeton to transition to adulthood.

For example, when Princeton mopes at the top of Act 2, his neighbors comfort him not by inviting him over to their houses, although in the real world poor people often take pleasure and comfort in their space, however meager. Instead, they too identify with Princeton's primary habitation as in The City. They lift Princeton’s spirits with the tellingly-titled number “There is Life Outside Your Apartment.” In the song they drag him out to the city to gawk at “a pigeon squashed in the street,” an ambiguously-gendered person, and a homeless person they refuse to help. They ride the subway, engage in some typical New York activities like smoking pot in

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85 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 96-102.
public and harassing college-aged women, encounter a jackhammer so loud that it interrupts the
time, save someone from suicide, almost get hit by a car, and step in animal feces. All of these
unpleasant encounters solicit an insider's humor that depends on knowing exactly how non-
- idyllic New York is and loving it anyway. Yet it is the insider’s humor of the transplant, not of
someone who has childhood memories or long-established references in the city, and who might
instead visit friends, relatives, and old haunts. Not despite but because of the difficulties of the
city, Princeton's recovery from his breakup, and his ascent to somewhat-adulthood is secured
during this venture, and is symbolized by his acquiring a previously-desired sexual partner at the
end of the group’s jaunt.

The centering of the city is no accident; it is explicitly emphasized by Avenue Q’s
creators. In the script’s afterword, Whitty discusses the various changes to the script during the
run.

We made some of the changes to keep up with the times. Originally, Brian and
Christmas Eve moved to the Lower East Side at show's end. But as Avenue Q continued
its run, that neighborhood grew ever chic-er. So we changed it to Hell's Kitchen for
some of the Q companies - a neighborhood that sounded threatening, but then the day
came when Hell's Kitchen also became trendy. Another change was in order! Brian and
Christmas Eve's current destination is Flushing, Queens. (Investment tip: buy property
in Flushing immediately, as it's bound to become the hot new place to live.)
Keeping the show on the edge of gentrification, the work was changed over time to continue to
appeal to a particular desire for “threatening” yet up-and-coming neighborhoods. The city, a

86 Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, Avenue Q, 150, emphasis in original.
sense of its authenticity especially through contact with pre-gentrification populations depicted as dangerous racial others, is not only the show’s antiracism, but central to its appeal.

To review, Avenue Q makes the city, and overcoming racism, integral features of the narrative arc of a coming-of-age story. Avenue Q’s popular antiracism promotes extended racial contact as the solution to universal racism, and promotes the pre-gentrified city as the site for the fulfillment of this politics. It is only through racial contact that white people can prove they are not racist by getting beyond the racism they might perform to their inner benevolence and truly good politics. Avenue Q also, of course, takes and creates pleasure in its promotion of the city; as explored earlier in “Christopher Street,” musical theatre’s New York City offers excitement, exoticism, and the promise for personal growth and capital accumulation. Gentrification promises that racial contact acquired by moving to the city will secure for new residents street cred from their proximity to difficulty and racial others who are depicted as dangerous. The city as site of racial contact and poverty is central to what makes it desirable. While in Avenue Q the main white character suffers in the city because of his newfound unemployment, it is the very experience of being in the city, of working through issues such as dating and getting over racism with all the different and exciting people he meets, by which he is transformed into liberal maturity. The city itself (including its extant social relations) is the environment through which this can happen precisely because it presents the risk of violence, confrontation with others, and economic struggle.

Yet it is clear that associating abjection and liminality with poor people and people of color literally places white, bourgeois, non-New Yorkers at the center, and thus structurally marginalizes those who are anything but. Particularly, with the celebration of stereotype here, those who are not white are depicted as suffering rather than as subjects, and thus as unworthy to
achieve the same rewards as people in similar situations to Princeton. The musical always has a place for Princeton; low-income housing is ultimately not in very high demand, and the question of who Princeton displaces is never raised. And because the musical displays a process of abjection and overcoming abjection, this is representation of the liminal process: not just an in-between stage but a working-through-the-in-between-stage by which the main character becomes transformed. Importantly, he is transformed through his suffering: while the city serves as a liminal space, being oppressed functions as a liminal position. Thus living in poverty, being a person of color in a white supremacist society, being gay in a heteronormative society…according to Avenue Q none of these are definitively material, positions according to which one might live or die. Rather than positions they are all transition zones, inevitably temporary, important for how they might shape others’ politics but never unjust, restrictive, or imbricated in institutional hierarchies. Coming of age itself, experiencing oppression as only temporary, is the personal transformation that is made political. Those who, unlike Princeton, cannot transition to different class or race positions are depicted as responsible for their own suffering because of their attachments to these positions.

Conclusion

My goal in this chapter has not been to suggest that theatre is the root cause of gentrification, or vice-versa, but rather that both phenomena are produced and linked by a larger dynamic that is only revealed through a nuanced understanding of Broadway works themselves. As part of their contemporary moment that particularly encapsulates that moment’s structure of feeling, cultural products can give us insights into the shape of the economy as it operates. Understanding Avenue Q’s calculus of social relations elucidates the ideology that shapes current practices and patterns of exchange, profit, and exploitation both within and beyond the
immediately theatrical. This is particularly true when *Avenue Q*’s calculus of social relations is echoed within a market that is distinctly not the market for *Avenue Q* itself. It is here where we can see that patterns become formulae, that practice ossifies into institutions. This chapter has been about how economic redistribution (upwards, to the wealthy and elite, and away from black people and largely towards white people) is produced as hopeful and uplifting political practice through its appeal to the mass desire to end racism. While I have attended in particular to how the popular antiracism associated with “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” hinges a sense of antiracist political action to obtaining proximity to racial otherness via moving to the city, the economic and political value of proximity to racial others is ultimately a practice of consumption.

I use the term “experience economy of racism” to refer to the growing shape of the market towards an ideology of exploitations of “diversity” and “difference” as modes of racial contact that depend on this connection between consumption and political action. While there are general market shifts in this direction, the starkest examples come in the form of specific experiences that are marketed and sold on the basis of the proximity they offer to experiences of racism to consumers not previously inured to it, and the rewards offered (particularly to white people) because of those experiences. The engagement of an audience of consumers oriented around the idea that their consumption brings them closer to both “racial contact” and to the solution to racism is an increasingly common ideological feature of commodities and in particular of experiences in the post-9/11 liberal marketplace. I suggest that this market capitalizes off of the idea that purchasing products associated with people of color will both bring consumers closer to people of color, and also that the attendant associations with people of color will serve as a way for those consumers to be distinguished through their righteous politics.
The symbolic value accorded to racism, itself a consequence of the hard-fought struggle for social recognition of the material inequalities of existence under racial capitalism, is turned towards profit. Performance, particularly of hip-hop, was an integral part of this transformation: think Run DMC’s 1986 hit “My Adidas,” and subsequent $1.6 million marketing deal. The song linked the rappers’ credibility and skill to their street-savvy lifestyle that was at once a testimony to the difficulties of racist inequality and a celebration of the rappers’ resilience in the face of that adversity. And each of these centered around their brand of shoes, which they exhorted audiences to show them before they performed the number. Wearing the shoes and rapping along to the lyrics, the audience was invited to step into the role of Run DMC, including into their experience of racism. The shoes gave consumers the credibility of the street, power through their association with the difficulties of and resistance to racist inequality, whether the consumers were from the Bronx or the ‘burbs.

This is why, as Brooks observes, Avenue Q’s puppets produce the same racial order as blackface minstrelsy. In the experience economy of racism, there is a move away from products that demand you become something in order to reap the rewards of transformation, and a move towards products that offer the same or similar promises to everyone coming from different positions. It is through an individualized experience of universalism that the market comes to embrace diversity: it strives for products that are saleable not only despite diversity of consumers but even more saleable because of the diversity of consumers.

On the one hand, this is a niche market that has found a way to capitalize off a desire that is likely only temporarily so profitable; like all such symbolically-inflected elements of popular

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88 Brooks Bodies in Dissent, 345.
culture, these particular associations between market desirability and racial subjugation (i.e.: between “coolness” and, particularly but not exclusively, “blackness” and “racism”\textsuperscript{89}) are faddish and will likely give way to other trends. But beyond this particular market is the shape of the economy overall. Rather than work to unify consumers by aligning each particular audience with a single product, even as broad an audience as a national one, liberalism has worked to bring universalism to the market through a universalizing appeal to difference. “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist” reflects a pattern of universalizing the experiences of racism to trivialize and dematerialize real-world racial hierarchy; subsequently, it promotes the purchasing of proximity to “others” (who are predominantly racial others for the majority white audience to whom it appeals) as central to achieving the rewards promised to the elite through their participation in the experience economy of racism.

We can better understand the experience economy of racism by interrogating what we mean by an “economy.” A traditional definition of economy might understand it as the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. This understanding is shifted when we include “experience” alongside “goods and services.” Beyond Pine and Gilmore’s discovery that people would pay for experiences,\textsuperscript{90} we might rethink the economy as always already an experience one: if Marx argues that relations between people become seen as relations between things, then relations between commodities in the marketplace are also relations between people.\textsuperscript{91} The obscuring of them as such is what Marx explains as commodity fetishism.

\textsuperscript{90} B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, \textit{The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
\textsuperscript{91} “In [a commodity] the social character of men’s [sic] labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between
As relations between people, all moments of exchange are in fact experiences, however short-lived, of a very particular social relationship. Any service purchased is in fact the lived experience of a labor relation for both the consumer and the laborer providing the service. Similarly, the purchase of a good represents a set of experiences that are solidified into the good, the chain of labor relations obscured by commodity fetishism. By examining the experience of a purchase (including in particular what is invisibilized), we freeze these constantly shifting relations for a moment of time. Buying the fetishized good is in fact living the experience of obtaining the good without laboring in other stages of its production and distribution; it is experiencing one’s position as consumer in that chain of labor relations. The economy is a deeply social relation.

This particular arrangement that I observe in this chapter is a continuation of the modern capitalism of liberal economic practice. In part in competition, in part in alignment with neoliberalism’s shaping of collective economic practice towards competition as a commonsense, liberalism shapes our collective economic practice towards the maintenance of bourgeois class relations through the regulation of political action motivated by racial hierarchy (including the political action of economic redistribution). This is not a new observation; many leftist thinkers argue that liberalism’s promises are rooted in distinction and hierarchization, not justice. For example, Wendy Brown observes that liberalism is in practice entwined with neoliberalism and “postcolonialism.” Brown’s exploration of liberalism through the lens of tolerance exposes this politics as “an exercise of hegemony that requires extensive political transformation of the cultures and subjects it would govern.” Liberalism establishes “the superiority of the West” and

valorizes “individual autonomy” while obscuring its own “cultural norms.” Liberalism and its associated tolerance are key factors in contemporary maintenance of white supremacy. Offering a materialist critique of Brown’s attempts to rescue liberalism, Slavoj Žižek maintains, in contrast, that liberalism, the ideology of capitalism and abstract universalism, is the root of commodity fetishism. And Lisa Lowe critiques the very foundations of liberal political humanism as dependent on the global social relations of genocide, slavery, and indentured servitude, noting that “forms of both liberal subject and society in the imperial center are possible only in relation to laboring lives in the colonized geographies or ‘zones of exception’ with which they coexist, however disavowed.” This popular antiracism as a distinctly liberal economic practice explains its resonances with Avenue Q’s liberal audiences and the other political expressions (such as pro-gay homonormativity, or explicitly anti-Republican party political alignment) that might resonate with such audiences today, but it also provides specific insights into the economy as a liberal social relation more broadly. These insights paint a clear picture in which today’s Democratic Party liberalism is part of the legacy of liberal political humanism that Brown, Žižek, and Lowe critique.

“Experience” is a central part of this economy, and theatre itself is vital to “experience.” First, as a cultural object theatre provides insights into structures of feeling, including the structures that shape experience. Second, theatre’s defenses take on a unique class-based role of bourgeois gatekeeping that permits the dominant positions within the field of racial capitalism to continue as such. Those defenses take a particular shape as described throughout the chapter: disavowal of material hierarchies and of its own class position (and work to achieve that class

distinction through the act of consumption) that is cloaked in appeals to universalism, individualism, and the understanding of consumption as the definitive political act such as, in this case, one that resolves racism (even as those acts of consumption either do not challenge or in fact worsen extant hierarchies). Yet, the shift that Pine and Gilmore observed when they began to discuss the experience economy is not only significant because of how theatrical and performance products could generate more profit. Rather, the success of experience commodities around the turn of the millennium reflects a change in how commodity fetishism operates that is intimately performative: a shift in the practice of disavowal in the marketplace. Disavowal’s role has not shifted in how we think of commodities themselves, but in liberalism’s understanding of its role in the relations that constitute such commodities, in the consumers’ understanding of commodities as experiences of social relations.

This shift comes in part from decades of labor in consciousness raising on the left, truly something to celebrate. Attention to inequities in power (which I deliberately name with extreme lack of specificity) has reached at least some level of mass consciousness in the United States by the turn of the millennium. I do not want to downplay the lives spent investing labor, thought, and activism into raising such awareness in the hopes of conquering class, gender, and race-based power inequities. Indeed, such work has been so collectively powerful that it is no longer as efficacious for those in dominant positions to counter this labor with oppositional consciousness-raising. Instead these advances have been misdirected, turned aside, or appropriated by those in power to serve their own ends, often in ways that are initially not completely contradictory to the motivations of leftist organizers. The resulting change in how

95 However, there is much excellent work discussing these market shifts. See such works as Maurya Wickstrom, Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Jon McKenzie, Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance (New York: Routledge, 2001).
disavowal and thus commodity fetishism functions is related to both this shift in mass (though not universal) consciousness, and to the appropriation of this increased consciousness by dominant interests.

In light of this increased consciousness, liberalism acknowledges that inequality exists, yet vitally the nature of that inequality and its solutions are even further obscured. So, while liberal consumers may be conscious of, say, the slave labor used to peel shrimp,\textsuperscript{96} they misunderstand the nature of the social relations by which people are enslaved as their own relationship to a specific product. A well-intentioned liberal consumer may turn to buying only head-on shrimp, or to boycotting the purchase of shrimp altogether. The liberal consumer comes to understand the limits of political action as “voting with their dollars;” without such a frame for political action, they cannot use capitalist relations to try to punish the corporation utilizing slave labor. But the social relation between the Western consumer and the slave laborer is unchanged by such an action, and this material reality remains disavowed, despite the defetishization of the commodity. Even when the labor involved in its production is elucidated, the material relations that constitute and make possible that labor (the hierarchical and racializing order of the field itself) remain deliberately obscured. This is the significance of the bourgeoisie’s liberal antiracist political action, of knowing and enacting “Everyone’s A Little Bit Racist”: even though the commodity itself is no longer completely fetishized, the social relations of racial capitalism remain obscured and unchallenged.

The resolution of the now-acknowledged hierarchies that accompany a commodity’s production is attendant on the act of consumption itself. In other words, commodities are

\textsuperscript{96} Margie Mason, Robin McDowell, Martha Mendoza, and Esther Htusan, “Global supermarkets selling shrimp peeled by slaves,” \textit{AP}, December 14, 2015, accessed on December 14, 2015, \url{http://bigstory.ap.org/article/8f64fb25931242a985bc30e3f5a9a0b2/ap-global-supermarkets-selling-shrimp-peeled-slaves}. 
positioned so that liberal consumers feel that they must purchase the commodities in order to solve the problems those commodities present. The disavowals of commodity fetishism have moved from the realm of production to the realm of consumption; in doing so they displace critique of the relations between capitalist and proletariat to critique of relations between consumer and producer. The only political act, then, can be from ones position as consumer, to be a less exploitative consumer. Consumption itself is the only political solution for the injustices of capitalism.
Chapter Three: “Postrace”: *Hairspray*, Contemporary US Electoral Practice, and Popular Antiracism As National Political Ideology

“Mr. Obama’s presidency, though an undeniably encouraging gain for the civil rights movement, may have been inadvertently loaded with expectations it will struggle to live up to…. For now though, it is important to remember that just because someone voted for Mr. Obama does not mean that he is not racist.”

**Introduction**

The turn of the millennium was marked by attacks on land claimed by the US on 11 September 2001, and the period of popular insecurity, fear, and uncertainty that followed was one of rapidly institutionalized intolerance. A hasty racialization of certain people of color as “terrorists” and certain white people as “patriots,” as well as accelerated changes in the structure and operations of the United States government resulted in vast shifts in the production and expansion of “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” American Studies scholar Evelyn Alsultany’s list of legal changes following 9/11, from *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, is worth quoting at length to convey a sense of the collective impact of these measures.

The USA PATRIOT Act, passed by Congress in October 2001 and renewed in 2005, 2006, 2010, and 2011 legalized the following (previously illegal) acts and thus enabled anti-Arab and Muslim racism: monitoring Arab and Muslim groups; granting the U.S. Attorney General the right to indefinitely detain noncitizens whom he suspects might have ties to terrorism; searching and wiretapping secretly, without probable cause; arresting and holding a person as a “material witness” whose testimony might assist in a case; using secret evidence, without granting the accused access to that evidence; trying

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those designated as “enemy combatants” in military tribunals (as opposed to civilian courts); and deportation based on guilt by association (not on what someone has done). Other measures included the Absconder Apprehension Initiative that tracked down and deported 6,000 men from unnamed Middle Eastern countries, in most cases for overstaying a visa. In the weeks after 9/11 at least 1,200 Muslim men were rounded up and detained without criminal charges. The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), required males from twenty-four Muslim countries to be photographed and fingerprinted and to register their addresses with the Immigration and Naturalization Service every few months; anyone who refused would face deportation. Under this “Special Registration” approximately 80,000 men complied, 2,870 of whom were detained and 13,799 placed in deportation proceedings within two years after 9/11. The government submitted young Arab and Muslim men to a “voluntary interview” program, based on the assumption that they would have information about terrorism because of their religion, gender, and national origin. Nearly 200,000 Arab and Muslim men were interviewed.3

The USA PATRIOT Act alone, to say nothing of the state and local means by which it was taken up, racialized Arab and Muslim people by differentially practicing surveillance, privacy, security, and physical treatment; by differentially distributing access to space, time, relationships, and citizenship; and by hierarchizing rights and responsibilities within the justice system. This was not a one-time decision made in the agonizing moments following the trauma of violence. As Alsultany concisely indicates, the Patriot Act was renewed again and again; under slightly different auspices as the USA Freedom Act, it persists at the time of this writing.

At the same time, mass incarceration and its after-effects remain a significant determinant in racial and class hierarchization. These are the racial capitalist legacies of not only George W. Bush, but also of Barack Obama. The turn-of-the-millennium was by no means one of successful radical antiracism; rather it was a period of innovation in the US’s role in the differential distribution of life and death, and of deep retrenchment for racial capitalism.

Yet, somehow, the new millennium is widely celebrated as a definitively post-racism period. This is particularly true in the realm of cultural production. Broadway set designer David Rockwell makes explicit how tightly the theatre and antiracism were linked after 9/11 when discussing the creation process for the musical *Hairspray*.

It amazed and thrilled me (but should not have surprised me) when all the elements of the show came together seamlessly. Theater is the most collaborative art form, bringing together individuals with diverse skills who contribute their talents to achieve a common goal. The heart of *Hairspray*—both the movie and the musical—encompasses John Waters’s belief in racial, sexual, class, and body-type tolerance. Although it went unspoken, as a result of September 11, 2001, every member of the *Hairspray* family realized the significance of transferring John’s vision of empowerment and hopefulness to the stage. Trust, respect, and flexibility underpinned the desire to accomplish our shared goal.

Rockwell begins with a statement about the elements of the show coming together that reflects a sense of natural coherency between members of the creative team. Rockwell then moves to a platitude about theater’s value as a collaborative art form, a statement that might be true but

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reveals the significance of theatre as an exceptional space of artistic unity in diversity. Here, diversity is defined as people with different skills. For Rockwell, theatre’s unity in diversity is linked to “the heart of Hairspray,” its message of racial and body tolerance. It is through this message that Rockwell is assured that US culture’s genuine tolerant nature will prevail; theatre is antiracism incarnate.

Yet tolerance, involving an empowered party aligned with dominant interests who is authorized to permit the survival of that which/who is tolerated, is a form of political action that is not just amenable to but already ridden with hierarchy. Critical theorist Wendy Brown’s exploration of tolerance revealing it as a liberal project that “is an exercise of hegemony that requires extensive political transformation of the cultures and subjects it would govern” is apt. The conditions of a tolerant relation grant the person(s) doing the tolerating moral legitimacy, while requiring the tolerated be subjugated to, at the very least, the tolerator’s symbolic order. A critic, producer, artist, or audience that is tolerant is affirmed as an authority that deigns to read and not-kill a tolerated other. A tolerant production is anything but an antiracist political goal. How tolerance is brought to life on the stage is a significant factor in post-9/11 struggles over racism and antiracism: Hairspray might tolerate fat people, working-class people, and people of color as protagonists, but it does so while working to reestablish the hierarchies that oppress them. Through tolerance, we achieve postracism: existing hierarchies do not just remain in place, but are strengthened through Hairspray’s very inclusions. Indeed, Rockwell goes on to note the universal albeit “unspoken” commitment to this narrative of tolerance as a response to 9/11. This study argues that the relations of bodies and capitals that experience “empowerment and hopefulness” through what Rockwell calls “racial, sexual, class, and body-type tolerance” in

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Hairspray, is also articulated to a carefully-delineated electoral practice that brings national political power to the US liberal bourgeoisie. Postrace as popular antiracism shaped electoral practice by hailing mass political empowerment and directing that national antiracist sentiment towards the election of Barack Obama.

In 2008 the presidential campaign, the product of a variety of actors, shaped mass options within the institutional sphere of elections, the mass performative of American democracy. While campaigns and other political actors struggle to shape elections through what happens before (such as through gerrymandering or voter identification laws) and after (such as by determining how votes are counted, or campaigning for a candidate’s recall) elections, this is a study of the ideology that shapes the voter encounter with the ballot itself. “Postrace,” a racial politics exemplified by the 2002 musical Hairspray, shaped popular antiracist inclination at the national scale into votes for bourgeois liberal interests in the form of Barack Obama as president. In order to explain how “postrace” mediated the ideology of the ballot, this chapter first turns to Hairspray to carefully take apart the constellations of bodies, capitals, and political action that constitute “postrace” as a popular antiracism. “Postrace” creates a historical myth that centers white people as both the victims and heroes of racial hierarchy, charging the audience (or the nation) with the responsibility to solve racism at the same time as disavowing the existence of racial hierarchy. From this definition, the chapter turns postrace towards understanding the reception of Obama’s 2008 marketing campaign. While result of “postrace” in Hairspray is a pleasurable nostalgia trap that encourages further consumption of works like Hairspray, media interventions shaped this project as part of the 2008 presidential campaign to provide an outlet in the form of electing Obama as a national enactment of popular antiracism.

Postrace In Public Discourse and Postrace as Popular Antiracism
Hairspray’s “postracism” as popular antiracism defines the pleasure in and popular support for black culture as a key antiracist political action, a politics that maintains racial hierarchy and capitalist practice. Antiracism, according to Hairspray, should be enacted by putting faith in and popular support behind a visionary, if unexpected-looking, figurehead who is valuable because of the pleasure promised by their black culture. Antiracist political action should feel good and be easy, like appreciating popular music or voting for a favorite candidate. Any difficulties and misrecognitions along the way will be temporary, and racist social structures will eventually realize the errors of their ways and change to reward just behavior. People who do such work should expect to gain black friends and lovers, to gain the respect of authority figures and peers, to fulfill their dreams, to reap profits of a variety of capitals as well as to be remunerated for the resources they expend, and to gain the vindication and self-righteousness of being on the right side of history. By participating in popular support of a figurehead, bourgeois activists should expect immediate and permanent change.

Like other popular antiracisms I have explored, “postrace” is a bourgeois manipulation of mass political desire to end racism, one that encompasses a particular calculus of relations of bodies and capitals. As I explore in Hairspray this calculus is one in which present-day prejudices are imagined as the same as a particular myth of 1960s racism (the “race” and “racism” to which we are now “post”), which can then be conquered through consumption; this formulation is concomitant with the persistence of racial capitalism. Racism exists only as individual failure and interpersonal prejudice, and as such the only institutional racial inequality worthy of intervention is exclusion from the marketplace of cultural goods.

Terms such as postrace and postracism (which I sometimes interchange) are used to exert symbolic capital to serve political and economic capital. “Postrace” is a way of defining and
remaking what race is that is distinguished predominantly by its prefix “post.” The term indicates two things: the disavowal of the significance of race concomitant with really-existing racial hierarchy. Postrace denies all features of race, positive, negative, or neutral. A similar yet distinct project, colorblindness, functions first and foremost as an individualized strategy: the connection with a sense of sight (and lack thereof) connotes distinctly individual perception. One purports not to see race, therefore race does not exist for that particular person. Of course, such “colorblindness” is used to affirm the significance of race while contradicting political demands for racial justice, justifying individual support for the maintenance of the power differentials that privilege those who are received as white. While colorblindness operates to disavow the existence of race interpersonally, postrace builds from these assumptions to deny the existence and impact of race across contemporary society, asserting the broader social and political necessity of colorblindness’s individualized disavowal. “Colorblindness” and “postrace” typically function dialectically, with the former hinting at the need for the latter, and the latter typically premised on the near-universal existence of the former. Since much of the disavowed significance of race is actually about racial hierarchy, “postrace” as a project encompasses expressions of “postracism,” as well as numerous deployments of “diversity,” “inclusion,” and “multiculturalism.”

According to theater scholar Brandi Wilkins Catanese, “postrace,” like colorblindness, “emphasiz[es] elective culture over supposedly inert racial categories.” Catanese notes that one risk of such a philosophy is “substitut[ing] a quantitative focus on representation for a sustained

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commitment to political and material change in American society.” More than a risk, this substitution is central to postrace as a deliberately social concept. If “colorblindness” is a descriptive expression of an individual’s viewpoint, and thus informs a sole individual’s political stance, postrace is a descriptive and prescriptive social project. In popular cadence, it typically refers to US American society; even when the term “postrace” is connected to an individual, that individual is a political or cultural figure (often, in public discourse, Barack Obama) whose inclusion is somehow meant to stand in for social change as a whole. While postrace describes a society that is purportedly beyond racism, it also asserts the destruction of race as a political goal for US society, with the threat of violence against people of color persisting connotatively just beneath the surface. “Postrace” is, then, an explicitly invasive and performative worldview which, in the act of description of society, attempts to create the world it describes. The term implicitly or explicitly insists that social and political systems and institutions should not and may not consider race. Yet that “post-” is never really post at all. Even at its best, acceptance of the racial status quo functions to maintain unjust racial hierarchies and the systems of privilege and stigma distribution that constitute them. Additionally, tolerance of the existing racial order

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serves to obscure political action that retrenches and expands racial and class hierarchies, and to disrupt political opposition.

So Hairspray’s “nostalgia trap” is a substitution of culture for politics that is intimately about creating a past racism which we are, through our consumption, moving beyond. Throughout the show, racism is always cast in the past (with respect to the audience), even as it is also built in the present, carrying out the postrace performative in how both the show and the audience are shaped. Both the show and the audience’s consumption of it bring postrace into being because racism is cast back into the past, enacting the moving beyond of that racism and then celebrating that action. The moving-beyond-ness is achieved throughout the course of the show, which is about the celebration of black culture that the audience gains particular access to because a charismatic leader figure has access to that culture. In this way, this chapter moves beyond the consumption logic of this dissertation’s earlier discussion surrounding Avenue Q; it is the process/performance of reenactment that is itself a snare for political action, a misdirection I call a “nostalgia trap” because of the way this displacement of political action depends on the “post” of postracism.

**Hairspray’s Popular Antiracism**

For the purposes of this dissertation, Hairspray is a live\(^\text{13}\) musical theatre remake of the 1988 John Waters movie of the same name. Like the 1988 movie, the musical is set in the 1960s and centers on a fat, white Baltimore high school student Tracy Turnblad and her fat and agoraphobic mother Edna, as Tracy attempts to gain recognition, love, and popularity for her dance moves by getting a role on the local television dance show. Along the way, Tracy overcomes her bullies, uplifts her mother’s confidence, secures the romantic interest of the

\(^{13}\) Based on and following the success of the stage musical, a new film version was produced in 2007. It did not achieve as much critical acclaim as the stage musical.
show’s teen idol Link Larkin, and integrates the racially segregated show and American popular culture.

The musical was produced by Margo Lion in association with Clear Channel Entertainment, and premiered at the 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle, Washington USA. The book was written by Mark O’Donnell and Thomas Meehan, with music by Marc Shaiman (of South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut) and lyrics by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman. It was directed by Jack O’Brien and choreographed by Jerry Mitchell, with set design by David Rockwell and Costume Design by William Ivey Long. The show opened with Marissa Jaret Winokur playing Tracy, and Harvey Fierstein playing Edna in the tradition of the movie (where the role was famously played by Divine). Mary Bond Davis played Motormouth Maybelle, Corey Reynolds played Seaweed, Dick Latessa played Wilbur Turnblad, and Linda Hart played Velma Von Tussle.\(^{14}\) The show opens with its most famous number, “Good Moring Baltimore,” and proceeds episodically predominantly from the perspective of the teenage characters. Other popular songs include “Welcome to the 60s,” “Big, Blonde and Beautiful,” and, the closing number, “You Can’t Stop The Beat.”


Hairspray is an important cultural object because it reflects the mythical role that race relations in the 1960s have taken on for US American culture, politics, and economy. The “postrace” way it arranges bodies, difference, and power, and how that order signifies antiracism, reflects a vital force in formal political action in the contemporary United States.

Three simultaneous and intersecting racial projects are built into the plot and early twenty-first century performance of Hairspray. First, the show focuses on restaging and recreating “past” racism to bring that racism into the present under the guise of nostalgia and
irony. Second, it equates all other contemporary inequalities with racism to increase its appeal. Third, *Hairspray* defines racism as individual prejudice, and cultural practice, and in particular consumption of black culture, as its solution. *Hairspray* dematerializes the political problems it addresses and the solutions it promotes, while also capitalizing off of the racial hierarchies it maintains.

**Restaging 1960s Racism**

Unlike some of the other Broadway shows I have discussed, *Hairspray* (particularly when produced in the United States) does not disavow the relationship between its characters and real-world constructions of race. The main characters are explicitly meant to be white or black, and the Broadway production was cast to affirm this textual racialization. In fact, the racial identity of the characters is so strong that some productions of *Hairspray* notoriously engaged in literal or virtual blackface to stage the “race relations” at the plot’s core, such as at the UK’s Brighton Youth Theatre, Texas’s Plano Children’s Theatre, and productions in Italy and Korea. Yet blackness and whiteness are neither static nor monolithic, but are multifaceted

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17 In another thread on Broadwayworld.com, fans of the musical discuss an Italian production done with blackface and share pictures which have since been removed. Accessed on September 11, 2015, http://www.broadwayworld.com/board/readmessage.php?thread=952206; youtube.com also features videos of a Korean production done with blackface, such as magazinethemusical’s
formations that are always being re-crafted by and as part of their ever-changing milieus.

Hairspray’s racialization project is a deliberately nostalgic one, a 2002 celebration of, or wish to return to, the blackness and whiteness of the 1960s. The key question is: why? What does restaging (which is also recreating, albeit a limited and conditional recreation) 1960s whiteness, blackness, and race relations, offer at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

Nostalgia, rooted in a longing to return to something whether that is possible or not,\textsuperscript{18} permits the recreation of certain elements of historical racism. Through the musical’s staging of the past, acts of racial discrimination and hierarchization come into being in the early twenty-first century, such as when Velma prohibits Little Inez from auditioning. While the musical is obviously \textit{staged} and \textit{acted}, performance’s ontology is not reducible to its self-reflexivity just as, in the abolitionist feminist maxim, impact is not reducible to intention. That is, just because a performance is meant to indicate a historical period, or just because an enactment is meant to provide critical distance from or critique of racial hierarchy does not mean that the racial hierarchy it stages does not also exist. Rather, performance’s ontology is a uniquely vital part of how “postrace” operates, because it is through it that re-doing racial hierarchization gains a loosely-disavowed guise as reenacting racial hierarchization.

Go to a performance of Hairspray and you can see white people discriminating against black people nightly, in public, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, although they are actors and on stage. One rich example displays how the musical carefully works through this weighty practice to assert its own authority to speak about race. An early scene introduces the titular host of the Corny Collins Show (CCS), a television dance show based on \textit{American}

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Bandstand and the Buddy Deane Show. In the number “The Nicest Kids In Town,” Corny brings race up as an issue worth talking about, singing, “Nice white kids who like to lead the way/ and once a month we have our Negro day!” Using the term “Negro” was a symbolically loaded act in the early twenty-first century. In order to place the term safely into the musical’s mythologized past, the musical immediately provides a villainous counterpoint to Corny. Clarifying Corny’s role as one of the good guys are antagonists Velma von Tussle, the producer of CCS, and her daughter Amber von Tussle, a dancer on that show. While Corny’s use of the words “white” and “Negro” are made innocuous in the context of the song’s lyrics, shortly thereafter Velma uses “white” to express white supremacy. Velma complains about the black music Corny features on CCS, reprimanding, “None of that Detroit sound today. You have something against Connie Francis?” Corny defends the music as being what kids are interested in, but Velma replies “They’re kids, Corny. That’s why we have to steer them in the white direction…I mean…you know what I mean.” Corny’s use of the word “white” to identify the “nice kids” that do not dance on Negro day is very different that Velma’s slip of the tongue; the latter is depicted as what the “real” racism looks like, in large part because Velma tries to control popular culture while Corny tries to serve it. Velma’s biggest faux pas is that she prefers white culture, a very literal and individual rendering of white supremacy as the desire for or belief in the superiority of whiteness. This explicit depiction of villainy, juxtaposed with the historicization of the term “Negro,” demonstrates a back-and-forth that the musical must constantly perform between the past and the present. A key feature of postracism is the way in

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20 Hairspray typescript, 10.
21 Hairspray typescript, 10.
which it creates a very specific version of the past and carefully monitors and regulates it to serve contemporary needs.\footnote{Enforcing this sense, critic Ben Brantley’s review notes the “Like the ‘Producers,’ ‘Hairspray’ succeeds in recreating the pleasures of the old-fashioned musical comedy without seeming old-fashioned. Think of it, if you insist on such nomenclature, as a post-postmodern musical.” Ben Brantley, “Through Hot Pink Glasses, a World That’s Nice,” \textit{New York Times}, August 16, 2002, accessed on October 8, 2016, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/16/movies/theater-review-through-hot-pink-glasses-a-world-that-s-nice.html}. Similarly, Margo Jefferson critically picks up on this dynamic but ultimately shifts the critique of politics into one of aesthetics. Jefferson notes, “Though all involved [in the production] have studies the period [of the ‘60s] with care, none of them truly seems to be living inside it. We’re supposed to feel good about ourselves because we learned 40 years ago that prejudice is bad and bad taste is good….Why does it all look and feel generic, as if the dances could be transplanted to another show and do just as well.” Margo Jefferson, “It’s Fun But Sticky, And Even A Bit Stiff,” \textit{New York Times}, September 1, 2002, 3.}

An authoritative version of the play script, published in a hardcover coffee table book, is sprinkled with revealing notes from the artists that created the musical which strengthen these readings of the performance. For example, a few lines later the book writers reveal one of Velma’s cut lines that furthers this individualized depiction of her white supremacy. Originally, Velma was supposed to say of Amber’s romantic ventures: “And keep it caucasian!”\footnote{O’Donnell, et al., \textit{Hairspray}, 30.} The book writers intended her villainy to be explicitly about her personal preference for whiteness both for her and her daughter. Thus, references to “white” and “Negro” are linked with their historical use; Velma is permitted to use them to demonstrate the bad behavior of racists, and Corny because of realistic historical conventions. In the process, \textit{Hairspray} defends its present practice against dissent or protest at the use of either term, controlling the contemporaneous symbolic complications of the early 2000s through its references to the past. This occurs in other expressions of racism and fatphobia, such as when Mr. Spritzer, the head of the corporation sponsoring the dance context, complains about Tracy’s politics: “Negro Day, every day?!” That
chubby communist girl!” Mr. Spritzer is clearly a villain, aligned with the von Tussles. While staging of these violences may be meant to recollect the past, such staging is ontologically part of the present. Indeed, it is often through the guise of historical enactment, nostalgia, or irony that racism is reenacted in popular culture in the twenty-first century. *Hairspray* stages a nostalgic myth of the field of race, including its hierarchies, to justify its own interventions in that field and delimit the actions of others.

**Equating Other Oppressions with 1960s Racism**

Key to the moves *Hairspray* makes in the field is how it defines racial hierarchy through connection with other oppressions. Because Edna is traditionally played by a large man (Harvey Fierstein originated the role in a fat suit), this character is often the most celebrated element of the musical by the theatre literati. Edna links self-love and queerness, and Edna’s self-acceptance and fashionable personal transformation at the end of the musical are tied to the end of racial segregation on the CCS. Similarly, Tracy’s own path to success is tied to overcoming racial hierarchy. As the main character, Tracy is central to the meaning of the musical and her story line is what I examine as exemplary here. By equating heterosexism and fatphobia with racism, *Hairspray* reduces racism to a universal but nonetheless individualized prejudice.

Two preliminary notes. First, scholarship in fat studies has demonstrated that the connections between anti-black racism and fatphobia are partially mutually-constitutive, and partially intersectional. Western standards of beauty define white femininity as their epitome, including standards of body shape that favor slenderness over fatness. Much of this scholarship

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24 *Hairspray* typescript, 41.
addresses how the unique objectification of black women in the diaspora involves to some extent a distance between black women and this white beauty standard; at times this intersection explicitly associates blackness, fatness, and poverty, constituted into stereotyped formations such as the Mammy or the Welfare Queen. This is by no means meant to suggest that fatphobia is the root cause of the forces of white supremacy, misogyny, and misogynoir which devalue the beauty of blackness and are violent to black femininity and black women in particular ways; rather the reverse. I point out this connection not as a kind of additive intersectionality, but to demonstrate that fatphobic misogynoir is a formative piece of the hierarchies of racial capitalism. Any abolitionist feminist intersectionality must account for it in order to adequately address the power relations by which we value bodies, lives, and people in our contemporary world. In other words, not all black women are fat, not all fat women experience racism, and not all women are oppressed by the limited social range of accepted bodily sizes, yet racism is a fundamental part of how fatphobia operates as a social force. To understand fatphobia and body politics we must always already account for the race and racism of which it is always also a constitutive piece.

I cannot analyze Hairspray without an additional preliminary comment: as fat politics are increasingly materially relevant, radical body politics opposed to fatphobia are increasingly necessary. The fat politics of Hairspray, like its race politics, ultimately reconstitute extant


hierarchies, albeit in a different historical context and a different contemporary environment. Contemporary manifestations of racism, which form a structural racial capitalism that is as strong or stronger than it has been throughout modernity, are dynamic, violent forces, as this dissertation demonstrates, even as they are the sites of vital struggle and resistance. On the other hand, the current context and environment for fat politics is unfortunately much less volatile. The dangerous hierarchies of fatphobia are, at the turn of the millennium, in the process of becoming rapidly concretized and institutionalized, and the opportunities for resistance and struggle are extremely limited by the stark disparities in power in the field. The extant cultural preferences, practices, rules, and laws, and those that are currently being written, are delineating new categories of the human at such a rate that I cannot discuss this musical without pausing to note the seriousness with which these issues must be handled by academics. This is particularly true because the academy is playing a major role in fatphobia’s violent institutionalization: both the sciences, with their reliance on division and classification, and the humanities and their dependence on aesthetics, are contributors to this ongoing hierarchization of bodies and lives.

“Good fat politics” are justice-oriented body politics, which work against fatphobia and the other forces that constitute it: the cis-heteropatriarchy, ablism, capitalism, and white supremacy. Yet while fatness is a site around which many struggles are waged, and while a few feminist and anti-racist activists at times struggle against fatphobia, fat politics as a field is unambiguously one-sided. Radical fat politics do not exist on the scale of the national imaginary that radical racial politics do, in part because of the enormous legacy of labor and life that makes up a history of anti-racist struggle, and in part because the symbolic power already gained by the dominant figures in the field of body politics is so starkly disproportionate to the symbolic power that
fatness is able to wield, as I argue elsewhere.\(^\text{27}\) That is to say, fat people and “good fat politics” are largely absented from struggles over the meaning of fat.

All of this is to say that a materially anti-racist politics in the early twenty-first century, rather than follow the Michelle Obama uplift politics against fatness, or move towards tolerance of fatness, must practice “good fat politics,” must detach the values-oriented ideologies of physical ability and appearance from the rights of human beings, and must reject white aesthetic standards and ideas of beauty even though some women of color can meet those standards in certain circumstances. Without doing so, anti-racist politics will remain a class-stratifying, and thus ultimately racial capitalist, force. It is from this understanding of the necessity of materially anti-fatphobic politics that I critique *Hairspray’s* equation of fatness with racism.

Tracy, the main character, is a young white woman who is fat, and she repeatedly experiences the individual and institutional discrimination by which the musical defines racism alongside or instead of the musical’s black characters. There are numerous examples throughout, including the audition scene in Act One, Scene Four. Tracy shows up to audition for the Corny Collins dance show and is attacked by Velma in a song that went through several iterations but was originally called “The Status Quo.”\(^\text{28}\) Although this song was replaced with “(The Legend of) Miss Baltimore Crabs,” it still demonstrates how Velma’s commitment to white, Western beauty standards is linked to her past. Racism is part of Velma’s character (as discussed above), but it emerges in practice out of Velma’s discrimination against Tracy’s body size. The exact moment of discrimination is worth examining carefully. The other dancers attack Tracy’s appearance with four different lines before Velma interrupts them, “Velma [singing]: Would you


\(^{28}\) O’Donnell, et al., *Hairspray*, 57.
swim in an integrated pool? (The music stops dead and the COUNCIL gasps in shock.) Tracy: Sure I would. I’m all for integration. It’s the New Frontier! Velma: Not in Baltimore it isn’t.”

While attacking Tracy is part of the song (par for the course), racism (here represented as being against integration), emerges as a moment of confrontation: the music stops and even Velma’s fellow attackers freeze, shocked by her methods. The question is an apparent non-sequitur, following attacks on Tracy’s appearance (her weight and clothes), but the musical insists on a clear connection between size and race: the music kicks back in as Velma sings, “First impressions can be tough/ and when I saw you, I knew it/ If your size weren’t enough/ that last answer just blew it!/ And so, my dear, so short and stout/ You’ll never be ‘in’/ [joined by Council Members] So we’re kicking you out!” Velma moves linearly from appearance generally, to body size specifically, to political views about race, in the process setting up a sort of nested relation between the three categories. Tracy’s contact with blackness (her pro-Integration politics in particular, but also, because this is about an integrated swimming pool, her comfort with contact with skin, with contact between the bodies of white and black people) is at the core of who Tracy is, fundamental to the shape of her body as well as her appearance and her experience.

In the view of the musical’s racists, Tracy’s body is a fundamental part of what is wrong with her racial politics. For Velma, body size is not just similar to blackness, but is also about the wrongness of Tracy’s skin. To drill the point home, the song structurally links Tracy with Little Inez, a young black character. As Tracy is kicked out of auditions Little Inez runs in and asks “Hello, ma’am, may I please audition?” Velma replies “Of course not!” before concluding the “Miss Baltimore Crabs” number with the sung directive to both Little Inez and Tracy: “but you

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29 *Hairspray* typescript, 26.
30 *Hairspray* typescript, 27.
can bow and exalt.” Velma rules equally over both these girls, and they are strongly linked by this parallel relation. Their similarity is further emphasized moments later when, walking across opposite sides of the stage Little Inez and Tracy sing in duet, “I know every step/ I know every song/ I know there’s a place where I belong.” In the form of musical theatre, this duet literally unites them, however briefly. Importantly, the focus quickly returns to Tracy as Little Inez exits the stage. Hairspray’s creators fully endorse this reading of the flattening between fatphobia and racism, noting in their marginalia, “[Tracy and Little Inez’s] unwitting duet points up for the first time that the battle for civil rights and for acceptance for anyone are the same battle.”

The connection between Tracy and blackness is continued in later scenes. The detention scene is particularly revealing, and it is telling that it is cut in the coffee-table book in which the script is published. In it Tracy’s “monumental hair-don’t” blocks other students’ view in class and gets her sent to detention where she immediately meets Seaweed J. Stubbs, one of the many African-American students in detention. Seaweed dances in introduction; Tracy watches him, and then asks his permission to do the dance, to partake in black culture. Seaweed responds not only with permission but with a challenge that actually demands her participation. “Tracy: That’s unbelievable. Can I do that? Seaweed: I don’t know. Can you?” The dance move works to establish identity between these teens. Gilbert, another African American student comments on her performance, “Well not bad. For a white girl,” performing a challenge to a common identity between black and white people. Seaweed immediately opposes Gilbert with postracism: “Hey man. Ain’t no black and white up in here. Detention is a rainbow experience.” This is a

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31 Hairspray typescript, 28.
32 Ibid.
34 Hairspray typescript, 29.
35 Hairspray typescript, 30.
particularly important exchange because it is the first of many times the main black protagonist of *Hairspray* deliberately disrupts Tracy’s racialization as white. Seaweed is the force of the colorblindness that permits Tracy to remain exceptional.

Dance, affirmed by Seaweed, goes hand-in-hand with Tracy’s own difference to mark her as “with it,” familiar with and excited about black culture, such as when she proclaims, “Negro day is the best. I wish every day was Negro day!” and Seaweed replies, “In our house it is.” And Seaweed teaches her the dance that she will later use (by herself) to get on the Corny Collins show and achieve her dreams. When the principal catches her it is the dancing that gets her in trouble. “Tracy Turnblad, you can give up all hopes of going to college. I’m putting you in Special Ed with the rest of these characters.”

Tracy’s literal proximity to black people within the space of detention, her familiarity with and affection for blackness, and her adoption of black culture are depicted as causing Tracy’s ostracization both in school and beyond it. This continues throughout the show, such as when Tracy’s attempts to get herself and black people on the CCS gets her thrown into jail and excepted from the privileges of bail.

This scene creates three different ways of being black in the 1960s through its three characters: Seaweed, Gilbert, and Tracy herself. Seaweed represents a “good” kind of black politics, worthy of reclamation in opposition to Gilbert, who insists on the importance of race. Gilbert is the closest the show has to a depiction of the Black Power movement, albeit through the show’s rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia. On the other hand, Seaweed is “good” because he is open to and focused on what Tracy wants. Tracy, finally, uses dance as a way to establish herself as authentic: the fact that she is discriminated against for her body combined with her interest in dance makes her, within the world of *Hairspray*, as good as black. At the same time, unlike

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36 *Hairspray* typescript, 30.
37 *Hairspray* typescript, 31.
Seaweed or Gilbert, Tracy as the main character and an agent of change make her “blackness” and the “racism” she experiences the most important depiction of such in the show.

If dance and music are identity, and Tracy is almost black, what is most remarkable is that it is Seaweed who must grant Tracy’s desires and also hold back any critiques against her. Seaweed is the musical’s first enabling figure, the black character embodied and envoiced on the stage by a black actor (the character Seaweed was originated on Broadway by Corey Reynolds38) who uniquely grants this character authority on the subject of race, racism, and antiracism because the character’s stances align so closely with audience stances. In other words, the audience already finds Seaweed’s view of detention as “a rainbow experience” more politically correct than Gilbert’s view; because of this, the actors’ perceived blackness works to support the politics of the former and undercut the politics of the latter. But given that these politics reflect conciliatory liberalism on the one hand, and barely hint at the potential for materially-redistributive radicalism on the other, these are not two different-but-equal positions. The former view obviously provides much more support for the status quo of racial formation, while the latter is undermined specifically because it suggests a disruption. Like in Avenue Q, when the black character affirms the popular antiracism it achieves unprecedented legitimacy on the stage. Seaweed’s affirmation of colorblindness (as a way of getting beyond race) and associated emphasis on black culture’s ability to serve Tracy’s identity formation is a definitive example of how Hairspray uses blackness to legitimate white-centric political action.

Such politics continues throughout the musical, in particular in relation to Seaweed’s mother Motormouth Maybelle, whose struggles for civil rights and self-love in a fat body serve

38 Sadly, a search for “Corey Reynolds” in the Internet Broadway Database reveals this as Reynolds’s only Broadway role so far, despite the many accolades Reynolds received for Seaweed. Critical praises did not necessarily into economic success. Accessed on November 29, 2015, http://ibdb.com/Person/View/100537.
as models for Tracy and Edna to take political action, to change the world and love themselves. Nonetheless, the show is rife with jokes at Tracy and Edna’s expense, and the audience is not laughing with them. With no viable material anti-fatphobic politics, the show merely restages fatphobia under the guise of resisting it. This, then, is also why the musical fails to provide a progressive fat politics; it is not actually about celebrating or even tolerating fatness at all, but fatness stands in as the visible marker for universal underdog status. When fatness and blackness are equated, it is Tracy who is established as both the real victim of racism in the plot of the musical, and the hero who brings about the end of racism.

The musical equates race and racism with fatness and fatphobia, and it does so for a specific racial politics. As the victim of racism as well as the hero who resolves it, Tracy justifies the restaging of past racisms through her outsider status. Relatable as a sort of universal underdog, she embodies the popular antiracism that resolves the plot. Hairspray’s dramatization of fatphobia and celebration of its fat heroines (both Tracy and her mother Edna) disavows its own work as part of the circulation of fatphobia, and uses its focus on body size to craft and justify and circulate the tenets of postracism: racism as individual prejudice, and cultural practice (especially the consumption of Hairspray itself) as politics, especially as antiracist political action. Together these serve to dematerialize racial capitalism and to attenuate radical antiracisms.

**Individualized Racism, Dematerialized Solutions**

Interpersonal prejudice, expressed by individual characters to varying degrees, is the most evident form of racism in the plot, and centers around establishing which of the characters are good and which are bad. While characters such as the von Tussles might match typical theatrical standards of beauty, their interpersonal prejudices mark them as the antagonists.
Similarly, Tracy and her parents represent an inversion of the visual attachment to morality: their embrace of black culture is what makes them good people despite their ugliness. Many other characters fall into an uncertain middle ground at the beginning of the musical; by the end, it is these characters that have markedly changed. A revealing example is the partial villain Prudy Pingleton, a white mother character. Several things mark her as unsympathetic from her entrance. First, Prudy complains about the cost of her laundering: “That’s pretty pricey for a few pairs of pettipants.” While this could make her empathetic in a class-hierarchical relationship, the fact that she complains to the working-class person who labors for her makes this more of a penny-pinching whine than a legitimate concern. Secondly, Tracy and Penny are hesitant around her. In particular, we know she is unpleasant when Edna tells Penny to greet her mother and Penny replies “Hello, Mrs. Pingleton…I mean…Mother.” The girls are the protagonists of the show, and this firmly establishes Prudy as a figure that partially oppresses them. In this same first scene, however, Prudy makes prejudiced comments about the Corny Collins show that keep her from seeming like the reasonable (if more strict) counterpoint to Edna’s mothering style. Prudy says, “Delinquents. It ain’t right dancing to that colored music.” This is the first instance of prejudice as racism on the show but it will not be the last; Edna is quickly established as the voice of reason in response to Prudy with the joke “Don’t be silly, ain’t colored. The TV’s black and white.” Edna might have said this in earnest, but she is the comic character and the audience’s laughter at her mistake also helps relieve any discomfort at the revitalization of the politically incorrect term “colored.” This joke helps the plot overcome the potential pitfalls of Prudy’s provocative comments and pave the way for the possibility of safely talking about (and

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39 *Hairspray* typescript, 7.
40 Ibid.
41 *Hairspray* typescript, 8.
42 Ibid.
even naming) racism. Both characters can say the word “colored,” yet it is made clear to the audience who is behaving correctly and who is wrong. Indeed, this set-up is essential to permit the audience to hear through the highly-charged language about race that Hairspray takes up to drive its plot: simply saying “white,” “Negro,” “colored,” and even “segregated” or “integrated” so far outside of bourgeois norms as to be risqué. As we laugh at Edna, the audience aligns themselves with her colorblind politics. On the other hand, Prudy’s persistent individual prejudice helps shape how the audience should receive her. She does not laugh with everyone but instead “exits with her bundle, shaking her head in disapproval.” 43 We should act likewise as individuals, disapproving of her and letting her exit our lives.

Hairspray constructs institutional in addition to individual racism, but only as it relates to the consumption of black culture. Some of the most important examples of racism and antiracism in Hairspray are around the unintegrated CCS. This institution is a relic of the past and already in the process of changing when Tracy encounters it. Corny’s once-monthly “Negro Day” is meant to indicate a step in the right direction, and Corny himself is open to integrating the show in order to expand its audience and profits. Indeed, these steps toward change are what expose Tracy to black dance, which she learns from watching the show. And it is Tracy’s love of black cultural production and desire to consume it (via television), encounter it (in detention), and embody it (through dance) that drive her activism and mark her as not racist and as a figure of antiracist action.

In each of the scenes of activism, racial integration is the purported or celebrated goal, but what is achieved is white exceptionalism. Penny’s sexual attraction to Seaweed works similarly; desire for blackness functions as antiracism in order to distinguish its practitioner as

43 Hairspray typescript, 8.
exceptional. In *Hairspray*’s myth of anti-racism, Tracy desires political transformation but is exempted from the real world labor of political organizing, activism, or consciousness raising necessary to achieve this goal. The cultural support for Tracy’s project is already in place, and all that is needed to bring about change is Tracy’s unique and exceptional self, as indicated by Tracy’s victory in the popularity contest at the end of the musical. During the musical’s resolution and rapid denouement exemplified by Tracy’s victory as Miss Teenage Hairspray, her status as victim, rebel, and hero are collapsed. Society’s others, such as fat people and black people, become not only interpolated within the social order but also constitutive of it. When Tracy wins, it is because she has significantly increased the number of people voting; the popular desire for Tracy and what she represents has already existed and was merely awaiting a cultural leader to bring it to fruition. Tracy did not change minds, but rather Tracy’s presence increased the popularity of the CCS by giving showing people what they already wanted. The enormous pool of votes from television viewers (by definition a dispersed and public crowd), with which Tracy wins over Amber in the final number provides a literal count of the popular support for Tracy’s integrationist project. This is how the musical defines antiracism: exceptional popularity and the end of racism are made equivalent. Although Tracy does not try to convince other white people to change how they see the world, by the end of the musical her mere presence has been sufficient to generate this change on the widest scale.

Tracy’s victory symbolizes the overcoming of discriminatory villains as well as the politics of liking blackness. Tracy and Penny like black music, black dance, and black men, and

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44 For example, the stage directions note “ALL turn to see the scoreboard spontaneously combusting, showing TRACY is the overwhelming winner.” *Hairspray* typescript, 107. Tracy’s dance and politics bring about a major increase in the show’s popularity. This is further confirmed when Mr. Spritzer rushes on with a change of heart: “This is marvelous. The phones are going crazy. The whole country’s watching.” *Hairspray* typescript, 108.
this enjoyment of blackness is what is celebrated in the final scene when the masses of home viewers vote for Tracy as Miss Teenage Hairspray and give Amber her comeuppance. Each of the plot’s threads comes to a resolution in the final number “You Can’t Stop the Beat.” Tracy is rewarded for her activism: she integrates the CCS, gets pardoned by the governor, gets a scholarship for a local community college, wins the Miss Teenage Hairspray contest by an enormous margin, and gets her man. Mr. Spritzer embraces his new customers and hires Velma von Tussle as the vice-president of the new division “Ultra Glow: beauty products for women of color”; economic gain interpolates both racists, Spritzer and von Tussle, into postracist sociality. Edna overcomes her agoraphobia to embrace her appearance and dance on national television, and Link wins a recording contract. Penny reinvents herself and Prudy discovers her own racial tolerance. And of course, the CCS is integrated and all the characters including the former antagonists dance together on stage. The scene depicts progress as inevitable; the lyrics of “You Can’t Stop the Beat” connect rhythm and social change to natural forces such as heartbeats, tides, and the ocean. Even the title of the song implies a teleological view of history.

In the final scene, tolerance of Tracy and Edna’s bodily and sexual difference, support for racially integrated cultural production, identification with and celebration of the underdog as the universally-relatable white exceptional figure, and the heteronormative romance myth are all brought together to defeat racism and reform its villains. The coup de grâce that enacts this victory is the popular vote that wins Tracy the title. While the audience members of the TV show are voting for Tracy’s hairstyle and dance moves, they are clearly also voting for Tracy’s politics. Therefore, it is not just Tracy who wishes “every day could be Negro day,” but the implied television audience as well, with whom the musical’s audience is structurally aligned.

45 *Hairspray* typescript, 109.
Still, this political project is distinctly one-sided: the denouement ties up the loose ends for the white characters, and the black characters express no real change in hopes, outlook, sense of accomplishment, or goals. In fact, the black characters have so few lines in the final scene they represent change for, rather than undergo change with, the white characters. Yet the ending feels “good” because Tracy is rewarded for her politics with romantic love, economic capital, self-confidence, the admiration of peers and parents, and the broader social confirmation of her popularity in the form of Miss Teenage Hairspray of 1962.

As we have explored, in *Hairspray* racism is predominantly individual prejudice. The only institutions worth acting on are cultural institutions, and popularity is political action. Political change, extant in the preferences of the masses, merely awaits a cultural figurehead or leader, takes the form of consuming black culture, and requires little to no organizing. Popularity is expressed through voting for culture. Indeed, the audience can engage in antiracism by making *Hairspray* popular, by voting with their dollar. Other oppressions are equated to a mythologized 1960s racial discrimination, and in the process the logic of racial hierarchy is obscured as a visual, body-based judgment that is always out of alignment with popular preferences and that the right amount of pep and self-confidence can overcome. Yet, the performance of the show itself reproduces fatphobia even as a fat character is celebrated in the name of its defeat. Similarly, *Hairspray* may celebrate the defeat of racism, but it does so while simultaneously restaging racialization, reproducing stereotypes, and affirming and recreating racial hierarchies. Indeed, the only thing about ‘60s racism that is inverted by *Hairspray* is the struggle against it: white people are credited as the saviors whose political action (defined by appreciation for black culture and the willingness to express such cultural preference by how they vote in an unrelated popularity contest) overthrows white supremacy. While white allies did struggle for civil rights
and play significant roles in the changes of the 1960s, it should go without saying that such attribution does great disservice to the legacy of black and brown antiracist organizing.

With injustices of any kind acknowledged through identification with Tracy’s suffering, and the overcoming of such injustices celebrated and rewarded through identification with Tracy’s victories, *Hairspray* is a nostalgia-trap that utilizes “postracism” for the pleasure of its audience members. At the same time, this rose-tinted view of history and the present disavows real world racial hierarchy and displaces political action into consumption of the musical itself. Unlike in *Avenue Q*, where consumption outside of the theatre can grant antiracist authority, in *Hairspray* one’s postracism as antiracism is fulfilled only during the trajectory of watching *Hairspray* itself. The audience member’s injustices are acknowledged through Tracy, and then the audience are celebrated as the saviors of the Civil Rights movement through the appreciation of dance and black culture, such as the dance and black culture within the musical itself. This cycle of political (antiracist) desire and fulfillment, made possible through the mythological past and through ignoring present material conditions, is the “nostalgia trap” by which postracism fundamentally serves to reproduce racial capitalist hierarchies.

All of these factors function to obscure the ongoing mainstream political support for racial capitalism at the same time as it charged audience members to feel both victimized by and responsible for conquering historical racism. This neat celebration of the defeat of racial issues of the 1960s serves as a reprieve as well as distraction from processes of racial hierarchization in the contemporary era. The musical elides liberal policies after 9/11 by justifying liberalism on moral grounds: for all of *Hairspray*’s audience members, well-intentioned activism for inclusion leads directly to political empowerment and the end of racism. Indeed, the fact that critic’s reviews of the musical have a difficult time taking it seriously is no accident. Ben Brantley
S A Jones

celebrates the “dewy” “fantasy” show as depicting “if life were everything it should be,” with barely a nod to the show’s “race relations.” Other mentions of the show simply celebrate its actors, its numerous Tony nominations and awards, and its financial success without paying much attention to its somewhat “pushy” political project. Only one review has any complaints about its depiction of race; Margo Jefferson’s neutral review accepts Hairspray where it is but finds it “just too ‘Up With People’-ingratiating.” Jefferson also treats the racial politics more delicately than others, enough to name the race of the white characters and make the critique “And please tell me this: Why, in a show that is about white kids smitten with black music, do most of the songs sound completely white?” But Jefferson’s review is the exception. It is easier, more comforting, even more pleasurable, for audiences to attend to their inclusion in this depiction of past racism than to do the genuine labor of confronting their role in the immense power of racial capitalism as it hierarchizes in the name of American security and consumerism today.

Postrace Framing of the Obama Brand

In 2008, Barack Obama won a difficult competition: Advertising Age’s Marketer of the Year Award (also, election as President of the United States of America). Shortly after that, the

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46 Brantley, “Through Hot Pink Glasses.”
51 Ibid.
53 Matthew Creamer, “Obama Wins!...Ad Age’s Marketer of the Year: At ANA Gathering, Marketing Pros and Agency Bigs Tap Barack Over Apple, Zappos,” Advertising Age, October 17,
2008 Obama campaign won the Titanium Grand Prix Award and the Integrated Lions Grand Prix Award at the Cannes Lions International Advertising Awards. Marketers think of US political campaigns as marketing campaigns for the candidate as brand; because the target market for a political campaign is the American public broadly, an analysis of the campaign’s marketing (the speeches, advertisements, public performances, branding, etc.) can reveal the popular ideologies to which it appeals and which it constitutes on a national scale. The marketing campaign of the successful candidate, then, provides insights less into that candidate’s actual politics and more into the ideologies that speak most popularly to the American people.

At the same time, candidates from across party lines typically appeal to a similar set of American values, and US presidential elections operate at such close margins, that a focus on the most appealingly American messages of a campaign may be less revealing about a particular candidate than examining other stakes in the election process. For example, because these campaigns are seen as news, attention to the media responses to a particular candidate’s marketing, including the role of the media in shaping that politician’s meaning, can more clearly demonstrate what a specific candidate means during a particular time. And focusing on media that appeals to a particular class of consumers can reveal what elements of the campaign’s ideology appeals most strongly to that class, as well as that class’s tactics around, and struggles for positioning within, a political campaign. While media responses to Obama’s campaign came in a variety of mass-circulating forms, those published in print present a readily available array of projects for studying class-based relations of that campaign as such.

Artistic Management and Grassroots Distribution of Obama as Postrace

The iconic image of the 2008 Barack Obama campaign for US presidency was created by renowned “street artist” Shepard Fairey. This widely circulated “Hope” poster (called *Obama Hope* by the artist) is depicted in Figure 1. The economy of the image’s production, distribution, and consumption, as well as the semiotics of the image, are revealing about the politics and culture of the Obama campaign’s brand national appeal.

![Figure 1: Obama Hope, Shephard Fairey, 2008.](image)

The original design, *Obama Progress*, read “Progress” at the bottom and had Fairey’s brand logo, a star based on *Obey Giant*, embedded within Obama’s “O” brand logo. For Fairey’s collectors, the brand logo was essential; the image united Fairey’s “underground” popularity with the Obama brand. After a short run of *Obama Progress*, the Obama campaign directed Fairey to focus on “push[ing] the ‘Hope’ message.”

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really popular during this campaign and served as the basis for the meme that was adapted across and beyond political alignments.\(^{56}\)

The “message” of this marketing campaign was a product of the resonances between Fairey’s politics and aesthetics, and the national political consciousness at the time. Turning attention to the content of the image, the means by which cultural product becomes political practice, is telling in general and especially in the image *Obama Hope*. The image links Americanness, postrace, moderate political alignment, cross-party compromise, and the celebration of counterculture together under the rubric of black culture. On its simplest scale, *Obama Hope* features Barack Obama’s face and brand logo, always in this campaign already black, explicitly linked to the simple, single-worded message of either “hope” or “progress.” Each of these terms implies a progressive teleology of American history of which Obama is the inevitable culmination. This sense of progression is key to the “postrace” formation. The message of looking to the future is enhanced by the look on Obama’s face, a look emphasized by the subtle shifts from the original photograph to Fairey’s poster.\(^{57}\) In the poster, Obama looks forward, yet off into the distance, with a determined chin and an almost smile. Compared with this subtly hopeful expression, in the original photograph Obama is clearly not smiling; more


facial lines and less white in the eyes make Obama seem to be looking at something closer at hand (a few meters away, rather than deep into the future), and Obama’s jaw is less clearly outlined and thus less distinguished. While the photo sets Obama in front of and slightly below the American flag, the poster’s background and color schema are calculatedly different, an important part of Fairey’s artistic contribution to the image’s message. The poster features red, white, and blue, but only in Obama’s logo do these colors mimic the US American flag. Instead, a lighter blue tempers the flag’s colors. Additionally, the white that highlights Obama’s face and shirt collar isn’t pure white but the same beige as the border of the image. The paler colors hint at a more measured Americanness, a tempered patriotism, while Fairey’s stance as rebel and artistic referencing of Soviet propaganda tinge this patriotism with just enough resistance to seem counter-establishment.

The predominantly blue and cream left half of the image and the predominantly red right half of the image suggest both political parties; their unity to create Obama’s face strongly suggests bipartisanship, a literal unity not just across but made up of party lines. If it isn’t the candidate’s ability to cross party lines that leads to compromise, then what is suggested is that the Obama brand itself represents cross-party interests, as both conservative and liberal sides constitute Obama’s face. Similarly Obama’s suit is more clearly blue in the poster but with a red tie, indicating that Obama’s very outfit is also constituted of opposing forces. This is not such a radical reading. In the design sense, using multiple colors offers unity across the image and generates visual interest, causing the viewer’s eye to move around the piece and generating more aesthetic pleasure than a two-tone image. Yet political marketing is the very definition of aesthetic qualities taking on political meanings; it is not far-fetched at all to suggest that such visual unity might have made the marketing piece feel like the “right” representation of political
unity to Fairey and the Obama campaign even if it was unarticulated as such. Of course, the very unarticulability of this feeling is what makes this both a tentative and a relevant reading.

At the same time, the image recollects other political posters that relied on similar aesthetics, such as Fairey’s influences from “Russian Constructivists, Rene Mederos and other Cuban poster artists…and politics, often portraying political revolutionaries in the same manner as musicians.”\(^5^8\) Yet the image also recollects the 1960s black revolutionary art of AfriCOBRA, in particular the work of Barbara Jones-Hogu and Wadsworth Jarrell, and places the image firmly within the trajectory of such black cultural production.\(^5^9\) At the same time, the imagery of the poster only barely embraces the blackness of this trajectory, mostly rendering Obama’s face in light tones. This is the unspoken source of the poster’s appeal identified when one scholar calls the image “arrestingly multi-toned” and “enliven[ed]” by “a fine use of hatching”\(^6^0\) (as in, shading to represent but not depict a slightly darker skin tone). Obama’s aesthetics are connected to black culture, yet visually lightened enough to read as unspecific or almost-but-not-quite unmarked, becoming an aesthetic representation of postrace.

An interview with the Huffington Post reveals in detail Fairey’s role in both creating and tapping into an image of Obama that was “viral” (a term used frequently by both Fairey and Fairey’s Obama-campaign collaborator Yosi Sergant throughout their interview to describe the massive popular reaction to their work). Fairey theorized,

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\(^6^0\) David Craven, “Present Indicative Politics and Future Perfect Positions: Barack Obama and Third Text,” Third Text 23.5 (2009), 646.
I think what then happened was that there were a lot of people who were digging Obama but they didn’t have any way to symbolically show their support. Once there was an image that represented their support for Obama then that became their Facebook image or their email signature or something they use on their MySpace page. Or they printed out the image and made their own little sign that they taped up in their office. Once that exists it starts to perpetuate and it replicates itself.61

Fairey compared the success of the image to another iconic brand with rebellious appeal, the Rolling Stones tongue logo. Despite Fairey’s emphasis on the pre-existing mass desire that *Obama Hope* merely symbolized, the artist’s role is still uniquely significant in shaping that demand. Fairey could have created many different symbols to represent support for Obama, so the semiotics of *Obama Hope* are worthy of investigation. In addition to making meaning as creator, Fairey also played a significant role in disseminating this iconic image, as was revealed during the discussion of the market for Fairey’s art. As for other works, Fairey used initial sales to private collectors to generate revenue to fund the popular dissemination of similar works. “I included my Obey star embedded in the Obama logo, not to try to highjack Obama’s credibility as some people have said. But rather, because I know that my hard-core collectors would feel that they had to buy the poster just because it had an Obey logo. Therefore, I was more or less forcing my audience to fund further perpetuation of the image.”62 This method of selling initial pieces as “art” in order to produce more pieces for mass distribution worked throughout the campaign, funding posters, stickers, t-shirts, and bicycle spoke cards. The *Obama Hope* image was as much a result of the zeitgeist of the campaign as Fairey’s own design sense shaping the structure, appearance and connotations of the image. The former is revealed by the breadth of

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61 Arnon, “How the Obama ‘Hope’ Poster Reached a Tipping Point.”
62 Ibid.
popular response to the image, such as the eagerness with which people took it upon themselves
to post the “Hope” poster. Notes Fairey, “That’s something that you don’t normally see—that
level of motivation in people to spread an image…. this is a unique case where all we had to do
was make the materials and disseminate them to some sort of hubs around the country and the
rest pretty much took care of itself.” The artist and the masses created this work together.

A lawsuit over image rights around the poster (between Fairey and photographer Mannie
Garcia) concretized issues of artistic intent and the unique meaning brought to Obama (the
candidate) by Obama Hope. Fairey was forced to articulate an array of connotations contained or
inscribed within the Obama Hope poster. Fairey argued that through artistic interventions Obama
was made “wise but not intimidating,” “strong,” and “a leader” worthy of “support,” and that
the image of Obama became “a political statement.” Other authors affirmed these intentions,
noting, “Fairey intended the image to convey a message of idealistic leadership potential, and for
most supporters this was precisely the meaning derived,” although it also conveyed ideas of
“socialism, communism, religious idolatry, anti-Americanism, and elitism.” Others agreed that
Fairey’s image was politically significant, an “elegant piece of agitprop” that was “far more
visionary, much more nuanced” than the original AP photo, “a portrait that literally soars”

Arnon, “How the Obama ‘Hope’ Poster Reached a Tipping Point.”
srv/artsandliving/style/features/2008/obama-poster-051808/graphic.html.
Shepard Fairey, “The AP, Obama, & Referencing,” Huffington Post, April 26, 2009, updated
fairey/the-ap-obama-referring_b_179562.html.
Ibid.
Holland “Social Semiotics,” 337.
John Armitage and Joy Garnett, “Radicalizing Refamiliarization,” journal of visual culture 8.2
(2009), 178.
because of the placement of Obama’s head.\textsuperscript{69} The poster became emblematic of “the resurgence of disenfranchised ideals and beliefs suppressed since the time of the civil rights era. Elderly survivors and heroes of that time came out to support the campaign, the election and the most cathartic of presidential inaugurations. A longstanding battle was perceived as won.”\textsuperscript{70} Obama was “a man whose very likeness has come to embody hope.”\textsuperscript{71} Fairey’s posters “created a new graphic space where the head tilt and glance could be given an inspirational meaning.”\textsuperscript{72} What linked various Obama images, including Fairey’s, was that “he represents a new beginning and a basis for hope. He effectively becomes a screen onto which people all over the world can project their own aspirations.”\textsuperscript{73} Clearly, Fairey’s poster was a significant part of the creation Obama’s postracial hope, and its wide circulation reflects mass participation in this message.

One scholar notes, “Among the many changes in American society signaled by the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency is a new aesthetic of American patriotism.”\textsuperscript{74} According to that author, “Shepard Fairey embodies this new patriotic aesthetic, but of course it arose from the participation in the campaign and election of a broad set of cultural producers across a range of media and professional status, from will.i.am’s video \textit{Yes We Can} to an enormous number of user-generated images that circulated on the web (along with lots of Fairey poster knock-offs).”\textsuperscript{75} Fairey’s campaign is taken as representative of this new aesthetic by that scholar, “emblematic of a new kind of cultural producer, at home with brand culture and political

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{69} Craven, “Present Indicative Politics,” 644.
\bibitem{70} Armitage and Garnett, “Radicalizing Refamiliarization,” 178.
\bibitem{71} Ibid., 183.
\bibitem{73} Ibid., 187.
\bibitem{74} Marita Sturken, “The New Aesthetics of Patriotism,” \textit{journal of visual culture} 8.2 (2009), 168.
\bibitem{75} Sturken, “New Aesthetics,” 171.
\end{thebibliography}
activism simultaneously” as though the racial capitalism endorsed by “brand culture” is not always already a political project. Scholars note that Fairey’s “influence on political and patriotic culture is” unique; Fairey’s image played “with the codes of the flag while deliberately not reproducing them.” In hailing (and confusing) the left, Fairey deliberately referenced Marxist culture in the Obama campaign as much as in an earlier ad campaign the artists created for Saks Fifth Avenue. Fairey’s role in creating political meaning as an artist is already tied to a particular moderate liberal agenda (despite or event because of cultural references to Marxism); Fairey’s “popular” art, including Obama Hope as much as ad campaigns for major corporations, is already imbricated with bourgeois liberal political meanings. Nonetheless, because it circulated so broadly, people gave many different meanings to Obama Hope.

The Bourgeois Production of Obama as Postrace: Disavowal

From within the popularly-circulating US American national political sentiment captured/created by Fairey’s Obama Hope image, the liberal bourgeoisie made specific and significant interventions to define Obama as the fulfillment of “postrace” as popular antiracism. The best way to track this position is by comparing this general postrace appeal (discussed in the section above) to the way that bourgeois liberal news media responded to and curtailed that appeal. In the twenty-first century’s media environment the Internet is increasingly a popular news source alongside television. In comparison, consumption of newspaper and radio news has

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76 Ibid., 169.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 170.
been on the decline in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{80} The Pew Research Center reports

More than half of the regular readers of the Wall Street Journal (56%), [and] New York Times (56%) … are college graduates. NPR’s audience also is relatively well educated (54% are college graduates). Just 29% of all Americans are college graduates. By comparison, 29% of CNN’s regular audience, 26% of MSNBC’s audience, and 24% of Fox News’s regular audience completed college…. There is a similar pattern when it comes to the family incomes of regular news audiences…. Other high earners include readers of the Wall Street Journal and New York Times—38% of each group has a family income of at least $75,000.\textsuperscript{81}

In contradiction to the “viral” circulation of \textit{Obama Hope}, the lengthy, written-word, print news reporting of papers like the \textit{New York Times} in particular serve as a source that solidifies meanings for bourgeois consumers. In contrast to the educated and economic elites accessing news through newspapers, working-class Americans, based on income and education, predominantly get their news through daytime talk television and local news. Yet for any measure of economic class, the \textit{New York Times} is solidly in the top five most elite media sources consumed in the United States.\textsuperscript{82} In another indication of the usefulness of that journal for this critique, \textit{New York Times} readers are much more liberal and Democrat than average news

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\textsuperscript{81} The Pew Research Center, “Trends in News Consumption,” 37-38. \\
\textsuperscript{82} Along with \textit{The Economist}, \textit{The New Yorker}, \textit{The Wall Street Journal}, and \textit{NPR}. 
\end{flushright}
or *Wall Street Journal* audiences. As we’ll see, the Obama campaign relied heavily on these bourgeois liberal manipulations to generate and capitalize on “postrace” broadly.

While *Hairspray* used postracism to generate popular election of its own consumption, this popular antiracism results in a very different set of consequences when the cultural producer taking it up is a political campaign. The *New York Times* served as a vital bridge between Obama and the US American people, particularly liberals, during this time. The media, like other cultural creators such as Fairey, deliberately created meaning for the candidate. The *New York Times* defined Obama’s connotations, created links between readers’ desires and Obama’s policies and person. They did so in particular by defining race, racism, and anti-racism, as we’ll see, according to the tenets of postracism precipitated within *Hairspray*. Yet a sense of the media as neutral-enough was important to the retention of symbolic power, of authority on politics. While I assert that liberal bourgeois gatekeepers use “postracism” as a popular antiracism to structure Obama’s signification on the ballot during this election, this is a disavowed project. “Postrace,” or similar terms such as “postracial,” or “postracism” are only rarely and indirectly used in association with Obama. For example, one *Guardian* article on Jesse Jackson’s critiques of Obama creates several degrees of separation between the authorial voice and the term “postracial,” in a manner exemplary of those rare times the term appears in print. The article brackets its critique of Obama through a quote from Eric Easter, a blogger at EbonyJet.com, who notes, “some worry that Obama…cemented his image as a post-racial saviour at the expense of black men.”

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brand, and the article is careful to quote that blogger, nesting the term so deeply that it is unattributable to The Guardian itself.

Relatedly, a search of the New York Times’s archives reveals very few uses of the term from the period of Obama’s campaign. When it uses the term or even the concept at all, the Times attributes “postrace” or “postracism” to voters or occasionally to Obama, such as one piece that notes Obama “played down his race and white voters…mostly played along, pretending either not to notice or suggesting that America has overcome such obstacles.” Even when the topic took center stage in the campaign itself, such as in the controversy around Geraldine Ferraro’s remarks that Obama benefitted from being a black man, the Times was careful to clearly distance itself from staking a position on the issue; an article reporting on these remarks was tellingly titled “Ferraro’s Obama Remarks Become Talk of Campaign.”

Whenever “postrace” emerged during the 2008 presidential race the New York Times was careful to keep its distance, creating an aura of neutrality to distinguishing itself from both candidates and average voters. While some local new sources also practiced this neutrality, for the most part other popular new sources more readily engaged with “postracism” by taking stances on racism’s existence (or not), or stances on whether or not electing Obama would

88 See for example, Bruce Walker, “You Wouldn’t Have Won in UK, Obama; Racism Watchdog Says Labour Racist,” Sunday Mail, November 9, 2008, 6; No Author, Editorial, “Keep Building Bridge Over Racism; The Controversy Swirling Around The Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr. Struck A
result in the end of racism. The practice of cultivating neutrality on “postrace” while deliberately raising the topic of racism was most distinctively a feature of the New York Times.

Yet despite a cultivated veneer of neutrality around racism and postracism before the election, Times articles after the election celebrated the Democratic victory as indicative of a righteous end of racism and Obama’s ascendance to power as bearing postracism into reality.

Bob Herbert’s New York Times Op-Ed “Take a Bow, America,” is one such article. Herbert

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summarizes the 2008 election results, “Voters said no to incompetence and divisiveness and
elbowed their way past the blight of racism that has been such a barrier to progress for so long…. [The United States] is not the same place it used to be.” Like many other articles, this one listed
familiar (and widely acknowledged) examples of racism (such as lynching and Martin Luther
King, Jr.’s assassination) to exemplify what had been overcome, and quoted a black person to
affirm the author’s concept of racial progress. Just like the requirements of “postracism” that
circulated in *Hairspray*, the *Times*’s narrative of the end of racism depended on constructing
links to a nostalgized earlier era of racism, depicted white people as beneficiaries and saviors,
and validated those sentiments through appealing support from black secondary characters.

This article demonstrates that postracism as a way to understand Obama was a value of
the *Times*, one that did not emerge fully formed in the moments after the election results were
announced. Rather, it was only after the election that explicitly acknowledging Obama’s victory
as a victory over racism was important for the *Times*, in order to fulfill the ideological narrative it
had been promoting yet disavowed all along of Obama as the harbinger of the postrace era.
These post-election articles show that this popular antiracism was indeed circulating, in
particular by the *Times* as well as from the Obama campaign itself, throughout the 2008
presidential election.

**The Bourgeois Production of Obama as Postrace: Individualized Racism**

Racism itself was a constant yet superficial topic for the media surrounding the 2008
election campaign, taken up in numerous *New York Times* articles. An article by Maureen Dowd
on Obama’s 2008 West Virginia primary loss to Clinton points out racial and political

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preferences among white, working-class voters inspired a variety of letters to the editor. The authors of these letters all accepted that West Virginians were racist, but varied on whether that racism had significance. One explicitly suggested that superdelegates that voted for Clinton would be “implicitly accommodating the racist vote,” while another noted, “racism has been used as a handy excuse everywhere Senator Obama hasn’t won.” Other articles in the New York Times pointed out racism against Obama, and these also had a treatment of racism that was far from systematic. One such editorial piece found a North Carolina ad attacking Obama “Manipulative. Shameful. Race-Baiting,” and compared it to North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms’s 1990s anti-affirmative action “Hands” ad: they both blatantly pandered to racism to promote white candidates. Another strange article that compared Obama to Mr. Darcy and America to Elizabeth identified racial prejudice in the differential numbers of white and black voters who had a favorable opinion of Obama. Around the 2008 elections the Times also defined racism as: criticizing Obama for not wearing a flag pin, when Dan Rather called Obama “Osama Bin Laden,” and when members of Sarah Palin’s office circulated emails that “included racist jokes about President-elect Barack Obama.” In addition to this eclectic collection of things that the Times identified as racist in 2008, the newspaper also focused on how voters expressed “racial prejudice.” One such article pointed out this prejudice in white

people of all backgrounds, deliberately comparing white southern voters who said Obama’s biracial identity made them uneasy with white Colorado voters who thought they would be more racist if they “were more familiar with daily life in black America.” This is not to say that these are not examples of racial prejudices. But they are revealing in their construction: in each instance, individual prejudices are the source of racist individuals. Unsurprisingly, the Times’s harshest critiques came out when it was defending its own position by critiquing other sources of media for their lack of neutrality, affirming that implicating institutions in racism was for the Times the greatest sin.

Other Times articles reflect on the racism of various parts of the electorate in ways that retain the emphasis on individual prejudice. One such piece, by Charles Blow on 8 August 2008, summarized the arguments of several others: that Obama should have been leading by a more significant margin, and that racism accounted for the “statistical dead heat” between Obama and McCain. Blow defined racism as an unwillingness to vote for a black candidate that went deep and could only indirectly be expressed in polls. For Blow this represented “the murky world of modern racism, where most of the open animus has been replaced by a shadowy bias that is difficult to measure.” This op-ed spurred numerous responses that were published as letters to the editor the next week. Tellingly, the Times picked a distribution of responses to publish: some agreed that racism would be a factor in the election, some denied racism’s salience in their rejection of or support for Obama, some discussed the popularity of certain black figures such as Condoleezza Rice and Oprah Winfrey as examples that racism could be overcome if properly

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100 Such as Bogues, “Rhymes With … Obama.”
managed, and some emphasized the unifying power of Obama’s biracial identity. This array represents in miniature how the *Times* saw the state of the field. Instead of presenting material historical facts that might seem like taking a side, the *Times* emphasized the importance of debate on: whether or not racism was real at the time, if and how racism influenced people, and whether or not it could be overcome. Institutional, structural, or historical understandings of race, racism, racial capitalism were conspicuously absent, guiding *Times* readers to understand what questions it was reasonable to ponder around race and presidential elections. The real problem, the *Times* revealed, was that any measure of unwillingness to vote for a black candidate was no longer expressible in the polls. Always understood as individual, racism could no longer be measured and thus its existence was murky.

Individualized racism continued even in the article “Racism Without Racists,” which investigated that “murky world of modern racism.” Using study data from the unlikely combination of Stanford University, the Associated Press, and Yahoo, the author argued that racism was costing Obama approximately 6 points: not because of a significant influence from “dyed-in-the-wool racists,” but because of “well-meaning whites who believe in racial equality and have no objection to electing a black person as president—yet who discriminate unconsciously.” Many were “aversive racists,” those who do not think they are racist. This kind of racism manifested the most in “ambiguous circumstances rather like an electoral campaign.” While affirming that good liberals were not to talk about race, the author deliberately implicated readers in this aversive racism by noting “a huge array of research suggests that 50 percent or more of whites have unconscious biases that sometimes lead to racial discrimination.” By also comparing Obama to John F. Kennedy and prejudice against Catholics, the article not only

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accused readers of well-intentioned unconscious racism, but also charged them to vote for Obama as the remedy for this unconscious racism. Indeed, voting for Obama was cast as both a preventative and a performative act, the means to cure their racism as well as collectively demonstrate that cure.\footnote{Nicholas Kristof, “Racism Without Racists,” \textit{New York Times}, October 4, 2008, accessed on October 25, 2015, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/opinion/05kristof.html}.} While the title of the article implies a structural approach such as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva takes up in \textit{Racism Without Racists}, in fact what the article argued for is the persistence of individual racism, albeit unintentional individual racism, to which Obama was the only solution.

If the \textit{Times} had argued that racism persisted without individual racists, far greater social change would be needed in response. The implication would be structural, not individual. Yet other pieces show that this newspaper dematerialized antiracist politics by taking the stance that the very persistence of itself racism was debatable, and was always the consequence of individual actions. For both bourgeois liberal cultural products \textit{Hairspray} and the \textit{New York Times}, racism was firmly individualized, and political change in response to it could only take the form of change in individual preferences. The inclusion of a black candidate through the popular democratic process was the only thing that could demonstrate as well as perform that collective change. By reducing even “racism without racists” to the individual, the \textit{Times} moved its audience to work on their own responses to Obama as the sole means to transform the US into a postracial society.

On the one hand, postracism’s hailing and disavowing of racial hierarchy stirred mass antiracist sentiment to action: racism was defined as individualized prejudice, reflective of the persistence of an older and more prejudicial political order that was responsible for an array of contemporary ills on the brink of being overcome. At the same time, this mass antiracist
sentiment was directed to the election of Obama. By limiting the form of racism and antiracism to the vote-wielding individual but disavowing racism to the extent that it could not be discussed, the Times structurally limited the venue for these activated individuals to express their antiracism to the ballot box, to do their part in solving the problems that only Obama was uniquely suited to overcome.

Managing the Contradictions of Postrace as National Political Ideology

“Postracism” as a popular antiracism emphasized the responsibility of individuals in the form of either “them” (conservative, southern, poorly-educated) or “us” (implicitly the ideal Times reader: liberal, wealthy, Northern especially in New England or the West Coast, educated, and well-intentioned if unconsciously biased). Either way, these organizations positioned Obama as the faultless victim of racism who good antiracist liberals were obligated to lift up from the racism of “them” in order to arrive at the desired postrace social order. The Obama campaign and the New York Times could continue to operate under the auspices of race neutrality, especially to white audiences, yet it could also still gain the cultural benefits of Obama’s positioning within the postrace narrative. Obama became an analogy for justice within a nostalgized retelling of the Civil Rights story where the voters were the heroes, just like the audience relation hailed by Hairspray. Yet because the bourgeois liberal understanding of race and racism erupted sporadically in newspapers throughout the campaign, this positioning was often contradicted by liberal, bourgeois, or Democratic tenets. This was true in particular because of the failures of “postrace” as materially-antiracist; occasionally this meant that the way Obama was “postrace” came face to face with the way the Democratic party re-instantiated race and racism despite its claims to the contrary. At no point during the campaign did these contradictions gain greater popular attention than during the Reverend Wright controversy;
nonetheless, the Obama campaign was able to use the “postrace” project in order to escape much of the fallout from this confrontation; in the process, it made “postrace” explicit.

What we might consider black nationalist comments by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s former pastor were brought to mainstream media attention in early March 2008. The media response to these sermons was voracious, an eagerness to “finally” talk about race belied by the volume of media attention already paid to whether or not race was significant for the Obama campaign, as I have only glossed here. But these sermons provided the opportunity for race to be discussed in the familiarly competitive terms with which the majority of white people treat them in all-white environments. The media backlash appealed to a commonsense of victimization with which white people often respond to the suggestion that they give up some of their white power. Wright’s comments served as a means to make fears about Obama’s race explicit, and although Obama quickly severed ties with Wright, it was not sufficient for the campaign to regain its position in the symbolic field of representing race, a position it had retained for most of the 2008 campaign and that it relied on in order to disavow its own investments in the postrace popular antiracist project. The campaign needed to regain its capacity to disavow the significance of race and of its popular antiracism, which it paradoxically did by speaking about race.

Contrary to popular belief, this was not just a conservative anxiety; the New York Times confirmed that this national appetite for talking about race was bipartisan. “The outrage over sermons by Mr. Wright demonstrates how desperately we as a nation need the dialogue about

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race that Mr. Obama tried to start with his speech on Tuesday.”

This article was about Obama’s “race speech,” “A More Perfect Union,” which was given on 18 March 2008, several weeks after ABC News Corporation released selected parts of Wright’s sermons. Obama’s campaign was as much a marketing campaign as that utilized by any corporation, a carefully planned and executed production of the Obama brand. And nowhere during the Obama campaign are the relations within this brand more explicitly deployed than in Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech, because this speech addresses the issues to which Obama’s brand appealingly offers the unique resolution. “A More Perfect Union” reiterates the myths of the Obama campaign: Obama’s uniquely American experiences and “genetic makeup,” the cross-racial connections enabled by Obama amongst supporters, and postracism, the disavowal of the significance of race concomitant with the production of Obama as the only means to end the significance of race.

As such, the postrace content and structure of the speech deserves particular attention here. After some introductory material, during which Obama explained the impossibility of repudiating Wright entirely by comparing Wright to a universalized racist grandmother figure, Obama turned to the past to frame most of its subsequent discussion of race. Historical formations of racism are central to the speech as the means of both explaining the present and of offering Obama as the solution to historical racism.

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really

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worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect…. As William Faulkner once wrote, “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.” We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.109

Here, Obama carefully connected current events (Geraldine Ferraro’s and Reverend Wright’s comments, as well as media responses to those comments, and Obama’s own campaign as a whole) to the need to resolve past racism, before attributing extant inequalities to the flaws of the ancestors of black people, and to neither the white people of that time (“slavery” and “Jim Crow”) nor to the structures that enforce(d) these systematic inequalities. The speech was meant to comfort, not confront, white audiences, and as such emphasized, like Hairspray and the New York Times, the individualized consequences of racism even when recollecting the structures of Civil Rights-era racisms. Obama listed past racisms that had consequences today, framed in terms of the Obama’s campaign’s own platform: segregated schools, housing discrimination, low employment rates, and the absence of a kind of broken-windows policing. Obama deliberately referenced forms of discrimination that are readily associated with the Civil Rights Movement in particular, such as Brown v. Board of Education (1959), and redlining. Obama then placed Wright “and other African-Americans of his generation” within this context, noting, “they came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted.”110 Obama connected these concerns to disparities white people were sensitive to, particularly around economic opportunity, and in the

109 Ibid.
110 Obama, “A More Perfect Union.”

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process recreated and redefined historical racism as, by the early twenty-first century, equally oppressive to both white and black people.

After hailing Civil Rights-era racism, and before self-positioning as the solution to that racism, Obama was careful to disavow postracism (vital, because the speech was about to turn sharply in that direction). “Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.” The candidate doth protest too much. It is at this point that the speech turns from the myth of past racism to asserting voting for Obama as the solution to that racism in order to achieve a postrace future. This major move is also worth quoting at some length to analyze its narrative arc.

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It’s that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

Here is the postrace project in a nutshell: beginning by asserting the continued significance of racism, the unprecedented universalism made obliquely possible by Obama’s blackness calls on all listeners to make Obama the unique solution to that racism through electoral practice.

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111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
Obama emphasized racial unity, noting that by “working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.” This means, unevenly, that African-Americans should stop “becoming victims of our past,” take a more active role in the bourgeois, heterosexual economy, and shape the performances of their feelings so that they and their children “never succumb to despair or cynicism” in order to “write their own destiny” (an individual responsibility, bootstraps capitalism ideal). On the other hand, white people are charged only with the responsibility to understand that “what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people,” once again painting “the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past” as a symptom afflicting African-Americans as individuals even if they themselves are not the cause of the illness.\(^\text{113}\)

This is not to say that the white audience’s ignorance of the ongoing history of segregation and racial hierarchization was not egregious. Given Obama’s popular appeal based on the exact myths encapsulated in this speech, it most likely was. But rather, it is important that here Obama also frames a myth of the racism of the past (albeit, a more accurate and more politically-activated myth than *Hairspray’s*) in order to universalize it and connect it to present day injustices. As in *Hairspray*, Obama’s myth ignores the ongoing nature of violent hierarchization that is the consequence of racial capitalism; it leaves out liberalism’s role in the process after the 1960s, and indeed neglects the significance of any political force during the intervening 50 years. But schools, housing, and employment did not just naturally continue to exclude by themselves; generations of humans struggled to reverse these exclusions and were either successful or were repelled by the defensive political actions of other humans. When this

\(^{113}\) Ibid.
speech acknowledges, drums up, and even creates popular political agency it is vitally only within their capacity to vote for Obama. Focusing on Reverend Wright, Hillary Clinton, or John McCain, Obama argues, means “nothing will change,” to say nothing of the more radical alternatives like Cynthia McKinney. The alternative was that “at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, ‘Not this time,’” by voting Obama.

In order to utilize Obama as the present-day resolution in a widely circulating US fiction of racial progress resulting in a postrace present/future, the campaign needed to make some adjustments to the widely-circulating grade-school level teleology of American history in which the Civil Rights movement served as the culmination of antiracism. It did so throughout the campaign, but most explicitly through “A More Perfect Union,” which served to nostalgically recreate and hail the injustices of the past. I am not asserting that the racism that Obama referred to was not “real” in 2008, or today. Rather, by framing it in relation to the emotional and nostalgic appeals of postracism, Obama neatly fit 2008 within the ideological arc of the Civil Rights movement, redefined with contemporary white voters as the saviors and with white people’s suffering as universal and what really needed to be addressed. Tellingly, Obama ended the speech with a story of a young white woman named Ashley who organized for Obama’s campaign, and the nameless black man who recognized her and validated her participation in the campaign, making explicit the promise of black validation that is part of the promise of postracism for young white activists, just like when Seaweed called Tracy’s idea to integrate the CCS “downright revolutionary.” This process of recasting whiteness as universal is also the means by which the need to address contemporary racial hierarchy was erased.

Conclusion

114 Obama, “A More Perfect Union.”
115 *Hairspray* typescript, 63.
Of course resolving these issues within US American public discourse is not an uninterested political economic project. Obama’s symbolic stakes in 2008 might have been the apparent resolution of US’s historic racial divisions, but such a position is not without material political and economic outcomes. Obama’s speech relied strongly on the twenty-first century recreation and universalization of Civil Rights racism in order to justify Obama’s position as the figurehead of its white saviors. And the *New York Times* unblinkingly packaged this myth for the elite liberal reader. Kristof’s response to “A More Perfect Union” revealed the liberal sentiments stirred by Obama’s speech, reverently calling it “not a sound bite, but a symphony,”\(^{116}\) and connecting it to the 2004 Democratic National Convention speech that launched Obama into the national imaginary and towards the presidency. In the 2004 DNC speech, Obama utilized the disavowed ideals of postrace to capture the political fervor of both the masses and the Democratic Party’s elites, most famously with the line, “there is not a black America and a white America…. There’s the United States of America.”\(^ {117}\) In addition to celebrating the disinterested aesthetics of the speech, Kristof preached that the message to be taken from Wright’s comments and Obama’s speech is moderation and increased dialogue, and drew attention to economic issues. Ultimately, Kristof applied the *Times*’s authority as a “neutral” news source to mark Obama’s speech as relatively disinterested, celebrating its “acknowledgement of complexity, nuance, and legitimate grievances on many sides” as well as embracing the moderate capitalism of Obama’s emphasis on individual responsibility.

Much as *Hairspray* equated other oppressions with historical racism in order to equate their resolutions, the postrace project of electing Obama promised more than the end of anti-

\(^{116}\) Kristof, “Obama and Race.”

black racism. In addition to representing the end of black-white divisions Obama’s biracialism was widely celebrated as the victory of the American melting pot; Obama’s postrace fulfillment suggested opportunities for the resolution of all racial, ethnic, and identity-based oppressions.\textsuperscript{118}

For example, Peggy Orenstein found “Obama as the first biracial candidate, symbolizes something else too: the future of race in this country, the paradigm and paradox of its simultaneous intransigence and disappearance.”\textsuperscript{119} Obama was heralded as the first Asian American president,\textsuperscript{120} as the most feminist candidate,\textsuperscript{121} and was awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize\textsuperscript{122} for international diplomacy, nuclear weapons policies, and climate endeavors,\textsuperscript{123} as well as the extent to which “Obama captured the world’s attention and [gave] its people hope for a

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better future.” Obama’s legislative director Chris Lu put it best, “[Obama is] basically a human Rorschach test…. African Americans think, and rightfully so, that this is a guy who understands their experience. But it’s similar if you talk to Latinos and Asian Americans, or to our 22-year-old field organizers. People see in him the qualities they want to see.”

Because presidential campaigns are political marketing campaigns, Obama’s appeal to multiple political issues is unsurprising, even predictable. What is remarkable, however, is that it is the “hope” Obama promised as a symbol of overcoming racism that makes Obama relatable, as the Nobel Peace Prize demonstrates. After all, if Obama’s election was made to represent the overcoming of racism, all oppressed groups also seemed to receive justice from this election just as Tracy’s success at the end of Hairspray stands in for everyone’s success, both from the 1960s and today. Obama’s political promise lay in the mass desire for the end of racism, which the campaign carefully managed through these “postrace” tenets.

Indeed, Obama was widely celebrated both before and after the “A More Perfect Union” speech as representing the resolution to all our diverse ills. Similar to Hairspray, by establishing this popular antiracism as the resolution for various forms of oppression (such as a range of racisms; shifting American identities, values, and ethnicities; and gender and environmental politics), racism came to stand as the universal signifier for liberal legitimation of all social ills, even as neither those ills nor racism is adequately resolved by this formulation. This emerges in “A More Perfect Union” when Obama turns to the bible: “Let us be our brother’s keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one

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another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.” The politics that reflect that common stake are voting for Obama’s racial capitalism.

Through these feel-good myths, bourgeois liberalism defended its own power and resources, and advanced a racial capitalist agenda. *Hairspray* and Obama both provided the means to celebrating racism’s defeat while US culture and politics worked to heighten material hierarchies in the distribution of resources, capital, and vulnerability to premature death. Postracism served as more than just a distraction from material racial politics such as increasingly legitimated practices of anti-Arab racism. Rather, as a popular antiracism, it siphoned mass political energy away from the left and towards democratic support for the politicians that constituted those material racial politics. After all, as a nation we voted for Obama even though the 2008 Democratic Party platform advocated that we “hunt down and take out terrorists,” “invest” “in American competitiveness,” “win in Afghanistan,” “secure the homeland,” “secure our borders,” keep police on the streets, give “$30 billion in assistance to Israel,” “revitalize our military” and “expand” and “rebuild our armed forces,” and “renew” “the American Dream.” Such process strictly limited how the vast majority of US Americans could take antiracist political action, affirmed the symbolic and economic authority of bourgeois gatekeepers, and maintained capitalism for the benefit of its elites.

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126 Obama, “A More Perfect Union.”

“This expanding civilian role is reflected, for example, in the State Department’s unprecedented involvement in administering defense measures in post-conflict Iraq. Today, civilian contractors are even involved in sensitive military activities such as drone operations. A common theme underlies these developments: the line separating civilians from combatants is becoming increasingly blurred.”

Introduction

Because he was cutting through the back, it was raining. He said he was looking in houses walking down the road. Kinda just not having a purpose to where he was going. He was stopping and starting….I think the situation where Trayvon got into um him being late at night, dark at night, raining, and anybody would think anybody walking down the road stopping and turning and looking, if that’s exactly what happened, um is suspicious. And George said that he didn’t recognize who he was.\(^2\)

On 13 July 2013, six women, five of whom were white, announced their decision that George Zimmerman’s 2012 killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in their neighborhood in Sanford, Florida was not a murder.\(^3\) The first juror to speak out about the Trayvon Martin case after the verdict, in an anonymous interview with Anderson Cooper on CNN, gave the above description of what made 17-year-old Martin into a criminal worthy of suspicion. The path that Martin took,

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3 Juror B-29, “Maddy,” in a July 26, 2013 interview by Robin Roberts on ABCNews’s “Good Morning America” expresses a disavowal of the colorblind white supremacy that juror B-37 described as the sentiment of the rest of the jury. http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/george-zimmerman-juror-29-interview-gma-vote-degree-19779607
the weather, the pace at which Martin walked, the time of day, and where Martin looked were all items worthy of comment, substantive factors in the decision about whether or not Zimmerman was justified in killing. This microscopic yet quotidian factors became arenas within which both Zimmerman and the jury participated in ideological decisions about security: about right and wrong; about belonging; about who could do what, and when. The racial hierarchization of this ideology emerges, for example, when Juror B-37 (who was one of the five white women involved in the decision) makes a titillating slippage discussing the “situation where Trayvon got into,” commenting both on Martin’s lateness and darkness as well as the hour and the amount of light to see by. But particularly revealing is the line “kinda just not having a purpose to where he was going,” which mingles fear with both fantasy (that either the jury or Zimmerman could know Martin’s intentions) and intense social control. Juror B-37 goes on to explicitly disavow the significance of race as part of the discussion during the jury’s deliberations, yet it was certainly a factor in why and how Martin came to be seen as suspicious, to be subjected to Zimmerman’s as well as these women’s surveillance. As the defense relied on Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law, the jury’s decision hinged on whether or not Zimmerman had reason to be suspicious and afraid of death; yet fear, safety, risk, security, and suspicious activity are long-racialized subjective formations of racial capitalism. In this case, murder as a racialized and racializing security action was voluntarily taken up by one US citizen against another. Martin was policed with deadly force without the official intervention of the state, and posthumously policed by the jury, through popular participation in security.

Informed by abolitionist feminist studies of prisons, policing, and surveillance, this chapter asserts the importance of the popular antiracism “If You See Something, Say Something” across mass twenty-first century racial capitalist security practices that I call, collectively, the US
Popular Security Regime. While the way in which these security practices are “popular” varies across US history, these forms are linked as bourgeois strategies by their common appeal to and dependency on mass participation, that is, through their delimiting of popular political action. Within this genealogy, I turn to the contemporary example “If You See Something, Say Something,” for the way in which it utilizes antiracism in order to generate the mass participation on which it depends, despite its own racially-hierarchizing consequences. By looking at how this is deployed within an exemplar of bourgeois cultural production, Wicked, I reveal the details of its operation as a structure-in-solution. I demonstrate how Wicked pleasurably distributes “If You See Something, Say Something” as a popular strategy of antiracism that justifies white bourgeois US exceptionalism to racialized security regimes as perversely necessary for the protection of racial and political minorities. These insights support the ideological and social-structural connections between policing and counterinsurgency, and demonstrate that the US Popular Security Regime has increasingly global reach. Within the realm of security, bourgeois liberalism’s popular antiracism produces reluctant popular support for the US’s global political and military agendas. Unfortunately, Wicked illuminates only one way in which theatre and popular participation shape the US security regime’s management of life and death.

The US Popular Security Regime: A Genealogy

Racist security is not a new phenomenon of social control in the United States. As Simone Brown argues, “‘racializing surveillance’ signals those moments when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance.”

Browne argues that practices and policies developed to regulate blackness are expansive, ranging

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from branding to airport security; all of these forms depend to some extent on popular participation in surveillance. For example, lantern laws in colonial New York City mandated that “black, mixed-race, and indigenous slaves” carry a light (a lantern or candle) shortly after sunset. Various similar ordinances existed, and the violation of these laws could result in arrest and apprehension by any white British person in New York City, after which the slave would be subject to public torture. Here, seeing and surveillance are connected but not identical formations. A certain kind of visibility, illumination by candle or lantern light, grants a certain kind of seeing (sight through illumination, as opposed to seeing in lower light or other kinds of attention to and detection of people); this formulation is required by law. On the other hand, surveillance extends out of and beyond the kind of seeing processes offered through this illumination. Surveillance is both about the kind of seeing promised by the light (the necessity of carrying a light suggests that the features of the enslaved person would be subject to detailed scrutiny), as well as surveillance around the lights themselves, monitoring certain people for those lights and searching the darkness for enslaved people without them. The law demands visibility, polices the responses to that demand, and creates the institutional apparatuses for supporting and enforcing that policing. The connection between visuality, policing, and the control of black people is continued today, albeit in different forms. For example, twenty-first century urban police forces use floodlights to illuminate predominantly black neighborhoods, housing projects, and events where black people gather to celebrate legacies of resistance to racial capitalism, such as J’Ouvert.6

5 Browne, Dark Matters, 16.
6 A contraction of the French jour ouvert (for day break) and also known as jouvay, this overnight event precedes Carnival celebrations and takes different forms and meanings depending on its location. In general it takes the form of procession, performance, and street party. It tends to emphasize community and features masquerade, dancing, and competitive
In colonial New York, what were presumably familiar mechanisms of state torture (such as imprisonment and public whipping) were further institutionalized by the additional demands of these new lantern laws. What I want to draw attention to is the public, popular participation in the practice of lantern laws, which is also a key feature in other racially-hierarchical security practices and surveillance mechanisms as part of and beyond slavery. It is not just important here that British citizens (implicitly yet undeniably white) were called upon to enforce the law. In the process they were produced as a group unified around white power, authority, and responsibility. The ubiquity of the white enforcement agent also rendered the law powerful, vastly exceeding the reach of more formal policing forces such as slave patrols or, eventually, official police departments. Any white person was capable of not only surveilling slaves, but was also empowered to police them.

Although the exact operations were different, lynch law was similarly dependent on the popular; mass participation in the mob was what gave lynching its force as a security mechanism that superseded the law itself.\(^7\) White popular support was essential for effectively surveilling and policing disobedience to the acceptable positions offered by oppressive racializing structures. In addition to mass participation in policing itself, these two forms shared an element of public spectatorship. As Browne reviews, the lantern laws were in part inspired by a 1712 armed insurrection of black slaves in the city; those revolutionaries were publicly tortured, drumming. For more information, see Errol Hill, *The Trinidadian Carnival: Mandate for a National Theater* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998); Earl Lovelace, “The Emancipation-Jouvy Tradition and the Almost Loss of Pan,” *TDR* 42.3 (1998): 54-60; or come out to Flatbush Avenue and Empire Boulevard at about 4:00 am the morning of Labor Day.\(^7\) See, Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship 1890-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011). Mitchell demonstrates how the performance of lynching plays provided a popular and community-based affirmation of black life not limited to the countering of performances of lynching themselves.
murdered, and disfigured, and their bodies left out to decay to dissuade further revolutionary action. Such public spectacle would also shape lynchings (literally social events for much of the white population) throughout the following three centuries. Each of these surveillance mechanisms was dependent on a mass seeing, mass visibility, as well as on a brutal popular action.

Marking the visuality of the black body for mass monitoring continued through the 19th and 20th centuries through the emphasis on physical description of slave patrols, fugitive slave notices, lynch mobs, and other state policies and practices. As Browne discusses elsewhere, branding operated as a precursor to contemporary biometric technologies. Runaway slaves would sometimes be branded on the forehead to, among other things, assert the centrality of the business owner on and around this person’s body. If these people tried to escape again, any who saw them might easily identify them not just as property but often as a specific business’s property. This “stamp burned into the flesh of human beings…to symbolize ownership,” was as a precursor to contemporary notions of the brand as a simple symbol indicative of a range of complex cultural connotations for the corporation wielding it. While the mark burned into the flesh and onto the skin of the enslaved person is infinitely more terrible, both of these kinds of brands are bound up with the same infrastructures of visuality, identification, and private property that ultimately make them both part of popular security practices. The symbol of the brand worked to make the enslaved human stand out, and also could be read to indicate in which

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10 Browne, Dark Matters, 91.
labor camp (as Edward Baptist has compellingly argued we should call what have been known as “plantations”12) the person was imprisoned or the nature of that human’s purported crimes. The brand activates an apparatus of reading that, when supported by institutions such as policing, prisons, or border controls, is a fundamental part of popular surveillance technology and a precursor for contemporary biometric mechanisms. Like today’s fingerprint or retina scanners, the branded body was distinguished as criminal or not through raised marks and ridges, in this case the scars. Similarly, the contemporary corporate brand activates an apparatus of reading as a kind of short-hand for a variety of connotations that must be seen, identified, and understood in order to be read.13 In both cases such “reading” (which might be better understood as interpreting) carriers with it encoded ideologies through which connotations can be selected as likely or possible; the power to read these brands depends on both knowing and “defin[ing] what is in or out of place.”14 These multiple layers of meaning are only superficially linked to the visual patterns on display, and are primarily social, the consequence of infrastructures of feeling around depend on “audience” agreement about certain readings and methods of reading which grant them a snowballing symbolic authority.

The brand demonstrates the extent to which capitalism’s current consumer culture continues a long history of intimately racializing surveillance processes. In addition, racial capitalism’s defense is the pivot around with surveillance is most often engaged, with security of corporate interests and bourgeois private property at the center of police and border forces, store

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and street surveillance cameras, and other popular security practices.\textsuperscript{15} Scholars also point out the role of popular participation in policing through Neighborhood Watch programs, meant to protect the sanctity of bourgeois housing environments.\textsuperscript{16} Throughout the next section I explore the political ideology of the \textit{US Government Counterinsurgency Guide} on its own terms. I rely on quotations from the document not to at all align myself with them, but to share the content of this official document even as I subject it to analysis and critique.

\textbf{The Non-Combatant Civilian: Achieving an Exception to Group-Differentiated Vulnerability to Premature Death}

Making certain people within the US feel safe is not a process restricted to US soil. Throughout the substantive shifts in the relations between the US and the other countries indicated by the term “counterinsurgency,” US and global citizens are increasingly conceived of as integral forces in securing the state. There is no more official document defining the US’s post-9/11 use of the idea “counterinsurgency” than the \textit{U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide} (henceforth, the \textit{COIN Guide}), “the first serious U.S. effort at creating a national counterinsurgency framework in over 40 years,”\textsuperscript{17} which was published in January 2009 by the United States Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative. The US Departments of


State, Defense, Justice, The Treasury, Homeland Security, Agriculture, and Transportation contributed to the document, as well as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The composition of the document was led by the Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. The document is careful to declare itself, in the preface, as an exceptional work: “This Guide, the first of its kind in almost half a century, distills the best of contemporary thought, historical knowledge, and hard-won practice. It is the best kind of doctrinal work: intellectually rigorous, yet practical.” While there have been numerous documents on counterinsurgency policy since the US Vietnam War, the COIN Guide does seem to be unique as a document setting forth knowledge, research, and best practices in a way that spans various “bureaucracies” within the US political structure that are presumed to be somewhat competitive and exclusionary. Yet, as a statement of the US’s “whole-of-government” approach to counterinsurgency, its difference from documents that fall under the sole purview of the Department of Defense\(^\text{18}\) is what makes the COIN Guide so important as an object of study, even as extant military practice has clearly influenced its formation. In the COIN Guide, the recent expansion of the US military into local and state police forces is concretized. Through the ideological and material turn to counterinsurgency, militarized US security officially enters into the everyday operations of the United States both domestically and globally; in the process the US shifts categories of the human, reshaping and reinforcing capitalism’s racializing hierarchies for the new millennium.

In addition to being a project of popularly reshaping institutions, as I will later discuss, counterinsurgency is also a project of establishing US moral authority on murder and war, which practice is intimately about creating racial hierarchization. I want to turn to a term the document

\(^{18}\) Such as the FM 31-20-3, FM 3-24, JP 3-24, or JP3-07.
deploys only once, on page 19: “non-combatant civilians.” While this is the only time that people within an “affected country” are referred to this way, I suggest this is not the only time they are conceived of this way, with radically conservative repercussions for the definitions of human, life, and murder.

While the COIN Guide is written by a variety of departments in collaboration, different interests emerge in different sections. In “Chapter One: Theory and Principles,” the State Department’s interests are foremost; it emphasizes the importance of policy makers and political reform, always positioning “non-military means” as more effective than the enabling “military forces.”

On the other hand, “Chapter Two: Components of COIN Strategy” forefronts the interests of the Department of Defense. It is amongst the utilitarian and hierarchical chain-of-command-ridden military jargon, that we find the term “non-combatant civilian” and are compelled to also think of its opposite, apparently not a contradiction in terms: the combatant civilian. The collapsing gap between “combatant” and “civilian” is clearly not an innovation of the COIN Guide. Scholars explore this as change in the composition of the US military. For example, one recent study explores the increase in contracted private security companies, the State Department’s involvement in Iraq, and US civilian contractors doing technological work such as on drones. Drawing from and working to concretize the same collapsing divide, another study by legal advisor to the Israeli National Security Council Gil Avriel argues for use of the term “civilitary” to “capture the state of play imposed on the international community by ISIL

and other radical forces of violence in the 21st century that has placed civilians at the heart of military conflict.”

Avriel’s attention is to “terrorists;” as we will see it is no mistake that the collapsing divide between civilian and combatant is at the heart of that racializing concept. In conversation with this research, we can read the entire COIN Guide, developed collaboratively between military and non-military US Departments and with its emphasis on how counterinsurgency is a “civilian and military effort,” as an example of the evaporating divide between civilians and combatants. Changing the relation between civilians and combatants fundamentally changes the operations of warfare. I next explore how the US conceives of war within which some civilians are also combatants, and how this is a process of producing mass participation in security practice.

The COIN Guide’s Preface firmly establishes counterinsurgency as the new way the US should engage in warfare. Calling insurgency “irregular warfare,” Eliot Cohen (who was at that time a counselor of the Department of State and who is the Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University) lays the groundwork for the replacement of traditional warfare with insurgency and counterinsurgency. Cohen notes, “While the possibility of conventional conflict remains, the fact is that, at the moment, the main powers of the international system are deeply reluctant to engage in it. Insurgency, however, can and will flourish in the modern environment….Whether the United States should engage in any particular counterinsurgency is a matter of political choice, but that it will engage in such conflicts during

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the decades to come is a near certainty.”23 Counterinsurgency is inevitable, and generating popular support for it is unavoidable. The US’s role in this warfare is to guide it to serve its own interests, both by killing insurgents and shaping “affected governments” into a US-approved political order, with the ultimate objective being to maintain the US-dominated world status quo.

With any insurgency within any state as subject to the US’s destruction (as long as the state itself follows US concepts of appropriate politics) all existing political orders are as they should be, reflecting the ideology of Francis Fukayama’s “end of history.”24 The guide notes that “in today’s world, state failure can quickly become not merely a misfortune for local communities, but a threat to global security.” Revolution anywhere on the globe is completely foreclosed. With revolution foreclosed, all enemies are not states with whom the US is at war, but rather rebellious young upstarts (known as “insurgents”) within existing and favorably mutable states. As such, they can and should only be addressed through counterinsurgency, which demands both military and political intervention. By legitimating even the most illegitimate of extant states, the US Government reserves the exceptional right to kill within those states, while eliminating the risks and limitations that open warfare might offer to the United States.

And the US’s self-claimed authority and right to kill (which “right” makes it not-criminal to do so) is extended to any misbehaving citizen; the boundary between military and civilian is as absent as the guide’s language suggests. With the evaporation of this distinction between civilian and combatant, no one should be exempted from the costs of the war (particularly outside of the

US, but as Obama’s use of drone to kill US citizens demonstrates,²⁵ this can also apply to misbehaving US citizens). That is, there is no longer any “innocent” person under the ideology of counterinsurgency; the *COIN Guide* justifies war as necessary against *everyone*. When any civilian is already a combatant unless they are earning their “non-combatant” adjective by participating in counterinsurgency, every person is not only at risk for but ultimately deserves the consequences of perpetual war within their life. War crimes are thus dissolved, and with them any concept of human rights. There is no unjust killing in the name of US security. War at the “end of history” is no longer even actually war, then, but more a perpetual state of militarized policing of information and political activity extended broadly across the populations of any non-US state.

As there are no longer non-combatants, there are no innocent victims of any state’s disproportionate power (such as the US’s disproportionate access to arms). In fact, with the dissolution of the possibility of non-participation in combat that gave meaning to the idea of a “civilian,” populations within non-US states are divorced from their collectivity, fetishized into singular objects who are themselves always at risk of becoming the enemy and risking the visitation of justice on them as individuals. The legitimacy of collective struggle is erased by the individual failings of its participants, and thus any social kind of justice is also foreclosed. It is because of this that the institutions of US security are so important, in fact. US counterinsurgency serves as a vast attempt to expand US militarized policing and bureaucracies of individuated law and order, which we already know is violently racializing as well as fundamentally about the warehousing of extraneous laborers who are still needed as consumers.

so cannot be allowed to die. Meaningful justice is evacuated and made impossible at the same time as prisons, courts, and police forces are disseminated as justice/to replace justice.

The collapse of distinctions between civilian and combatant is an ideology of justifiable perpetual violence against everyone. By defining people only as fully human when they are “non-combatant civilians” (indistinguishable from combatants without the legitimating adjective that can only be bestowed by the US), the *COIN Guide* limits the grounds for non-participation in war. With the accompanying shifting definition of the human, the only non-participant in the conflict is someone who is engaged in the exceptionalism of the popular antiracism of “If You See Something, Say Something.” Only when actively taking the side of the US by participating in its process of policing other civilian can one be appropriately designated by a legitimating US authority as a “non-combatant civilian,” exempted from the racializing order producing civilians as always-already threats. In order to achieve the exceptionalism of surviving under counterinsurgency, one must actively and regularly participate in US security, including supporting the further dissemination of US justice institutions such as police forces and courts, and I will later explore. To do so, to become an informant to the United States, makes one temporarily marked as an ally, as a non-combatant civilian. But the US’s authorization as such a non-combatant civilian is both fleetingly dependent on the process of performance, and necessary to prevent being subject to death. There is no other way to become exempted from the risk of war, to be innocent, than to constantly perform allegiance to the US through surveilling and policing other citizens.

Popular practice is necessarily a messy confluence of multiple formations, made even messier by the breadth of “security” as a practice. Security in the early twenty-first century has many meanings in addition to the sense of domestic safety and freedom from threat that is so
disproportionately distributed according to hierarchies of capital based on race, class, nation, gender, sexuality, and ability. Surveillance (attention, such as tracking and profiling, based on visuality, observation, seeing), feelings (of suspicion, fear, safety, comfort, and belonging), institutions (the police force, the Department of Homeland Security, ICE, the US military), policing (governing and enforcement of social norms through the exertion of power and violence), and more are each significant players in the struggle for US security. Security, then, is more than this feeling, that surveillance camera, or those institutions. Security as a “regime” is a collection of forces that operate sometimes together and sometimes at odds, but all oriented towards maintaining group-based hierarchies in the differential distribution of capital and ultimately, of life and death. The twenty-first century US Popular Security Regime is an expansive umbrella under which policing, procedures, surveillance, courts, bureaucracies, prisons, feelings, behaviors, capitals, and a myriad of other expressions cluster together to shape specific historical formations of racial capitalism in particular times and places. Next I turn to Wicked to reveal specifically how mass antiracist desire is appropriated to motivate popular participation in this regime after the turn of the millennium.

Wicked’s Social Order: Racism, Race, and Popular Practices of Exceptionalism

This genealogy of popular policing provides a revealing context within which to read the text, performance, and marketing of Wicked. Understanding the disavowed racial politics that are an integral part of the content and distribution of the musical helps account for the production and mass distribution of desire for participating in security today. Another way to begin to ask the questions in this chapter is to posit: why does the musical Wicked differ so significantly from the novel by Gregory Maguire on which it is based? What does a theatrical form of this story, and the particular theatrical form of this specific production, offer in the twenty-first century that
is lacking from the novel or the proposed film? This is not a gratuitous question, considering that in its first decade (2003-2013), the show grossed USD$3 billion and it is still going strong.\textsuperscript{26} As early as 2005 the show was hailed by the \textit{Wall Street Journal} for the profitability of its advanced sales, North American tours, and merchandising; \textit{WSJ} particularly highlighted \textit{Wicked}'s ground-breaking use of “the initial production as a platform for building a world-wide franchise.”\textsuperscript{27} By 2013, Patrick Healy emphasized the show’s economic success for the \textit{New York Times}:

“All ‘Wicked’ is on track to become the most profitable venture in the 101-year history of Universal,…more lucrative than its top-grossing movies like ‘Jurassic Park’ and ‘E.T.’ The show is an open-ended juggernaut, charging 10 times more per ticket than movie theaters do.”\textsuperscript{28} Indeed, although attendance peaked in 2005, grosses increased because of rising ticket prices and multiple productions. In 2013, a decade after its opening, \textit{Wicked} set a record as the first Broadway musical to gross over $3 million in a single week.\textsuperscript{29} While the novel was also relatively popular, and while novel author Gregory Maguire shared in at least $95 million worth of writers’ profits and royalties alongside Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman,\textsuperscript{30} the difference between page and stage was immense.


\textsuperscript{28} Healy, “Like the Movie, Only Different.”


The show differs starkly from the more complicated novel, and I will later analyze it in depth, so here I restrict myself to the briefest plot description of the former. The musical *Wicked* is somewhat episodic in structure, featuring a series of scenes centered on the songs and loosely connected by plot. It focuses on the friendship between two young witches, one green (Elphaba), and one white (Galinda, later, Glinda), who meet at Shiz University. Elphaba has unique magical powers, a bitter attitude, and a sister named Nessarose who is in a wheelchair. Glinda has money, popularity, and an abrasively bubbly attitude. Forced to be roommates, they befriend each other after a period of animosity. They take classes with, attend parties with, and develop crushes on some of their classmates, including the handsome prince Fiyero. At Shiz they encounter the oppression of Animals (talking animals), including a teacher. They travel together to the Emerald City to meet the Wizard, only to learn that he is responsible for the Animal oppression. They part ways after deciding different strategies to deal with this problem: Glinda is cowed by the Wizard’s power but Elphaba resists. In the second act, Elphaba is harassed and abused by the state, but Glinda comes to work for the state as a marketing figurehead spreading happiness. After Elphaba tries help others with her magic only to be punished and denounced at every turn, she charges Glinda to carry on her legacy and then fakes her own death to run off with Fiyero. Glinda overthrows the Wizard’s regime.

As the first and only green person in her world, Elphaba is hardly representative of a race of similar people. *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, the only book to address *Wicked*, dedicates two chapters to the show. Scholar Stacy Wolf is quite correct to note Elphaba’s greenness is not racial difference because the musical would need to link “her
to a larger social and sociohistorical group.”  

Her deracialization is necessary, Wolf asserts, in order to make Elphaba “solely a unique and special individual, the presumed subject of the audience’s identification and attachment.” In this way, “Elphaba’s ‘difference’ stands in for all difference.”

Wolf considers whether or not Elphaba is marked as disabled throughout the show, noting first that “over and again, the musical stresses how [Elphaba] is unique by using other characters to bracket what she is not.” The musical might make her green skin mark her as different, but it “wants the audience to recognize and sympathize with Elphaba. Two likely readings of Elphaba’s green skin and painful fate—that she is a person of color who suffers other people’s racism or that she is disabled and discriminated against—are emphatically foreclosed in Wicked.” The character used to bracket Elphaba as “not disabled” is Nessarose. Wolf argues “Nessa’s existence in the musical puts pressure on Elphaba’s meaning from the other side: the green girl is not disabled, just different….For a musical like Wicked that works overtime to send a politically progressive message, its use of disability as a metaphor for evil is, simply put, an ideological blind spot.” While I think that Wolf is correct to note that Elphaba is set apart from a stage-legible disability through the foil of her wheelchair-bound sister, questions of ability are ultimately vital features of “If You See Something, Say Something.” Seeing and saying themselves are embodied practices, and as such are differentially-distributed; not all bodies can do them. “Saying” in particular is also an embodied performance act that is always-already

32 Wolf, Changed for Good, 205.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 204.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 205.
social;\textsuperscript{37} Elphaba’s exclusion from the social makes it increasingly impossible for her to speak (and thus act), which frustration she expresses in numbers like “No Good Deed,” and, as I will explore later, “For Good.” And, as security practice, “seeing” and “saying” are embodied powers delimited to only those who are exceptionally worthy of not being policed themselves. Those who are the subjects of being policed are seen, not “seeing,” spoken about, not “saying.” Think of the weight given to the protestations of Muslim and Arab people falsely accused of terrorism to imagine their physical power to speak, in contradistinction to the empowerment given to a terrified or worried white woman who might be reporting “suspicious activity on the platform or train.” And once again counterinsurgency pushes this logic to its deadly extreme: only the act of speaking itself, while it is being actively engaged in, is enough to grant the speaker temporary exception from the category “civilian combatant.” The ability to see and say, socially produced, is a defining distributor of life and death. Thus the racial capitalist security order is not only differentially distributed based on ability, but is also, through US military interventions, a disabilizing process itself. Nonetheless, as with race, Elphaba is constructed as separate from any structural depiction of disability with historical resonances that might enable a powerful critique of real-world ablism.

Wolf is of course correct that Elphaba’s difference is part of her universalizing appeal; at the same time, Wolf’s claim that marking Elphaba as “neutral” compared to the oppressed Animal characters moves her away from racial associations neglects the racial specificity of whiteness. But I also want to argue that the economic success of this work operates not through deracializing Elphaba, but through a pattern of identification, disidentification, and

reidentification with her and Glinda that firms up white exceptionalism and capital even as the musical markets itself through “universality” and its “politically progressive message.” There is an important distinction between making Elphaba white and making her a distinctly-racialized figure of Otherness who is nonetheless disconnected from “a larger social and sociohistorical group,” a distinction that is actually the key to Wicked’s wildly popular appeal.

Racism

At the same time as being marked as racially neutral and white, Elphaba’s skin color difference beckons one of the main historical tools that the US and the stage has used to define and identify race and racial hierarchy (differences in skin color), and cannot be fully separated from that history. Her greenness does not obliterate race, but engages with a history of racialization. The audience sees the greenness of her skin, and recognizes the ways she is oppressed for that difference without necessarily being reminded of specific complicity in the long and ongoing history of racial hierarchization. And oppression for being green is a major part of what defines Elphaba in the musical. If Oz is not our world, the universal social repulsion Elphaba encounters for her skin color is in fact quite surprising. In a world totally foreign to our own, someone with green skin is just as likely to be ostracized as to be accepted, to be made a god as to be made an outcast, to be treated with contempt as to be treated with curiosity, and to be valued for her uniqueness as to be reviled for her difference. But Oz is always eerily familiar, and the formation of skin-color-based discrimination is too precise to be incidental. Oz provides a fantasy realm for experimentation, in this case with representations of racism and antiracism. The universal social ostracization Elphaba experiences is a representation of racism, a stance on what racism is that also constitutes its liberal opposite, a popular antiracism.

38 Wolf, Changed for Good, 205.
For example, from the opening number “No One Mourns the Wicked” the story centers on defining racism around Elphaba: “From the moment she was born she was… well… different!” Glinda is careful to not name that difference in this line, nor in her letter home at the top of “What Is This Feeling?” Yet those attending Elphaba’s birth have no such qualms, making sure that the audience is able to appropriately identify the exact reason she is set apart: “the baby is unnaturally—green!” They are clear to point out her skin color as well as that this color is unnatural. Singing “the enemy of all of us here in Oz,” the chorus works to separate Elphaba from society even as that difference is the very thing that gives that line content, that makes her worth singing about at all. Glinda once again marks herself as distinct by turning to the bigger picture (“Isn’t it nice to know that good will conquer evil?”), but the chorus promptly returns to the specificities of Elphaba herself, demanding, “Glinda! Exactly how dead is she?” This sets up racism as the central force in the plot of the story, defining it as the society unjustly attaching evilness to skin color, and establishing Glinda as the figure of antiracist practice. From its very first moments Wicked takes up not perceptions of good and evil in general, but around its exceptional protagonists (and although Elphaba is at first centered, ultimately Glinda is the figure of goodness). There is no attempt to hide this exceptionalism; it is incorporated throughout the plot and, through the figure of the heroic protagonist, is a formal convention of Western fiction. As I will later explore, this exceptionalism, particularly for Glinda, persists throughout the musical. It is worth pausing to emphasize that this is not the expected inversion. The show, like

40 Wicked typescript, I-1-6.
41 Ibid., I-1-2.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
the book on which it is based, suggests with the tagline “The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz,”
that the truth behind these figures is an inversion of common stereotypes of green‐bad/blonde‐
good. Yet, that inversion is itself undermined to demonstrate the genuine goodness of the
privileged girl who everyone loves to hate.

While Glinda is reluctant to identify Elphaba’s greenness, Elphaba names her skin color
as the source of her oppression in her first lines. “What?! What are you all looking at? Oh—do I
have something in my teeth?”44 she quips early in Act I, Scene 2, before making it clear that she
is used to slights about her skin color. “No, I’m not seasick; yes, I’ve always been green; no, I
didn’t eat grass as a child,”45 she yells before comparing herself to her sister Nessarose with the
line, “as you can see, she is a perfectly normal color.”46 Here Elphaba anticipates a universal
social rejection that cannot be based on a history of oppression since she is the only green person
in Oz. In this confrontation scene, Elphaba takes up a green identity, reifying herself as green in
the process. Elphaba demands that the audience see her as green, immediately rendering the
impossibility of her colorblindness as safely her own responsi-

This is the first time during the production that the audience sees her in person and she is
immediately outspoken to the point of confrontation. Her classmates’ dislike of her is caused at
least as much by her appearance as by her behavior. This is confirmed when Glinda teaches
Elphaba to act “Popular” in the song of that name. It is Elphaba’s suddenly “correct” behavior as
much as Glinda’s authorization of her that permits social tolerance to emerge out of the previous
pattern of exclusion. And throughout the musical Elphaba’s lack of control over her emotions

45 Ibid., emphasis in original.
46 Ibid.
and her tongue definitively shapes individual and institutional responses to her. Elphaba is
construed as in control of her own oppression; regardless of her intentions, she is responsible for
the negative consequences that befall her. Yet her defensiveness makes it clear that the people of
Oz constantly relate to her through offensive and invasive questions, such as those that
characterize real-world racist “micro”aggressions.

One of the consequences of Elphaba’s skin color (one of the show’s examples of racism
against her) is a lack of adequate familial love, a feeling that her parents clearly favor her not-
green sibling. Like a caricature of teenage angst, a feeling of being misunderstood and
undervalued by one’s parents is part of what makes Elphaba’s “‘difference’ stand[] in for all
difference;”47 antagonistic family relations persist without parody throughout the piece. On the
contrary, the musical’s links between greenness and real world racism come and go. In addition
to associations with anti-black racism, Elphaba is occasionally connected to structural
Orientalism. Glinda’s unwillingness to name Elphaba’s skin color is reflected by other characters
throughout the play. In “What is this Feeling?” Elphaba’s schoolmate tormenters call her “a
terror,” “a tartar” and “disgusticified,”48 but never limit their name-calling simply to “green.”
Still, this song works comedically to highlight a quality of distrust, foreignness, fear, distaste,
unfamiliarity, threat, and terror that links the responses to Elphaba’s skin color with Orientalism;
this association is strengthened by the somewhat vague racialization implied from the reference
to the Tatars.49 However, although she never receives her father’s or sister’s love, the connection
between Elphaba’s misery and her skin color drifts away as she befriends the socially

47 Wolf, Changed for Good, 205.
48 Wicked typescript, I-3-19.
University Press, 1996); and Edward Said, Orientalism, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York:
legitimating figures Glinda and Fiyero. For example, although in “What is this Feeling?” Glinda remarks that she loathes Elphaba’s “face,” her attitudes shift by “Popular.” When they are friends Glinda does not reflect on Elphaba’s physical body, instead associating Elphaba with descriptors such as “depressing,” “unprepossessing,” and “dreary.” She centers her benevolent makeover skills on the idea that Elphaba is “less fortunate” and needs to “fix [her] hair;” Elphaba’s problems are by this point not about how Elphaba looks but about how she’s viewed. Elphaba’s sudden exit at the end of this number is inspired by this changing same; what has shifted is what Glinda sees, emphasizing Glinda’s newfound ability to see through race. Fiyero later expresses the same sentiment when he implies that he finally finds her beautiful because he is “looking at things-- another way” and “seeing through different eyes.” The dangerous foreignness Elphaba poses is attenuated with each passing song, resulting in not colorblindness but a sort of seeing through race. Visuality is central to this dynamic; rather than colorblindness, Elphaba’s contemporaries (and through their model, the audience) learn to see her as valuable despite the ultimately unwanted greenness of her skin.

Elphaba’s non-historically-specific skin color beckons parallels drawn to a variety of familiar theatrical figures. Her skin color is the prominent visual element of her display on the musical stage (in contrast with her drab attire), beckoning comparisons with other protagonists whose skin is seen first and foremost. In particular, her belting number at the end of Act 1, “Defying Gravity,” might recollect the defiances of Effie from Dreamgirls or Celie from The Color Purple. But Elphaba is also on display within the world of the musical, allowing the

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50 Wicked typescript, I-3-19.  
51 Ibid., I-7-42.  
52 Ibid., I-7-41.  
53 Ibid.  
54 Ibid., II-4-99.  
55 Ibid., II-4-98.
audience to both observe her and observe her being-looked-at-ness, and to assess outcomes for their own potential actions with such a figure. By connecting her outspokenness to her different skin color, the play reproduces a variety of stereotypes, in particular of the angry black woman and the violent black man, and invites the audience to practice their encounter with and judge those stereotypes (from a safe distance). This is hailed again when Elphaba first goes to the Emerald City and is struck by how everything in it is the same color as her skin. The associations between “urban” and “blackness” (as in the phrase “urban youth”) are strong enough to make the pairing of the city and her race one that hails blackness, however briefly. The identification is necessarily temporary. Elphaba’s greenness is not a stand-in for blackness, because, as Wolf explains, she lacks any connection to historically-specific racial formations. That is, she is not substantively connected to a legacy of blackness or black representation. The content of her first outburst reveals her status as both novel and racially ambiguous to this community. Still, the audience’s racializing gaze is encouraged, and this reflects a pattern of blackness on the stage and on display. Alongside the other characters in the play, we are invited to look and look at her difference, as well as to judge her behavior. Through its emphasis on visuality as appropriate political behavior, and the associated restaging of spectacular racialization, Wicked traffics in a legacy of theatrical complicity in racist surveillance.

Race

After being discovered as a budding sorcerer at the end of this scene, Elphaba fantasizes about her future successes in the number, “The Wizard & I.” The song is one of her desire for success to bring her social acceptance, but there is also a deeply conservative biological-essentialism anchored in the piece. Here Elphaba’s desire to be with the wizard (her desire to be exceptional) is intimately tied as much to her experience of difference as to her biological
existence (which is tied up with her magic as well as her skin color). She sings that she has waited to meet the wizard “since, since birth,” the hesitation emphasizing her careful consideration of how deeply rooted her desire is. Whatever part of her has been waiting to “meet the Wizard” is a biological fact that has preceded any possible social desire. (After all, surely an infant Elphaba wasn’t immediately aware of how people would perceive her upon exit from the womb.) This biological necessity stems from her appearance: “And with all his wizard wisdom/ By my looks, he won’t be blinded.” And her skin color difference has deeply entrenched biological components she cannot herself fully understand: “This gift—or this curse—/ I have inside/ Maybe at last, I’ll know why.” Her magic is part of her racialization. Like her green skin it makes her different, and is also outside of her full control. After a short transition where she expresses hope about the future, the song shifts from the music for “The Wizard & I” to the “Unlimited” motif that peppers the score. Elphaba sings about a vision she’s having, in the process exposing the limitations of her control over this natural talent. She did not call this vision forth, and because the first scene of the show reveals how it all goes down, the audience can see that she does not really understand this vision either. The “celebration throughout Oz” is of her purported demise, not, as she imagines, of her usefulness to the wizard. Elphaba’s magical talents are part of her “race”: they are unique to her, innate, outside of her conscious control, and the very factor that makes her both want and be able to get with the wizard.

Popularizing Exceptionalism

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56 *Wicked* typescript, I-2-16.  
57 Ibid.  
58 Ibid.  
59 Ibid.  
60 Ibid., I-2-17.
This number’s most insidious engagement with white supremacy comes shortly before that musical shift. Elphaba sings: “And one day, he’ll say to me: ‘Elphaba, /Girl who is so superior/ Shouldn’t a girl who’s so good inside/ Have a matching exterior?/ And since folks here to an absurd degree/ Seem fixated on your verdigris/ Would it be alright by you/ If I de-greenify you?’/ And though of course that’s not important to me/ ‘All right, why not?’ I’ll reply.”

Through the imagined voice of the Wizard, she articulates the difference between her nature and her appearance: she is not only good, but also superior, and greenness is neither. Her own imagined response comes in a rush, giving urgency to her disavowal not of her oppressors but of her skin color itself. She sees “de-greenifying” as the just reward for her talent, character, and labor. She longs to be de-green, to be some kind of “normal;” this is a significant part of why identification with her is so popular.

Revealing some of the similarities between Oz and Broadway, Stephen Schwartz, who wrote the music and lyrics of the show, notes, “the trick with this show is of course that it’s set in Oz and therefore it has to have a sense of being in another place, and yet musically not be so inaccessible that people are thinking ‘well, that might be another place but not one I’d care to visit.’” Indeed, the score is a popular one, both in that it draws on pop music (including Elphaba’s songs), and that it is accessible and popularly received, as Stephen Holden and Michelle Boyd each discuss. Because of pop’s calculated broad appeal, the music of Wicked strongly supports my discussion of Elphaba as not, in fact, racially Othered for most of the play.

At the same time, pop music’s history is notoriously one of unattributed white supremacist

61 Wicked typescript, 1-2-16 – 1-2-17.
borrowing and reappropriation of African American musical forms; the use of a pop score indicates not just whiteness as some kind of mass-produced neutrality, but establishes Elphaba’s position (even stronger than a white claim) as the innocent appropriator. She is not white, and so may borrow from other cultural representations without fear of being reprimanded for “cultural appropriation.” Her difference is not just a visible placeholder for everyone’s difference, but also an infinitely flexible exception for various audience members to engage with the racial representations of popular culture with which she is entangled. This dialectically contributes to the popularity of the score.

As I discussed in the economy surrounding desire for the city and Avenue Q, this identificatory difference appeals to the experience economy of racism, equating oppressive or unpleasant experiences with racial injustice and promising the same affective resolutions (the validation of acknowledged injustice, the thrill of a righteous politics of resistance, and the aura of distinction) that are today awarded to historical struggles against racism, particularly the Civil Rights Movement. Elphaba’s greenness is a racial otherness (a skin-color based systematic social hierarchization) that, without a relationship to real-world racial hierarchy, anyone can try on or at least be friends with. Indeed, Wolf explores the character’s popularity and audience identification in a later chapter in Changed for Good. While both Elphaba and Glinda offer the girl fans that Wolf studies a figure they can imitate and to whom they can relate, Elphaba’s racialization makes this a process of trying on difference. Hence Wolf notes about Elphaba’s particular appeal, “[her] awkward outward ‘difference,’ her green skin, signifies her internal difference, her sensitivity, awareness, intelligence, and both render her sympathetic to almost all girl fans.”64 It is Elphaba’s exceptional difference, as well as her depoliticized response to it (as I

64 Wolf, Changed for Good, 225.
will explore in the next section), that promises the audience feelings of agency and self-actualization at the moment of their own “political” resistance to racism. They are invited to feel unique like Elphaba; when Elphaba is subjected to and repels stereotypes, prejudices, and slurs throughout the musical it is both a moment of pleasurable, safe subjection for the audience (validating by publicly standing in for their own unpleasant experiences), as well as a moment of victorious action for that audience.

![Image of We Can Defy It!]

Figure 2: We Can Defy It!, James Hance

Indeed, as is reflected in the audience’s reception, Wicked’s broadly-accessible exceptionalism supplants attention to material racial hierarchies with attention to other political causes and forms of oppression. One such example is the image depicted in Figure 1, fan art that circulates online and can be purchased from the artist James Hance; it depicts Elphaba in the pose of Rosie the Riveter under the banner “We Can Defy It!” The banner beckons a collective

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65 Other “relentlessly cheerful” art by Hance strongly emphasizes popular culture. More information on the artist can be found at [http://www.jameshance.com/](http://www.jameshance.com/).
“we” to join Elphaba’s deliberately unspecified defiance, while the reinterpreted World War II imagery appeals to a nostalgic sense of American militarized exceptionalism that can be used to give emotional strength to any cause. Indeed, a small stamp on one side of the bottom border claims the poster on behalf of “The Committee Against Anything EVER Bringing Us Down;” opposite, it also references the song’s lyrics with the note “If you care to join look to the Western sky.” In addition to, for example, the internet fans that Wolf later discusses, who identify with Elphaba’s politics in the form of compassion for animals rights, the Advocate begins a review of the touring production with a revealing audience quote: “Green is so the new gay.” The critical response is equally vague about what cause Elphaba can be connected to. Reviews of Wicked often mention Elphaba’s skin color but never discuss the musical’s racial implications. Instead they use phrases such as “misunderstood,” “special,” “hideous-looking,” “a misunderstood social outcast with a birth defect,” “sensitive,” and “friendless” to describe Elphaba’s physical markers of difference. Only Ben Brantley’s ambivalent review comes close to acknowledging the construction of power in Oz as racial, calling Elphaba “restless, dissatisfied…in a white wizard’s world.”

66 Wolf, Changed for Good, 227.
71 Chris Bournea, “‘Wicked’ is a magical, mystifying theatrical experience,” Call & Post, June 27, 2007, 2B.
73 Jules Becker, “‘Wicked’ has its moments,” Jewish Advocate, April 28, 2006, 37.
While a post-racial world-view denies the impact of race and racism in a way that *Wicked* does not (quite), two reviews note a potentially progressive feature of “post-race” on the contemporary stage: the racial permissiveness of casting decisions in *Wicked*. Both focus on particular African-American cast members and make the argument that the days of racial discrimination in casting maybe behind us. In the first, Linda Armstrong interviewed Wizard actor Ben Vereen. In this interview Vereen works to encourage the development of such a situation, commenting that this casting decision was “insightful and courageous,” and reflecting that, “with African American actors, it doesn’t matter the role, give us the opportunity.”

Echoing and amplifying the post-race ideal that tinges Vereen’s assertions, the *Philadelphia Tribune* quotes an original tour *Wicked* cast member, Terra Lynn Arrington, reflecting on the racial diversity among the cast of the touring production. Arrington notes “I think it’s getting easier and easier for African Americans and others to get roles in various shows. In our show alone, we have African Americans, a few people from Hawaii of Asian descent and others. And especially as far as ensemble roles, I’ve seen casting broaden in the past couple of years.”

Arrington is conspicuously silent on opportunities for actors who are not white to participate in leading roles, demonstrating that a celebration of post-racial casting is still unable to address the deeply entrenched material inequalities of theatrical production. The actors who originated the characters Glinda and Elphaba also shaped and revealed the characters racialization, connecting it to real world racial hierarchies in casting. Hailing from Oklahoma, Kristin Chenoweth originated the role of Glinda and could not be more white. Although Chenoweth’s whiteness

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cannot be named as such, it is often hinted at through references to blondeness; whiteness is central to Glinda’s role. For example, Bruce Weber notes in an early *New York Times* review,

The [opening] scene is reminiscent of the bubble-carriage entrance of Glinda in the film of “The Wizard of Oz,” and the opening line is meant to be a pithy and shrewd bit of postmodern self-awareness. What it requires from the actress playing the spoiled and sweetly conceited Glinda is that she give off a sense, equally, of mischief and sincerity, of self-mockery and self-confidence, of being a dreamgirl and knowing there is no such thing. In other words, it has to be Kristin Chenoweth. A blond pixie with a Pepsodent smile, Ms. Chenoweth, 33, has a soprano capable of both fine-china delicacy and sonic-boom belting, and the kind of presence, both on and offstage, that glows with the aura of too-good-to-be-true.77

An apt description of whiteness. On other other hand, Idina Menzel, who originated the role of Elphaba, is a New York person of Jewish heritage, with long dark hair. Weber notes that Elphaba is “played by the big-voiced, dark-haired beauty Idina Menzel (who was the original Maureen in ‘Rent’).….A woman who has none of Ms. Chenoweth’s naughty effervescence, Ms. Menzel, 32 (who isn’t really green, by the way), is introspective and seems almost shy.”78 Non-blondeness made Menzel a good fit for the alto role, including what Michelle Boyd notes in a study on the voices of witch characters, alto’s traditional social exclusion. Boyd concludes, “the gentle ‘white’ witch who abides by the rules can now hope to achieve the American dream, but the unassimilable witch, the ambitious witch, and the witch who ‘defies gravity’ still encounter a

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78 Ibid.
Menzel’s not-blonde-ness helped make the character more aligned with oppression. This was strengthened by Menzel’s proximity to racial “otherness” in a former role: Maureen from Rent, a musical celebrated for its representations of diversity. The original actors’ physical appearances were tied to their vocal range and how the show positioned each character racially. Because of their iconic performances, this remained true for the many actors who took up these roles after Chenoweth and Menzel moved on to other parts. Elphaba has been played by actors of a variety of racial backgrounds, including black performers Saycon Sengbloh and Alexia Khadime. Tellingly, both characters are predominantly played by white actors, and there is no record of a black actor ever playing Glinda.

The audience is invited to identify with Elphaba’s racial difference, while Elphaba herself is written as desiring whiteness. After identifying with (“rehearsing”) Elphaba’s experiences of racism, the audience finds that whiteness safely remains at the core of her response to her skin color as well as the oppression she faces. But whiteness represents only a small albeit privileged subsection of the global population, and in the context of security this desire for the privileges of whiteness is a desire for exceptionalism. It is vital that Elphaba does not want to be accepted for being green, but to gain enough power to be not-green. This “exceptionalism paradoxically signals distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence,

superiority);” as she strives to be true to herself and to succeed, what she wants has everything to do with setting herself apart on her own terms. Desiring exceptionalism (as process instead of the state that Puar describes) involves acknowledging and tolerating existing conditions of inequality, violence, and oppression. An “exception” is a special case, one exempt from the traditional order. Indeed, Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of the state of exception depicts its rise to dominance in the twentieth century as heralding the end of a traditional order of meaningful democratic political action. Instead of desiring change, imagining improved conditions for everyone or even for many, the desire for exceptionalism is the hope for the maintenance of existing problems simultaneous with the hope for one’s own slipping out from under those problems (motivated and justified by some sort of “superiority”). The existing order is necessary as the foil against which one becomes distinct. Importantly, than, the desire for exceptionalism is a competitive and anti-political desire. More than longing for freedom from oppression, this is also the desire to win, to be good enough, superior enough, or important enough to attain special status. As such, exceptionalism is a proscribed freedom where winner takes all, its form infinitely amenable to capitalism. As a wish for victory desiring exceptionalism is also a desire to replace the oppressor, and thus also to dominate. When Elphaba, the relatable character of the first act, desires to be de-greened, her inviting otherness provides the means to reforge the longstanding connection between whiteness and American exceptionalism. Both Agamben and Puar note that while exceptionalism at first arises in response to real or manufactured emergency, in the 21st century it is an ever more expansive quotidian reality. While Agamben fears that the state of exception will convert

democratic into totalitarian states, the popularity of exceptionalism that I suggest here indicates instead that the risk is one of democratically supported and controlled states that are nonetheless violently hierarchical.

**Wicked’s Responses to Racism: Depoliticized Defiance versus Reluctant Policing**

**Depoliticized Defiance**

Close attention to three numbers reveals the shape of *Wicked’s* popular antiracism. The first, “Defying Gravity,” comes at the end of the first act. In it, Elphaba is both racialized and subjected to racism from a confluence of security forces (the militarized police), the people (who will respond with similar militancy), and marketing representations (through the Press Secretary’s role as chief marketer for the state). In the preceding scene, Elphaba and Glinda meet the Wizard of Oz and, discovering he is responsible for the torture of Animals, reject his suggested political alliance and run away. Shutting themselves into an attic, they bicker until the State’s marketing director Madame Morrible makes a publicity announcement to the nation:

“Citizens of Oz! There is an enemy that must be found and captured….Her green skin is but an outward manifestorium of her twisted nature.”

Morrible summons mass participation in the state’s policing, dependent upon Elphaba’s racialization. Morrible as the voice of the state goes on to literally define Elphaba as “the Wicked Witch” of the West, using Elphaba’s skin color to substantiate that definition. This is the first time on stage that anyone other than Elphaba herself makes an explicit connection between inherent nature and skin color, and it impact on the audience is as a specifically racist mischaracterization, a legibly unjust racial profiling. In other words, there is no mistaking this as a moment of racism. In this moment, Elphaba and Glinda

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85 *Wicked* typescript, I-14-68.
stop fighting, emphasizing the importance of their response to this moment. The remainder of the musical develops the differences between how these two characters respond to racism.

Elphaba’s response is taken up first by the musical, through the song “Defying Gravity” itself. Yet Elphaba is at first unmoved by this expression of racism; her political response must be drawn out by her friend Glinda. Upon hearing the attack, Glinda literally closes the distance between them, gasping and stepping over to hold Elphaba’s hand. Before she strokes it (immediately after Morrible says the words “her green skin”), there is a pause, a hesitation, in which Glinda distinctly looks down at Elphaba’s hand. With her clothes, hat, and hair blending into the smoky shadows of their attic hideout (which also serve to obscure the theatre machinery that will shortly make her fly), Elphaba’s green hands and face stands out boldly. After Glinda’s pause, she seems to consciously choose to touch Elphaba, and raises a brave face, chin protruding, towards the audience to comfort Elphaba with, “Don’t be afraid.”

Glinda demonstrates her individual unwillingness to give in to the popular (and now official) interpretation of her friend’s skin color; her moment of hesitation emphasizes the power of the associations Morrible calls on within the world of the play. Glinda is distinctly not struck by the absurdity of the associations between “green skin” and “evil”; rather she measures her friend as disconnected from those undoubtedly familiar associations. Glinda’s importance to the scene is emphasized: what is important is that she chooses to counteract these associations and hold her friend’s hand anyway. Yet she will not join Elphaba in her expression of defiance later in the scene. In a small action that, as we will see, foreshadows the second act, Glinda defines an appropriate liberal-individualist response to a moment of racism, in which both seeing her friend and speaking aloud her friendship (for Elphaba’s benefit, but also for an imagined audience of Ozians) is vital.
Elphaba’s response through a song of resistance importantly stems not from racism but from being asked to contradict her own ethical beliefs, and this political neutrality is part of Elphaba’s flexibility. And it is revealing that those beliefs that caused Elphaba to be subjugated are about helping Animals, who are (particularly in the novel on which the musical is loosely based) positioned as a kind of oppressed Other, and whose political suppression within the play motivates Elphaba’s character development. Here, her emphasis on the wrong done to the Animals is a permissive projection; she gives the audience permission to rage against the “real” oppression and consequently powerfully disavows the significance of racism. This song crafts Elphaba as the source of empowerment, but not of the power to resist the structural violence of the state.

“Defying Gravity,” then is a song of depoliticized defiance. Defiance is cast as an act of opposition; to defy is not just to renounce and stand in the face of, but also to “declare hostilities or war against,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. However, this usage demands a direct object, which absence in the song is covered by “gravity.” While “Defying Gravity” purportedly comes out of Elphaba’s confrontation with the Wizard, she is deliberately unspecific throughout the song about the direct object against which she is declaring these hostilities. With lyrics such as “I’m through with playing by the rules of someone else’s game,” she stands in the face of structures (rules) without naming their source (the Wizard). Indeed, a vague “someone” appears again early in the next stanza; this time the ambiguous figure is again imposing limits that Elphaba is “through accepting.” While she does name the Wizard at the very end of the song with the lyric “And nobody in all of Oz, no wizard that there is or was, is ever gonna bring me down!” the Wizard becomes unspecific through lyrical dehistoricization. “No Wizard that there

86 *Wicked* typescript, I-14-72.
“is or was” includes the current Wizard of Oz, but also anyone else, and indeed, that generic Wizard is linked to anybody “in all of Oz” who might pull her down. Through the rest of the song, however, the source of gravitational force, if you will, is a generic second person pronoun: “you.” With that unspecified “you,” Elphaba addresses the listener, implicating the audience amongst those that are holding her back, and thus firmly cements her character’s untouchably flexible power. No matter what any other character or the listener may do with her, Elphaba will always be able to defy it. Defiance then is infinitely malleable: it is a political strategy that also is not one because of this fluidity. Elphaba needs no specific, historically-grounded political project, because she is outside of the restrictions of history, is always already against. Any resistance supported by “defying gravity” is far too slippery to have any political ground on which to stand. And it is here where Elphaba also breaks with the audience even as she suggests depoliticization as the route to follow her, for the escape from the work of real world politics into defiant individualism is a forbidden fairy tale for liberalism.

Reluctant Policing

While Wicked might be best celebrated for the number “Defying Gravity,” two other numbers from the second act define the emotional appeal and political project of the show as a whole. The first, “Thank Goodness,” is the opening number of the second act and is rich with emotional ambivalence. In it we see a depiction of Glinda’s response to the previous scene’s moment of racism: while Glinda’s political choice was to work with the Wizard, she struggles to celebrate the complicated consequences of this decision. Glinda has become “Glinda the Good,” a more appealing voice than the imposing Press Secretary for marketing the Wizard’s regime. Glinda the Good encourages proper behavior, raises spirits, and spreads good feelings about the
state and appropriate bad feelings about the Wicked Witch of the West. Glinda’s main job, it seems, is to generate love for herself in the people of Oz.

Underneath her brave smile Glinda struggles with the way her public persona must conflict with her private sentiments. She sings about happiness, “’Cause getting your dreams/ it’s strange, but it seems/ a little—well—complicated/ There’s a kind of a sort of…cost/ There’s a couple of things get…lost [sic] / There are bridges you cross/ you didn’t know you’d crossed/ until you’ve crossed!” 87 The last line is one of the best of the show, sung with passionate disappointment, and a powerful vibrato that stunningly portrays vulnerable humanity.

Underneath the blonde superstar who is universally loved (the ideal American exceptional subject), there is a vulnerable human who is beginning to see the restrictions her past choices have placed on her current life, and regrets those choices even as she accepts responsibility for them. Here, instead of the glittering idealism (whether good or bad) of fiction that shapes the show before and after this point, is the ambivalence of reality: regret, vulnerability, mistakes. Such “realism” is why it is ultimately Glinda’s politics of assimilation and gradual change that are the heart of Wicked. This number is also where the show begins to substitute emotional identification with Elphaba for identification with Glinda. This song expresses the feelings we expect to hear from Elphaba (as it is Elphaba’s demise that is foregrounded at the opening of the show): uncertainty about the costs of the path chosen. It is noteworthy that we do not see Elphaba really struggle with this self-doubt and sadness. In place of Elphaba, whose depoliticized flexible appeal became the defining feature of her ultimate exclusion, Glinda hails a universalized humanity more amenable to liberalism.

87 Wicked typescript, II-1-78.
Made desirable and empathetic through this strong appeal to audience identification, one of Glinda’s main roles is to perpetuate the state’s narrative of Elphaba as terrorist, (“as terrifying as terror is…”88), a narrative which fuels the murderous popular racism and policing that Glinda is positioned as exceptionally against. While Glinda is uncomfortable with the state’s misrepresentations of Elphaba, she seems cognizant of neither the threat inherent in this response, nor, inexplicably, of her own participation in this violence. The violence is not exactly obscured: throughout the second act Elphaba’s loved ones are tortured and killed by the state as part of the attempt to reign in her political defiance. Glinda, as the state’s new marketing director, plays a significant role in this brutal repression. She overlooks the torture of Animals that Elphaba knows and/or cares for. She is also a facilitator, varyingy active and passive, in the rumors that plot Elphaba’s downfall. After Fiyero runs off with Elphaba for the first time, a heartbroken Glinda reluctantly suggests that the Wizard and Madame Morrible use Elphaba’s sister Nessarose against her. She is complicit in Nessa’s murder although she leaves the room before Morrible and the Wizard decide it will take place. And Glinda leads the state’s forces directly to Elphaba at the site of her sister’s murder, resulting in Fiyero’s capture and torture.

Throughout the second act we see Glinda engage in a guilt-ridden invocation of policing and security regimes as a strategy for her to profit and gain power under the Wizard’s employ. Glinda’s need for exceptionalism from the very security regime she supports is part of what enables and indeed demands this “reluctant policing.” For example, as Morrible gathers the militarized forces set on Elphaba’s death, Glinda suggests that she has “gone too far,”89 and then hints that she knows Morrible used her weather magic to murder Nessarose. Morrible replies, “The rest of Oz may have fallen for that ‘aren’t I good’ routine, but I know better. You wanted

88 Wicked typescript, II-1-74.
89 Wicked typescript, II-7-110.
this from the beginning! And now you’re getting what you wanted. So just smile, and wave, and shut up!”

A member of the mob quickly follows with a shout of, “Kill her!” The threat is clear: Glinda could just as well be the target of this violence as Elphaba. In order to survive, Glinda must be the one doing the policing.

Motivating Reluctant Policing: The Representation of the Oppressed

Cementing the significance of Glinda’s political response over Elphaba’s is the show’s final number, “For Good.” Despite the show’s initial emotional connection with the green witch, at the end of the musical Elphaba is forced out, and the bulk of audience relation is firmly shifted onto Glinda. The song “For Good,” the emotional climax of the musical, begins with Elphaba’s acknowledgement that her racial difference not only holds her back, but in fact has become the definitive feature of her lack of success in this world. She acknowledges Glinda’s racial superiority, opening the song with: “I’m limited/just look at me—I’m limited/ And just look at you--/ you can do all I couldn’t do.” Nonetheless, Glinda is inspired not to take political action against the racist terror state that oppresses Elphaba (much of which Glinda has in fact aided and abetted), but instead to celebrate their friendship for what it has brought her: moral and emotional fulfillment. Elphaba affirms this relation: in fact, she needs Glinda to maintain her position of power.

In the introduction to this song, Elphaba gives Glinda the special book of magic that only Elphaba can read. Magic is Elphaba’s natural skill, the talent that makes her valuable as well as threatening to the Wizard and the state, and that somehow no one else really has. It is thus intimately connected to her uniquely green skin; both these things mark her as extraordinary and as racially Other. But Elphaba’s inability to persist in the oppressive world of the play leads her

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90 Ibid.
91 Wicked typescript, II-8-114.
to not only gift the book to Glinda (who responds with the comic line, “you know I can’t read this”92), but to insist that Glinda take it up, that she learn to read it. Elphaba replies, seriously, “Because now it’s up to you/ For both of us— /Now it’s up to you.”93 She demands that Glinda take up the mantle of her special racial talent, because Glinda’s exceptional position will allow Glinda, as well as Elphaba’s legacy, to survive. If Glinda refuses, Elphaba’s gift will be wasted and no one will be left to remember her. With this parting gift Elphaba demands that Glinda maintain her position of power within the state, literally requiring Glinda to stand her ground in order to avoid Elphaba’s erasure.

Glinda reluctantly accepts the book and the imperative to power from Elphaba, but it is her decision to speak out that ultimately results in the overthrow of the Wizard and Morrible and her own ascent to power. In the final scene, after Elphaba’s “melting,” Glinda observes the green bottle that is left behind and deduces its significance. In the absurdly simplistic conclusion, Glinda uses her observation to make the Wizard emotionally vulnerable. At that point, all this coup requires is her decision to say that it will happen. Words take on authority now that she has Elphaba’s charge. Glinda simply says to the Wizard “I want you to leave Oz,” and he obeys. Similarly, she taunts Morrible with the threat of prison before simply saying, “Take her away!” The guards also obey.94 With Elphaba’s need uniquely empowering Glinda’s ability to both see and say, Glinda’s statements have incredible performative power. This is the ultimate apolitical white feminist action: consequences from discussing action, empowerment through having opinions. Throughout the course of the play, seeing something and saying something about it provides white Glinda with academic and career advancement, uniqueness, social security, and

92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., II-8-115.
94 Wicked typescript, II-8-120.
the authorization to stand her ground, while it simultaneously subjects Elphaba and the people and Animals she cares for to a regime of institutionalized violence and exclusion (including torture, enslavement, and murder). Yet Elphaba’s representational need, the need to not be erased, empowers Glinda even further.

The violent regime exiles Elphaba; she literally and figuratively goes underground (through the trapdoor used to simulate her melting), and then literally and figuratively exits the stage. In the process, the musical audience cries with Glinda but it does not leave with Elphaba (who exists first with Fiyero), cementing the temporariness and utilitarianism of identification with the racial Other. Glinda is left for the audience to identify with, and the audience is bonded to her because they share her mourning (which she cannot share with anyone else in the play, lest she break her vow and lose her capacity to represent Elphaba). Elphaba, the Other who was so strongly desired, is a disappearing figure, one who is mourned but not fought for, missed but not sought out. With the emotional weight of the immensely sentimentalized final number, this mourning is a highlight of the show. The pleasure of observing the inequitable distribution of security, of mourning (of missing, longing for), is far more valued than any of the work of their relationship, of the work for justice.

Using a pleasurable and emotional appeal for the representational needs of racial Others to drive an appropriate political action of “If You See Something, Say Something,” Wicked structures its popular audiences to participate in policing as they produce themselves as exceptional. This policing, however reluctant, demands controlled contact with, surveillance of, and authority over those who are regretfully seen as obstacles and enemies to the formation of fully realized American-exceptionalism. Indeed, Puar discusses the way that “surveillant
assemblages”95 craft populations of “exceptional militarized citizens.”96 But the archetypes Puar discusses for this relationship to surveillance are eager participants who already see themselves as exceptional; these “free patriot-citizen-soldiers”97 prepare themselves to lead in the militarization of day-to-day life. Wicked also militarizes reluctant liberal citizens in the name of the protection of the oppressed. Their unenthusiastic embrace of policing, surveillance, and security nonetheless motivates their struggle for exceptional political empowerment, for a unique exemption from the violence of the security regimes to which they subject others. Using exceptionalism and liberal antiracism to demand popular policing as political action, Wicked gives us a picture of how liberalism negotiates the contradictions between its purported progressive and antiracist ideals and the material consequences of the racial capitalism that it supports and depends on.

**Wicked's Marketing and “If You See Something, Say Something” As Popular Antiracism**

“If You See Something, Say Something” is a marketing campaign developed by New York advertising agency Korey Kay & Partners. After it was rejected by “the U.S. Departments of Justice and State, as well as the Office of Homeland Security,”98 the company shared the campaign with Adweek, and eventually sold it to New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).99 The MTA notes that the campaign, funded by the Department of Homeland Security “is a collaborative effort the MTA has undertaken with City, State and Federal governments to give MTA customers the means to join the police and MTA employees as

96 Ibid. 156.
97 Ibid. 157.
watchful partners, helping to ensure security within the transportation system.”

It spread: New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago begin using the phrase in 2005, in 2007 the US Coast Guard adopted it, and in 2008 Mike Daisey wrote a send up of the security state (performed at the Public) entitled If You See Something Say Something. By 2010, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under Secretary Janet Napolitano adopted the slogan in part because they felt it “reinforces the importance of state, local, tribal, territorial, and federal entities—including police chiefs and sheriffs” and because it “emphasizes the importance of the public reporting suspicious activities to local law enforcement.”

Critiques of the racializing surveillance inspired by the campaign are so well known that they are disavowed throughout the DHS’s materials. For example, in a document outlining the campaign and how the DHS can help local governments adopt it, there is a section reflecting such critiques called “Protecting Privacy, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties.” It proclaims “the ‘If You See Something, Say Something™’ campaign respects civil rights and civil liberties by emphasizing suspicious behaviors and indicators, rather than appearance, in identifying suspicious activity.”

Yet what behavior is perceived as out-of-place is informed by subjective assessments of what behavior is appropriate and for whom. This, as evidenced by the history of disproportionate observing or policing of people of color (as well as queer people, trans people

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101 Riggs, “Ten Years.”
104 Ibid.
and women, poor people and the homeless, and people who are Muslim), is clearly racialized, informed by and informing racial hierarchies and racist stereotypes. And beyond expanding popular support for racialized surveillance, “If You See Something, Say Something” also participates in white supremacist structures through its support for other racializing security institutions, such as by expanding the legitimacy and purview of “law enforcement” and other “officials.”

“If You See Something, Say Something” emphasizes the same kind of mass participation in policing that, as discussed above, liberalism uses to negotiate and maintain hierarchies of capital. It reproduces a popular supplement to a police practice which vastly disproportionately targets people of color, which emphasizes the protection of bourgeois lifestyle including domestic security and private property, and which works for the warehousing of and extraction of wealth from the poor and unemployed.105 “If You See Something, Say Something” as a popular campaign participates in racial hierarchization in two ways: first, by encouraging surveillance in a way that enhances the popular policing of people of color as suspicious; and second, by enhancing technologies and institutions of white supremacy by supporting the spread of and popular support for surveillance technologies and the power of police and state authorities. It does not invent but reinforces the contemporary police as a popular force by compelling civilians to surveille, act on that surveillance, and support the institutionalization of policing and surveillance with the dogmatism of protecting their own interests and quotidian practices.

While the previous two sections conducted an in-depth analysis of Wicked in performance, its relations are present in and reinforced through even the simplest visual

representation meant to encapsulate the show as a whole: a branded marketing image. An analysis of one such widely-circulated marketing image reveals the same dynamics of “If You See Something, Say Something” as popular antiracism.

![Figure 3: Advertisement for Wicked](image)

In the image in Figure 2 the green woman is centered,¹⁰⁶ which might indicate her centering in the story. But she is in fact not the figure of attention; being centered in the image makes her appear more balanced, while the eye is drawn to the figure in white on the right as unbalanced and thus standing out. The figure in white is in action, which also draws attention to her. Although the viewer cannot see her speak, the hand hiding her lips and the orientation of her head towards the central figure indicates that she is in the process of whispering a secret. While the green figure’s skin could just as well be empty (a black outline or an invisible figure in front

¹⁰⁶ As the advertisement refers to the two protagonists of Wicked, fictional characters who are gendered within the plot, I use gendered pronouns “she, her, hers” to refer to these figures here.
of a green background), the figure on the right is distinctively Caucasian. As surveillance studies scholar John Fiske argued, “today’s seeing eye is white.”107 Her eye (the only eye in the ad) looks not at the green figure but off into the distance. The color matches both the green girl and the ad’s background, suggesting two things on top of the traditional association between green and jealousy. First, the green eye suggests that her vision is overwhelmed by their surroundings. She can see those surroundings, and also is a significant observer of their surroundings, their social and physical contexts. The reflected greenness (the background color echoed and amplified in her eye) indicates that she is wide-eyed, taking in these surroundings with intelligence and also wonder. It also suggests that her inner nature is the same as the outer nature of the green figure. The eye, which gazes as much as it is a window to the soul, is part of what makes this figure active within the image. The actions she takes (observing and whispering, seeing and saying) suggest a rich inner life for this figure, one that deserves to be listened to.

On the other hand, the central green figure does the listening. Her passive status is reinforced by the echoed image of her dotting the “i” in the title text “Wicked.” While a person cannot realistically be in two places at once, the viewer eye sees multiples of this green figure, each an incomplete depiction of who she is. Furthering this sense that she is not a coherent whole, her eyes seem to be covered by her hat. The lack of eyes for the figure indicates that she is closed-off and cannot see; she is not open to the possibilities that are visible around her. She waits to hear what may come, and responds with the slight smile on her boldly red lips. Indeed, without eyes she depends on an external informant for information about the world. The whisper in her ear then, is a necessary antidote to her different (and, because sight is the privileged sense in particular for theatre, “reduced”) ability. She cannot see, and thus cannot say, so someone else

107 Fiske, “Surveilling the City,” 69.
must do so for her. This being-subject-to-action is further emphasized by the movement in the green figure’s hair; on the left-hand side of the image a wind buffets her hair and perhaps also her hat. As the only red object in the scene these lips grab the viewer’s attention, indicating the importance of that smile to the image and the situation it depicts as a whole. The action in the image is motivated around and by that smile; its desirability is emphasized by its red color. The white figure whispers to win it; the green figure waits to grant it.

The image shows an active, complex white woman and the almost-passive, mysterious, identityless recipient of her whispers. What is most striking about the ad, however, is its color schema. The green figure, the precise color of the background and thus essentially colorless, is carefully cornered in by blackness, which is itself restricted by whiteness. Whiteness and blackness leave space for greenness, the space out of which an image of a figure can emerge. The green figure is contentless, delineated only by these other colors, literally substantiated by her surroundings. And by being green like the background, she seems to be naturally connected to her environment. She does not need to see and take in the world the way the green eye does because she is more genuinely real and connected to the world; she is part of the environment and cannot act. The contemporaneous connection between “green” and environmentalism and ecology amplifies this connection. Rather, she is part of what must be secured by popular security practice, the desirable and distinguishing feature of the white figure’s environment.

As Wicked reveals, “If You See Something, Say Something” would be impossible without a relation of racial surveillance and liberal exceptionalism, wherein those in power must surveille, represent, and ultimately replace those who are oppressed. This dynamic compels, however reluctantly, the mass participation on which the form depends. To appeal to its liberal bourgeois audience, Wicked drew from a post-9/11 US feeling of insecurity reflected in this
campaign, as well as from the continued significance of “antiracism [as] a nationally recognized social value.” The result is a popular antiracism in which bourgeois security and liberal exceptionalism are crafted as the appropriate political action by which to resolve racial oppression and defend the state. This structure was widely disseminated both by the Department of Homeland Security and the extremely popular musical, albeit in significantly different ways.

**Conclusion: Building and Enforcing US Security Infrastructures across the Globe**

The point here is that “If You See Something, Say Something” as popular antiracism is a unifying force of the US Popular Security Regime, ranging from producing popular participation in policing and counterterrorism on US soil, to generating mass participation in US counterinsurgency agendas abroad. It operates as a popular antiracist force through a representational imperative by which the motivation for participation in policing that overcomes liberalism’s reluctant engagement of violence is the preservation of a more vulnerable “Other,” of liberal values, and ultimately of one’s own exceptionalized life. Through this popular performance, the security institutions of the state, including military-based interventions and foreign policy, brings themselves into being. While widely distributed, popular security forces are not solely constituted by popular culture, however oppressive its politics. The structure and affinities of “If You See Something, Say Something” also functioned across other twenty-first century security forms and practices, which engaged with this popular antiracism through much more expansive institutional formations. Taking up the connections between liberal exceptionalism, speaking for oppressed others, and popular security depicted in *Wicked*, I turn back to US counterinsurgency policy to demonstrate the broadest scale at which the US and increasingly global liberal bourgeoisie utilizes “If You See Something, Say Something” as

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popular antiracism. Parallels between the US’s contemporary “irregular warfare” and *Wicked’s* antiracist political practice demonstrate the continued significance of liberal bourgeois gatekeepers for maintaining racial capitalism, even as such a political-economic/racial class formation takes increasingly globalized, neoliberal form.

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**Figure 4: Components of US Counterinsurgency Strategy**

Because it is about building the legitimacy of the existing order, COIN relies on gathering information, but depends as much on controlling the population through the information it disseminates. Conceived as “influence,” this information should shape “opinions among several different population groups,” including the US people, the affected government, and the people within the affected nation.\textsuperscript{110} The COIN Guide describes a totalizing picture: “The influence strategy must cascade down from a set of strategic narratives from which all messages and actions should be derived….Messages and actions must address the ideological, social, cultural, political, and religious motivations that influence or engender a sense of common interest and identity among the affected population and international stakeholders.” Of course the COIN Guide eventually also notes that “influence” strategy should also counter insurgent ideology in order to undermine them and to “deny them popular support and sanctuary.”\textsuperscript{111} This totalizing manipulation of information is clearly a far larger project than to take apart insurgency; it is about spreading US influence in every arena of life within the affected nation in order to generate “common interest and identity” between non-US populations and US-shaped political ideals within non-US governments.

Insurgency and counterinsurgency, as the new yet “irregular” warfare, are actually centrally about the US’s control of appropriate political action within other non-US states. The COIN Guide does this work by establishing the control of populations (rather than, for example, inter-governmental relations) as the appropriate site of political and military engagement. Insurgency is defined as “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region;” and insurgents struggle in order to “establish a

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 20.
competitive system of control over the population.”¹¹² Counterinsurgency, then, is a “comprehensive civilian and military” process.¹¹³ Violence is necessary on both sides, but it only serves to create space for each side’s “political, economic and influence activities to be effective,” that is, to work on the masses, to do popular projects. Neither protecting nor resulting from populations, but rather convincing and reaching them (with, of course, the right message) is the motive force for US counterinsurgent intervention, the source of the demand for the violences of contemporary “irregular warfare.”¹¹⁴

Through this establishment of insurgency and counterinsurgency as society-wide concerns, the COIN Guide positions most of the people of any particular nation as responsible for the success of insurgencies, even when they are not actively participating in those movements. For example, it notes that insurgencies only need a population’s “passive acquiescence” or their capacity to be manipulated through “religious, tribal, or local identity” or around “common societal grievances or needs”¹¹⁵ in order to win. This is the beginning of its contemporary racial project, the grounds through which the divide between “combatant” and “civilian” is bridged as I will explore more later. The COIN Guide hails the popular in order to position those people as not just potential enemies, but as active enemies, paradoxically made so even through their inactions. The only behavior that is not insurgency is thus actively-pursued counterinsurgent activity. The logic that structures the guide, though not often explicit and occasionally disavowed, is that a member of the populace is insurgent at all times except when actively in the process of demonstrating their loyalty to the United States. This definition spreads

¹¹² Ibid., 6.
¹¹³ Ibid., 12.
¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2.
the practice of both insurgency and counterinsurgency to every corner of everyday life, and requires constant active pro-US politics in order to not become an enemy. In addition to creating counterinsurgency as the *only* option for non-participation in insurgency, the guide works insurgency and counterinsurgency into everyday life by asserting the existence of interpersonal networks of insurgency (what we might consider social networks), which are understood to be constantly expanding and contracting to potentially include any number of the population.\(^\text{116}\) It also redefines any scale of political practice as unambiguously dangerous, asserting that insurgency develops through any of a variety of stages which include popular unrest and civil disobedience. The very existence of non-US sociality and political expression, regardless of their character, are risks to the United States.

Finally, the *COIN Guide* creates the broadest reach for its projects by delegitimizing any rationality for opposition: unlike “the more renowned insurgencies of the 20th Century”\(^\text{117}\) that “were often motivated by Marxism”\(^\text{118}\) and “led by university educated ‘intellectual elites,’”\(^\text{119}\) contemporary insurgencies are “more complex matrices of irregular actors”\(^\text{120}\) with conflicting interests that typically follow no uniform ideology. Both the ideology and the actors involved are so broad as to be indeterminable. At the same time these limitless counterinsurgents have no connection to real concerns. The *COIN Guide* is careful to both distinguish the “basic wants, needs and grievances of the population”\(^\text{121}\) as possibly having “little to do with” the ideology of insurgents, and to note that insurgents are likely to be motivated by profit, connections with


\(^{117}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{118}\) Ibid.

\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) Ibid.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 7.
organized crime or general criminality, and petty local histories (of conflict, interpersonal hatreds, and tribal rivalries).\textsuperscript{122} Overall, we can see the scale of the ideological project of counterinsurgency: insurgency and counterinsurgency infiltrate all arenas of life, and a population that is not actively counterinsurgent is both responsible for the insurgency (because it is not actively counterinsurgent), and its participation in insurgency is in no way based on legitimate concerns or in moral or ethical ground that would allow anyone to reasonably support them.

While these selections demonstrate how the \textit{COIN Guide} generates the broadest potential impact for US ideology, its main project is to legitimate the global dissemination of certain US political structures, and in the process to secure the dominance of the US’s political practice. This becomes clear in particular when the apparent binary between local insurgency and US/international state-military counterinsurgency efforts is expanded to include the third interest group in the equation, what the \textit{COIN Guide} calls the “affected government.” This is “the government threatened by a nascent or active insurgency” that is also “the most important actor in COIN.”\textsuperscript{123} It is here where the major projects of “counterinsurgency” actually intervene: getting the affected government to adopt an appropriate political order.

If shifting popular support for an affected government’s political practices are the US’s goal, it is liberal democracy that is at stake. In “Chapter Four: Assessment and Planning,” the authors lay out general policy for deciding if and how to participate in COIN efforts. Prevalent among the factors to consider are the character of the government (including its level of bias and corruption but emphasizing its likelihood of becoming seen as legitimate and in particular its

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 6-7.
“democratic and responsible”\textsuperscript{124} nature), the extent of the rule of law, the government’s capacity to respond to terrorist groups, and its border security. It emphasizes that a safe country that can effectively resist insurgency is one with “an effective strategy for border security, [and the] reduction of ungoverned space.”\textsuperscript{125} It also notes that a good country will be able to handle terrorist groups, and have “robust, transparent and effective rule of law systems…including judiciary and legislative processes, court and prison systems, police, prosecutors, defense attorneys and legal record-keeping systems.”\textsuperscript{126} While this list is meant to indicate warnings that a country will be difficult to help, it is soon also clearly identified as a list of goals, indicators that a government does not, in fact, need external assistance with counterinsurgency. It is particularly these indicators of lack of “human security”\textsuperscript{127} (border security, “justice” institutions, and appropriate anti-terrorism activity) that are themselves the source of the problem that justifies US intervention. In addition to establishing the US’s political authority and determining the appropriate global order, the US also utilizes counterinsurgency to establish its security regime abroad, not through direct colonization but by manipulating atrocities and revolutions to generate popular support US-based justice systems.

The \textit{COIN Guide} notes ominously that if an affected government can effectively perform what the US requires of it regarding containing an insurgency, international support “will usually be consensually withdrawn.”\textsuperscript{128} Of course, the guide also disavows the US’s political interests by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} United States Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, \textit{US Government Counterinsurgency Guide}, 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 17-18.
  \item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 16.
\end{itemize}
occasionally proclaiming the existence of the affected government’s sovereignty. Yet it also references throughout the potential for conflict between the desires of the affected government and the United States. For example, at one point it notes “Any sovereign government may exercise its autonomy in ways that are in opposition to U.S. interests. A quandary may arise between the U.S.’s desire to reach the end-state (a fully functional, independent and legitimate nation state) and its protection of the very U.S. interests which prompted engagement in the first place.” Here, the authors are careful to end the paragraph, leaving the point hanging as they move on to another topic. After taking the explicit stance that sovereignty and autonomy exist for the affected government, the guide reveals that US international interests are what ultimately drive counterinsurgent interventions. At the same time, by raising this “quandary” but not following through on it, the guide effectively cautions decision makers to avoid this outcome at all costs. What is unwritten yet implied here is that counterinsurgency should ensure it does not produce states that function against US interests.

Indeed, it is vital for the politics of counterinsurgency that the non-US states adopt US ideals. Not just acquiescence but enthusiastic participation is required: an affected government that has “the desire to do only the minimum necessary to defeat an insurgency before returning to business as usual” would directly contradict the “intervening government’s [ie: the US’s] aspiration for wholesale reform and institution building to prevent a recurrence of unrest.” The guide conceives of US and other international interventions, whether military, political, or

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129 Ibid., 4, 26, 30, 50. Of course, if this US government document proclaims another government’s sovereignty it is at the same time asserting and establishing the US’s own symbolic authority as the designator of appropriate sovereignties. This observation is an effective analogy for the Guide as a whole.
131 Ibid., 29-30.
economic, to be demanded by the affected government, and for the affected government to appropriately perform this role of taking-up US-designated appropriate politics: “Effective COIN therefore requires that the major effort is (and is seen by the local population to be) led by the indigenous government. Under ideal conditions, foreign forces do not operate independently of the affected government, nor are political, economic or other development assistance activities undertaken except at the request of the affected government.”¹³² In the ideal situation the affected government collaborates from the very beginning to develop correct counterinsurgent strategy,¹³³ and the major challenges to successful counterinsurgency come from an affected government that has “lack of will, incapacity or counter-productive behavior.”¹³⁴ However, “not all COIN interventions will have the full consent of the affected government,”¹³⁵ and “real world conditions are never ideal.”¹³⁶ Indeed, the Guide is careful to indicate that those governments who most need help are least likely to be those that appropriately participate in the correct politics required to defeat counterinsurgency and keep it from reoccurring. The language used for this connection is revealing: “Effective, legitimate governments that meet the needs of their people and are capable of managing internal security threats are, almost by definition, unlikely to require external COIN assistance.” This quote sets up any government that doesn’t operate according to COIN standards to be both ineffective and illegitimate, and the inability and inappropriateness of their rule is linked both to liberal humanism and to militarized securitization against threats. This is not an arbitrary connection to liberalism. Later on the same page the guide suggests three out of four of the indicators of a state’s legitimacy are liberal ideals: its stance on

¹³³ Ibid., 4.
¹³⁴ Ibid., 29.
¹³⁵ Ibid., 13.
¹³⁶ Ibid., 29; this quote explicitly refers to the ideal participation of the affected government.
human rights and “fundamental freedoms,” its responsiveness to citizens’ opinions, and its “reasonable limits on the power of government over individual rights.” The Guide goes on to make the dominance of US interests more explicit, noting that the non-ideal governments that actually need COIN assistance also need to be persuaded (or in some cases, co-opted or pressured) into such assistance, fully undermining any earlier assertions that counterinsurgency takes place with the consent of the affected government. With the US positioned as the decider of what political economic institutions are appropriate, its major intervention is not so much what is decided, but how.

The US uses its brute military power to force non-consenting governments to participate in this arrangement. By positioning itself as always justified in/capable of intervening militarily, and as not always willing to intervene, the US wields a double threat against any other state: if the non-US state doesn’t follow the correct politics it risks US militarized and political intervention despite its consent, or it risks not getting international support for its own agendas. At the same time, any government that operates with any support from its people risks the US significantly shaping popular opinion in an attempt to not just create US policies but to instill the popular means to recreate them well into the future.

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137 Ibid., 29.
Conclusion: Future Directions for Material Antiracist Political Economic Practice

“For those of us who were imprinted with fear like a faint line in the center of our foreheads learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk for by this weapon the illusion of some safety to be found the heavy-footed hoped to silence us For all of us this instant and this triumph We were never meant to survive.”¹

“Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness, and this is not only a matter of relative freedom or control. For practical consciousness is what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex.”²

If race is a field, racism is its hierarchization (which explicitly governs group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death), and the field struggles over the power to make such groups. Antiracisms, as much as I have often felt the concept to be a radical political term like “feminisms,” are simply non-dominant positions in the field (again like feminisms). This basic reframing of the field, along with Melamed’s critique of state-sanctioned antiracist projects that serve capitalism, really opens up the study of cultural objects even as it preserves the opportunity to think of antiracism as a potentially vital political intervention.

Through this reframing of the field, musical theatre is a remarkable object of study, in particular for the way it traffics in such significant positions on what kind of antiracism we should do. As I investigated these shows (and others which have not made the cut), they revealed remarkable things as structures-in-solution. I was pleased and surprised to see that my sense of

what was off, distasteful, unpleasant, oppressive, and remarkably white about these shows was grounded in extremely significant political processes of which theatrical production was a major part. It is not simply that these plays support antiracist politics that are mediocre. It is that each show is designed, from individual lines within songs, to plot and character development and resolution, to structure, to emotional impact, in a way that reflects particular political stances with extremely high stakes. These shows are uniquely quiet but nonetheless vital parts of contemporaneous circulating discourses. And their political stances are indeed taken up and reflected in the reception and circulation of these works and beyond.

These liberal popular antiracisms have done a significant amount of redistributive labor not just through the circulation of these shows. These antiracisms reflect political practice of their time that is distinctly not bounded by the audiences who have seen, say, *Wicked*, and accurately read all of the nuance and details that I read within the structure of the show. The audience does not and need not process the meanings of these shows with the same depth I have done here for their political projects to be meaningful. Because of the distinctly powerful liberal bourgeois mechanisms of disavowal, theatre is essential as the object of cultural study here. By looking at the Department of Homeland Security’s or the MTA’s “If You See Something, Say Something”™ campaign alone, we do not get the full picture of the processes and institutions of racialization (and its attendant distribution of resources) that are part of it. We might be able to see how white people are encouraged to surveille and police the behavior of brown people on the New York City subway, but it is not evident how that formulation actually functions to require, for example, Pakistani people to surveille and police other Pakistani people and reproduce the US’s racial class divisions via counterinsurgency. Because it is not that these shows invented and fully contain the messages “My Black Friend,” “Postracism,” or “Everyone’s A Little Bit
Racist,” but rather that they reflect these political practices by containing examples of them simultaneous with their disavowals.

Overall, theatre is an essential object of cultural study for understanding racial capitalism’s persistence today, and the bourgeois gatekeeping that makes possible the continued differential distribution of material resources: the extremely linked resources of economic capital (as chapters 1 and 2 focus on) and vulnerability (or not) to premature death (as chapters 3 and 4 focus on). This dissertation has been an opportunity to practice the study of racial capitalism driven by abolitionist feminism. I have shown the vital need for, as well as the “how” of, thinking of capital as racial capital, in particular for musical theatre scholars. And I have revealed what has been missing without this critique: the political-economic and racist impact of these shows in the world. Ultimately this points to a critique of class-based (and I do mean racial class) political practice with which musical theatre audiences are entwined that is in conversation with other critics of liberal participation in capitalism in a way that should be developed further.

Theatre’s Political Promise and Limitations

I find it impossible to be a Bourdieuan and not to find the political potential of the theatre enticing. After all, if Bourdieu paints for us how power is relational, the theatre is a space that at first seems to uniquely permit disruptions in the extant order of relations. Humans are social actors who are constantly structured and structuring, and through that there is immense promise in theatrical practice. On and through the stage, people are encouraged to abandon their habitus and experiment with new positions in the social order. But theatre is itself a set of social relations, not neutral, but structured according to hierarchies that unfortunately reflect the shape of racial capitalism. As an institution, an accumulated set of habitual practices that take a consistent shape over time, theatre gains capital from and invests capital in its own solidified
practices, expectations, and norms. One of these institutional limitations includes theatre’s capacity for novelty, for challenging the artistic and social order.

As I have worked through this project at numerous conferences, in seminars, and at other presentations of this work I am regularly confronted with the question: Why should we expect anything other than racial capitalism from Broadway? In short: so what? Although I acknowledge that there is no outside to racial capitalism and thus appreciate the cynicism of this critique, it nonetheless creates a false binary within the realm of cultural production. By dismissing Broadway itself as the source of the problem, such critiques turn to other sources of cultural production with the hope of salvation. Yet it is difficult to name what anti-capitalist theatre might look like, because there is no convenient outside to racial capitalism. Instead of seeking which form of theatrical production can “solve” or be excepted from racial capitalism, I suggest that one of the strengths of analyzing Broadway musicals is that they serve as a clear model for critiquing the role of cultural production in racial capitalism in the first place, which is always conflicted, a repository as well as a final resting place of hope for change. This is not to suggest that all cultural production is necessarily bad. But making theatre is not the same as making politics, and, as David Savran delicately and passionately reminds us, “can lead to real political and economic change only through the most impossibly tortuous of routes.”

Broadway theatre obscures the institutionalization of theatre’s norms because works that are successful there mostly conform to them. This is not, however, a critique of the “commercial theatre” but of a characteristic of contemporary theatrical production as a whole; we see theatre’s self-limitations of transformational politics as much on Broadway as in self-declared “political,” avant-garde, and/or experimental productions such as those on off-off Broadway, at regional

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theatres, or in museums or other sanctified spaces of “art.” Theatre’s institutions have solidified to contain its own revolutionary potential safely to the stage. For this reason, intention in theatrical production is not a useful indicator of transformational potential. As well intentioned and even revolutionary artists, we do not merely strive to do the best, most political theatre we can. Even when innocently aiming for transformation, we do so within a set of structures, and without explicit and directed opposition to them we will end up reproducing them.

Working from racial capitalism as the governing order of the field of US political economy does much to illuminate the ideological and social historical context of the turn of millennium. I have traced one project of New York Times theatre critics deployed around August Wilson and three musicals (Avenue Q, Hairspray, and Wicked) as sites of struggle within this field of racial capitalism, and the positions and capital that the liberal bourgeoisie maintained or gained from these struggles.

This study is ultimately about bourgeois gatekeeping and the performance and practice of class (an always already racial class) as a phenomenon in racial capitalism, with a particular focus on the liberal bourgeoisie of theatre and its role in the formation of social structures. It goes beyond a critique of white behavior or whiteness studies, to discuss class behavior as a whole. This class struggled over the defining antiracism in order to delineate appropriate political behavior and shape popular political practice. With the New York Times and the work of August Wilson, I demonstrate how this class used negotiations in symbolic power to defend the practice of economic distribution away from black theatre companies and black theatrical productions. Through Avenue Q I reveal how this class defines and defends consumption as political practice; through Hairspray, I explore how this class permitted political action beyond consumption in the case of the 2008 presidential elections, but only on the terms of support for the Democratic party.
candidate. Finally, I look at how US security structures the popular participation in and production of this exceptional class itself through *Wicked’s* representational imperatives.

**Future Research Directions**

I hope that this work contributes to musical theatre studies, and also illuminates how attention to musical theatre can expand the scope and stakes of the field of theatre studies more broadly. On the one hand, I think that the arguments presented here can help illuminate the trajectory of a work such as *Hamilton*, which similarly traffics in the appeals of popular antiracisms and liberal bourgeois political practice. While the work is, like the musicals examined here, still freshly making meaning, one hint of its material consequences and investments comes in its impact on the US ten-dollar bill. While Harriet Tubman was lined up to soon replace Alexander Hamilton on the $10 bill, “Hamilton received added support after the breakout hit of the Lin-Manuel Miranda musical ‘Hamilton,’ a hip-hop biography of the first Treasury secretary that is one of Broadway’s biggest sensations in years…After a visit to Washington last month, Miranda himself assured his anxious fans that [Treasury Secretary Jack] Lew told him he would be ‘very happy’ with the new $10. ‘#wegetthejobdone,’ Miranda tweeted.”

While Tubman will eventually appear on the $20, it is no coincidence that *Hamilton’s* heralded multicultural success is literally strengthening the whiteness of the dollar. On the other hand, I hope my methodological approach, abolitionist feminist attention to the material relations of racial class uniquely activated by the problems of Broadway, can help shape theatre studies as a whole to more careful attention to racial capitalism.

**Materialist Antiracism for the Theatre**

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It has been almost entirely impossible to write a “hopeful” conclusion, to write any of this at all, when faced with the blood-soaked body of yet another black person murdered by the police, and the scant material remains of yet another human condemned without trial and executed or collaterally damaged by US military intervention abroad, particularly drone attack. What good is any of theatre’s “hope” in the face of this? What does a decade and a half of increasingly diverse and multicultural theatre leading to the phenomenal success of *Hamilton* mean for Mya Hall, Shante Issac, Sandra Bland, Meagan Hockaday, Natasha McKenna, Alexia Christian, India Beaty, Janisha Fonville, Janet Wilson, Sahlah Ridgeway, Kisha Michael, Patricia Kruger, Bettie Jones, Jessica Nelson-Williams, Darnell Wicker, Jamarian Rashad Robinson, Jawari Porter, Earl Pinckney, DeMarco Newman, Korryn Gaines, Paul O’Neal, Dalvin Collins, Devon Martes, Richard Risher, Austin Jerry Lee Howard, Gavin Eugene Long, Orville Edwards, Jason Brooks, Joseph Mann, Alva Burnett Braziel, Andre Johnson, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Jai Lateef Solveig Williams, Kawme Dejuan Patrick, Lafayette Evans, Tyrone Reado, Sherman Evans, Donte L. Johnson, Germichael Kennedy, Ismael Miranda, Angelo Brown, Jay Anderson, Deravis Caine Rogers, Quencezola Maurice Splunge, Isaiah Core, Rashaun Lloyd, Antwun Shumpert, Michael Moore, John Williams, Lyndarius Cortez Witherspoon, John Michael Brisco, Willis N. Walker, Henry Green, Demarco Rhymes, Rodney Rodriguez Smith, Willie Demetrius James, Michael Johnson, Osee Calix, Devonte Gates, Doll Pierre Louis, Vernell Bing, Michael Eugene Wilson Jr., Joshua Beebee, Kentrill William Carraway, Jabril Robinson, Sean Ryan Mondragon, Arthur DaRosa, Jaffort Smith, Lionel Gibson, Alton Fitzgerald Witchard, Ronald D. Williams, Deresha Armstrong, Burt Johnson, Charlin Charles, Ashtain Barnes, Kendar del Rosario, Joshua Brooks, Willie Tillman, Demarcus Semer, Jorevis Scruggs, Demetrius Dorsey, Rico Don Rae Johnson, Edson Thevenin, George Tillman, Richard

Maulana Noor Saeed, Mullah Akhtar Mansou, or Mohammed Azam? And what good is theatre to all those whose names I cannot document here because they were killed by less spectacular excesses of racial capitalism: overwork, increased risk, stress, lack of care including lack of meaningful health care, lack of substantive agency in their lives, environmental destruction, and in general the substitution of mass produced junk for the real requirements of quotidian survival? What kind of art are their lives worth?

We know that art enriches us. Or, to flip the argument and emphasize what really matters in it: a just and peaceful post-revolution world certainly has art in it, has the richness of life for everyone that is the condition of possibility for “art,” most broadly conceived. So I want to be clear that this is not against art, not against theatre production, but rather a demand for those conditions of possibility first and foremost. This is a symbolic centering of the end of racism within the conversations of what kind of art we should make, vital because the sidelining of racism as “not the real issue” or “not the real question” is a constitutive feature of what prevents the end of racial capitalism. Before we can even begin to ask “how can we make exceptional theatre that brings racial justice into being?” we must address theatre’s existing role in the material conditions by which the murder of black and brown people is seen as not only necessary but just, but required. We must do so even though theatre’s role is disavowed and obscured, or especially because its role is disavowed and obscured. Addressing and dismantling theatre’s

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6 This list includes people killed by US drone strikes in Pakistan since May 14, 2014, during the duration of writing this dissertation. While Pakistan and Yemen, among other countries, have been the site of focused attention from US security and military, statistics collected by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism through the Naming the Dead Project only address Pakistan since 2004. “Naming the Dead: People database,” last modified May 21, 2016, accessed on July 1, 2016, [https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/namingthedead/the-dead/page/147/?sorted-by=oldest-to-newest&gender=any&location=any&reported_status=any&lang=en%3B](https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/namingthedead/the-dead/page/147/?sorted-by=oldest-to-newest&gender=any&location=any&reported_status=any&lang=en%3B).
complicity in liberal bourgeois gatekeeping, the distribution of capital and thus also of life and
death, is the condition of possibility for its redemption.
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