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Redefining America, Arena Stage, and Territory Folks in a Multiracial *Oklahoma!*

Donatella Galella

Branded “the largest theater in the country dedicated to American plays and playwrights,” Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., is an ideal site for studying the negotiation of race and American identity.¹ The nation’s capital lends its symbolic power to the theatre for its dedication to US work and position as the first local professional resident company. In 2010, to celebrate the regional theatre’s sixtieth anniversary and its new theatre complex, artistic director Molly Smith opened the season with perhaps the most “American” of musicals, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* It became the highest-grossing initial-run production in the company’s history. It won rave reviews and four local Helen Hayes awards, including Best Resident Musical. The selection and success of this musical helped to distinguish Arena as a home for US theatre. Yet, it was Smith’s multiracial directorial approach, I contend, that worked to engage audiences, redefine America and Arena, and reverberate with the optimism of symbolic racial progress, as well as with the dangers of colorblindness and neoliberal multiculturalism. I invoke this term from Jodi Melamed, who argues that twenty-first-century US neoliberal practices and multiculturalist literature obscure racial hierarchy and normalize violence by mobilizing capitalist logics of competition and fairness.² Through Smith’s approach, this *Oklahoma!* provides rich opportunities for understanding the ways that multiracial theatre production and consumption uphold, challenge, and transform racial-national structures. Staged in the nation’s capital, *Oklahoma!* resonates with the racial triumphalism and transcendence of Barack Obama’s presidency; at the same time, however, the multiracial casting obscures historic and continuing material inequality. By producing this classic musical with a multiracial cast, Arena staged a production of *whose* American voices may sing and under *what* conditions. The produc-

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I am grateful to the editorial staff of *Theatre Journal* and to my mentors and comrades at The Graduate Center/CUNY for their support. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the ATHE conference in Washington, D.C., in 2012, the Harvard–Princeton Musical Theater Forum at The Graduate Center/CUNY in 2013, and the Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth College in 2014.

¹“About Arena Stage,” available at <http://www.arenastage.org/about/>.

²Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

tion articulated power dynamics at the crossroads of race and nation at a time when post-racial projects increasingly co-opt representations of interracial harmony to deny the salience of racial hierarchy and eclipse widening disparities.

Often hailed as the first “integrated” musical, *Oklahoma!* indexes the golden age³ of American musicals, roughly the late 1920s through the ’60s, and performs US identity. The musical is based on the play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, written in 1930 by Lynn Riggs, a playwright of Cherokee and European descent who dramatized mixed-race characters and an ambivalent ending. For the musical, which premiered in 1943, Rodgers and Hammerstein turned the narrative into a celebration of nationhood through the union of romantic couples, farmers and cowmen, and the Indian and Oklahoma territories. The libretto mainly deals with Laurey choosing between cowboy Curly and farmhand Jud to take her to the box social.

The Arena Stage production went further than typically all-white-cast productions of *Oklahoma!* to encourage a multiracial reading and challenge assumptions about who lived on the frontier and, by implication, who comprises the nation today. As an example of what Jill Dolan calls “utopian performatives,” this production illustrated how exhortations for togetherness can map onto calls for racial diversity, equality, and eradication of identity lines that alienate individuals.⁴ According to Dolan, imagining utopia as a “what if” “allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that’s always, itself, in process.”⁵ Because Smith and her creative team asked “what if” and wanted the racial makeup of the nation to be reflected in the cast and therefore the new Arena Stage, their *Oklahoma!* featured a racially diverse ensemble and principals. Black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, and mixed-race performers made up nearly half the cast. Laurey and Aunt Eller were played by black actresses and Curly by a white Latino–Native American actor, while Jud, Will, and Ado Annie were played by white actors and Ali Hakim by a South Asian. Sensitive to stereotypes, the creative team made these casting choices carefully and provoked spectators to read and reframe the territory folks both racially and temporally. Throughout this essay, I invoke “territory folks” because of the connotations of unstable positioning and Hammerstein’s lyrics in “The Farmer and the Cowman” that call for them to stick together. Not quite yet US citizens and not exactly all white, the people of the Indian Territory, which did not combine with Oklahoma Territory to become a state until 1907, *can* be “in between,” “now and then,” “all or nothing,” suggesting the social construction and contestation of racial and national identities. Multiracial casting, and interpretations of that casting, raise high stakes for practitioners, academics, and audiences invested in social justice. How we read bodies onstage mediates, and is mediated by, how we read them offstage.

This essay parses the productions and interpretations of racial and national identities of multiracial *Oklahoma!* territory folks in the age of Obama. Arena’s production stages a utopian performative of inclusion, but that utopia troublingly rests on indigenous genocide and elision of racial difference and inequality. Both parts of this argument

³ I put “golden age” in quotation marks here, but not in the body of the text, to indicate that I do not believe that the so-called integrated musicals typically classified in this way are the best, although I still find its historical classification of musicals from the 1920s through the ’60s to be useful.

⁴ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

are crucial when a majority of white Americans openly celebrate diversity though deny the significance of race and racism, despite vast disparities in income, housing, education, hiring, media representation, policing, and sentencing of those convicted of crimes. The production represents a moment of apparent racial progress through diversity, hope, and change, but largely a continuation of the status quo through the avoidance of addressing institutional racism. My identification as a woman of mixed color, as well as my experiences of having worked at Arena Stage and having seen its production of this musical, among many others, influence this study. First, I offer terms for understanding how bodies become variously interpellated and interpreted into existing racial projects and the shifting (re)productions of Americanness: multiracial-conscious, whitened, and post-racial. Using promotional materials and interviews with artistic staff members, I analyze the marketing and casting of the production. Angela Pao's key work on casting, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, informs my close readings of specific characters and actors as well as the possibilities of and limits to redressing and representing Americans.⁶ Finally, I turn to critical reviews, although I recognize that critics write from privileged positions, both symbolically and literally having the best seats in the house. The reviews help to exemplify negotiations of the multiracial *Oklahoma!* and its synecdoche for Arena Stage and the United States as multiracial, white, and/or post-racial. They reveal the struggles for defining, and who gets to define race and American identity at a moment when people of color appear to have significant representation, enabling many with privilege to disavow that privilege and therefore perpetuate systemic oppression.

Theorizing Multiracial Musical Revivals

As open texts, musical revivals allow artists and audiences to reconsider new historical contexts and new racial projects.⁷ According to sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "[a] racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines."⁸ Their work on racial formation conceives race as both social construct and material lived experience. Staging a multiracial *Oklahoma!* in 2010 puts forth competing visions of race that resonate with Barack Obama's presidency and encourage attendant policies ranging from cultivating equality to preserving white privilege.

Arena's artists and patrons navigated the racial projects and overdetermined texts of *Oklahoma!*—its marketing, casting, and dramaturgy—to negotiate a sort of semiotic contract to make sense of race and US identity in this production.⁹ To underscore and examine race, I use the term *multiracial* casting instead of *colorblind* or *nontraditional*

⁶ Angela Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

⁷ For more on musicals as open texts, see Bruce Kirlé, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

⁸ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 56.

⁹ The imprecise diction here and below—"sort of"—denotes the struggle of articulating race and theorizing spectatorship. Naming racial identities should not be taken as ahistorical, essentialized, and knowable, although an attempt at naming may be necessary to articulate race, even as it problematically reifies race as if it were fixed.

casting. *Multiracial* avoids the not-so-blind spots of colorblindness and the false binary of nontraditional, while still leaving room for dynamic interpretations. In *The Problem of the Color[blind]*, Brandi Wilkins Catanese shows the ironies of colorblindness: “a heightened and sublimated awareness of race” that can lead to tokenistic casting of nonwhite actors “to prove that they no longer face specific barriers” and mark “the triumph of racial transcendence.”¹⁰ In recent essays on race and casting, director and educator Daniel Banks offers the term *integrated* casting, while playwright Dominique Morisseau proposes *color-consciousness*.¹¹ I intend for *multiracial* to encompass their critiques of whiteness as the apparently neutral, unmarked default. *America* is also a term that spills over boundaries and can therefore be useful to stress the nation’s construction, containment, and implications of empire. A site of struggle, *America* largely exists in imagined and material tension between the privileged white citizen and disenfranchised people of color, as seen in the nation’s theatre broadly and in this production more particularly.

I outline three primary modes for understanding the casting of *Oklahoma!* and the mediating of struggles over America as multiracial-conscious, whitened, and post-racial. In *No Safe Spaces*, Pao stresses the hegemony of realism in US media and audience expectations so that the body in performance, especially when nonwhite actors portray implicitly or explicitly white characters, reshapes reception.¹² Following Pao and highlighting the importance of production as well as consumption, I offer multiple lenses through which to read bodies performing racial projects in the age of Obama. My hope is for these lenses to be applied to other musical revivals. In the multiracial-conscious mode, producers and spectators could make the racialized bodily equation of actor and character, using the “logic” of racial legibility. These race- and body-conscious lenses would present a multiracial utopia of black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race actors singing and dancing together as black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race characters. Second, producers and spectators could whitewash the roles, at once registering the different races of the actors and assuming that they were, for the most part, playing white characters. In this case, the black actresses who portrayed Laurey and Aunt Eller could appear white in order to conform to earlier productions of *Oklahoma!* and hegemonic narratives of the state’s history. Third, producers and spectators could, through sense-making of the cast in a present-day, allegedly post-racial, nonracist, colorblind world, perceive the cast and characters as transcending race, ultimately deeming race unimportant. For example, this view permits the disavowal of any racial meaning in Jud, played by a white actor, breaking up the romance of Laurey and Curly, played by actors of color. The multiracial, whitened, and post-racial modes of understanding bodies as performing racial projects are not static but dynamic, and they are not necessarily discrete; they can be contradictory within and between modes. They have different political valences in affirming, challenging, and changing race and racism.

¹⁰ Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 66.

¹¹ Daniel Banks, “The Welcoming Table: Casting for an Integrated Society,” *Theatre Topics* 23, no. 1 (2013): 1–18; Dominique Morisseau, “Colorblind Casting or Color-Consciousness?” Public Theater (blog), 20 October 2011, available at <http://publictheaterny.blogspot.com/2011/10/colorblind-casting-or-color.html>.

¹² Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 28.

In addition, audience members are not all alike; they have different horizons of expectations with respect to *Oklahoma!*, Arena Stage, and other multiracial productions, and different processes for understanding race and the United States. Multiracial casting can thus trigger numerous questions, especially because American spectators versed in realism tend to read the body of an actor into the character, and try to make sense of that character in context. In this production, the context could be one or more of several multiracial, whitened, and/or post-racial frames with which the audience could measure “reality”: the Oklahoma and Indian territories in the early 1900s, the time of the debut of the musical in 1943, and/or the season during 2010–11.

But these three modes rest on the fundamentally troubling premises of *Oklahoma!*'s narrative and of multiracial productions in general—namely, the erasure of Native Americans and appearance of effortless racial egalitarianism. The histories of the Oklahoma Territory and the Indian Territory are uniquely bound up with the United States' violent resettlement and containment of indigenous peoples. “Oklahoma” comes from the Choctaw words for “Red People.” This name and history are often silenced. Musicologist Raymond Knapp argues that the musical reproduces that silencing because Rodgers and Hammerstein whitened and Americanized the characters of *Green Grow the Lilacs*.¹³

White–Native American playwright Riggs was far more attentive to racial specificity and history in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which has a significantly different ending from the musical version. In the play, after Curly and Jud fight and Jud dies by falling on his own knife, Curly goes to federal prison to await a formal trial. When the territory folks catch him escaping from prison, Aunt Eller persuades everyone to allow him to spend his wedding night with Laurey. She admonishes them, “[w]hy, the way you’re sidin’ with the federal mashal, you’d think us people out here lived in the United States!” They reply, “[n]ow, Aunt Eller, we hain’t furriners. My pappy and mammy was *both* borned in Indian Territory! Why, I’m jist plumb full of Indian blood myself.”¹⁴ Citing blood, which reduces race to biological essence, they claim to be part Indian and identify as Indian Territory folks, not as Americans, so they are willing to flout US federal law. To then Americanize the musical, Hammerstein erased this indigenous complexity, lightened Curly’s sentence, and celebrated the United States. In the musical, Curly does not go to prison; instead, the ensemble immediately stages an informal trial and exonerates him, and they gleefully sing about the territory becoming a state.

The multiracial casting and the celebratory ending also have the potential to elide material differences, as if territory folks are all the same and have always harmonized. With the rise of post-racial rhetoric, audience members may enter and leave the theatre believing that racial parity has already been achieved and that race does not matter. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has illustrated in *Racism without Racists*, the vast

¹³ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 124–26. A further discussion of racial dynamics in the text proper of *Oklahoma!* is beyond the scope of this essay. For more on how the positioning of Native Americans in this musical fortifies whiteness, see Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 56–66. For a longer history of white male appropriation and performance of indigenous peoples to construct American identity, see Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Lynn Riggs, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (New York: Samuel French, 1931), 161 (emphasis in original).

majority of white Americans disavow white privilege.¹⁵ They deny systemic white supremacy and their implication therein by typically using a frame of abstract liberalism that celebrates equal opportunity, which assumes an already-level playing field and ultimately obscures and justifies racial material inequality. The US Supreme Court's recent overturning of the still much-needed Voting Rights Act is but one example of the severe consequences of believing that structural racism no longer exists. Although Arena Stage's casting decisions productively redefine the borders of the United States to include multiracial territory folks, those same decisions exclude and flatten others. The result largely maintains racial hierarchy because neoliberal multiculturalism mobilizes images of diversity to drown out radical articulations of race and nation and the redistribution of power.

Branding America–Arena–Oklahoma!

In 2010, Arena Stage opened the new Mead Center for American Theater, rebranding its space, image, and programming.¹⁶ The Fichandler in-the-round stage and Kreeger proscenium theatre were remodeled; the Kogod cradle, a black box, was built to "cradle" new work; and the three theatres were encased by a glass-curtained structure. Previously known for staging plays from around the world, the theatre shifted decidedly in 1998 to American work under its third artistic director, Molly Smith. According to her, there were approximately seventy professional theatre companies in the Washington, DC, area, and none of them sufficiently attended to the market for US drama.¹⁷ Now, Arena Stage presents itself as "Where American Theater Lives."¹⁸ Its new mission includes developing US plays, as well as staging festivals of "American Giants," who, so far, turn out to be the white patriarchs of US theatre: Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee.

Producing golden age musicals has been an important part of establishing the American brand. Knapp argues that musicals are American in their production, consumption, and themes of community-building.¹⁹ Smith agrees, considering musicals to be one of the true American art forms: "[i]t's in our bones. It's in our sensibility. The best of the musicals really define the American character."²⁰ In the 2000s, Arena Stage repeatedly sampled the American songbook, showcasing well-known musicals like *South Pacific* and lesser known examples, such as *Hallelujah, Baby!*, that often have explicit racial themes. In addition, the company regularly staged multiracial productions of musicals, including *Guys and Dolls* and *The Fantasticks*. According to Smith, "[w]hen one does American work, it is often about race, because race is our underlining tragedy in this country. It's the wound that we are continually trying to heal. So a theatre that focuses on American work, it's always gonna be there. So in a profound way, I'm answering that through casting."²¹ Opening the Mead Center in 2010 with *Oklahoma!*

¹⁵ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

¹⁶ For images of the Mead Center, visit <http://arenastage.org/plan-your-visit/the-mead-center/>.

¹⁷ Charlene Giannetti, "Arena Stage's Molly Smith—Showcasing American Musicals and Plays," *Woman Around Town*, 9 May 2012, available at <http://www.womanaroundtown.com/sections/woman-around-town/woman-around-town-arena-stage%E2%80%99s-molly-smith-showcasing-american-musicals-and-plays>.

¹⁸ See Arena Stage's "Our History," available at <http://www.arenastage.org/about/history/>.

¹⁹ Knapp, *The American Musical*, 3–12.

²⁰ Molly Smith, personal communication with the author, 28 December 2012.

²¹ *Ibid.*

in the Fichandler Stage, the largest space, was a way to cement Arena's branding as *American* and as intimately woven into racial dynamics.

When advertising *Oklahoma!*, Arena Stage linked the redefined theatre space, the musical, and the United States past and present. Smith pronounced that "[i]t's a beautiful morning for Arena Stage," implicitly evoking political diction and dawn imagery while explicitly connecting the opening number to the opening of the Mead Center.²² She and the marketing materials stressed the theme of change for Arena, the territories, and the musical form. The header "GREAT AMERICAN MUSICAL" accompanied *Oklahoma!* in overviews of the season that claimed that "*Oklahoma!* introduced a change in musical theater—the fully developed book musical."²³ "Book" or "integrated" musical means that the artistic elements from the score to the sets seemed of a piece in telling a serious, realistic story, as opposed to earlier musical comedies like *Anything Goes* (1934) with loosely strung together numbers and plotlines typically about show business. However, scholars like Tim Carter have traced the construction of this suspect evolutionary narrative (in which Hammerstein himself played a major part) and pointed to the existence of book musicals prior to 1943, such as Kurt Weill, Ira Gershwin, and Moss Hart's *Lady in the Dark* (1941).²⁴ In addition, some recent scholarship has questioned the privileging of book musicals over other forms, such as megamusicals.²⁵ Characterized by melodrama, spectacle, sung-through pop-inflected scores, graphic marketing, and international distribution, megamusicals, including *Les Misérables* (1985) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), have been much maligned, in part because of their perceived departures from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* (1945) and *The King and I* (1951).²⁶

Despite scholarly critiques of musical historiography and cultural hierarchy, Arena capitalized on the more common acceptance of *Oklahoma!* as one of the chief golden age musicals that legitimized the genre and embodied US identity. This narrative is fundamental not only to Arena's re-branding, but also to Gerald Mast's larger claim that Rodgers and Hammerstein "sought to define exactly what America meant and Americans believed."²⁷ Academic articles on *Oklahoma!* often argue that the musical invokes positive "American" ideals of inclusiveness, reconciliation, and community.²⁸ Many scholars locate this musical's American identity on the frontier, deploying Frederick Jackson Turner's influential thesis that encounters between indigenous and pioneering white ethnic peoples along the westward frontier produced a distinct, democratic American character. Accordingly, in one promotional YouTube video, Smith earnestly

²² Arenastage1, "Molly Smith discusses OKLAHOMA!, the 10–11 season opener," YouTube video, 2:44, 17 August 2010, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmD5OpFd47c&feature>.

²³ Arena Stage, "Great American Musical," 2010–11 Inaugural Season brochure.

²⁴ Tim Carter, *Oklahoma! The Making of an American Musical* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁵ See, for example, Elizabeth Wollman and Jessica Sternfeld, "After the 'Golden Age,'" in *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 111–26.

²⁶ Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

²⁷ Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1987), 214.

²⁸ See Bruce Kirlé, "Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of *Oklahoma!* in American Conscientiousness," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 2 (2003): 251–74; and Paul Filmer, Val Rimmer, and Dave Walsh, "Oklahoma!: Ideology and Politics in the Vernacular Tradition of the American Musical," *Popular Music* 18, no. 3 (1999): 381–95.

claimed that *Oklahoma!* represented “the kind of grit, the kind of robustness, that I think America is made of.”²⁹ This spirit of rugged pioneering translated to the new Arena and cast. Some Washington critics connected the frontier spirit of the musical to Smith’s former leadership of Perseverance Theatre in Alaska.³⁰ In the same video, she noted that “the territory [was] completely diverse,” at which point a photograph of a Native American man and a white frontiersman standing side by side appeared. Such a claim and the accompanying image suggest on the one hand a knowing sense of indigenous peoples and American colonization, and on the other a sense of confusion in not naming *the* Oklahoma and Indian territories and the tensions therein. What adds up to a “completely diverse” territory?

To unsettle preconceptions of the frontier as white, in part due to cultural productions like *Oklahoma!*, Arena used historical documentation to justify its multiracial casting.³¹ Extensive dramaturgy in patrons’ programs detailed the racial demographics and histories of the Indian and Oklahoma territories. Dramaturg Janine Sobek shed light on the ways that race and labor were tied with respect to Asian immigrant workers, and how tribes like the Cherokee participated in enslaving black people. This historical rationalization for casting people of color helped to persuade skeptics and satisfy *Oklahoma!*’s reputation as a more “realistic” book musical than earlier ones. In the director’s note, Smith asserted that “Arena’s cast is an American tapestry, with all colors and types. African-Americans, Native Americans and Asian-Americans lived in Oklahoma at [the] beginning of the 20th century. They shared a territory but lived in separate communities. . . . Arena’s frontier is a fully cross-cultural one.”³² With romantic imagery of the “tapestry” and “frontier,” she wove together a rationale for the multiracial cast to represent both the territory folks in 1907 and the United States of today.

Yet, the multiracial casting can be troubling in how it rewrites historical racial segregation and obscures persistent segregation, particularly in the racially fraught metropolitan area. Despite the theatre’s being in a majority black neighborhood in a predominantly black city, the majority of Arena’s patrons are white. Still, in my theatregoing experience, I have noticed that Arena has a relatively racially diverse audience, to some extent because it markets to black churches and invests in multiracial productions. Distinct from local peer institutions, including Signature Theatre, Shakespeare Theatre Company, Studio Theatre, and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Arena Stage regularly stages drama by and/or about African Americans. In addition to *Oklahoma!* during the 2010–11 season, the company produced Marcus Gardley’s *every tongue confess*, Anna Deavere Smith’s *Let Me Down Easy*, and Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*. During Smith’s tenure from 1998 through 2014, 30 percent of plays produced were written by playwrights of color, and 26 percent of productions were directed by directors of color.³³ Because Smith staged *Oklahoma!* in the round, the diverse audience helped form the “tapestry” that is the backdrop to the production. The theatrical space attempted to promote a spirit of US patriotism through the use of dozens of

²⁹ Arenastage1, “Molly Smith discusses OKLAHOMA!”

³⁰ See, for example, Peter Marks, “A Grand New State: You Just Can’t Say No to Arena Stage’s ‘Oklahoma!’,” *Washington Post*, 6 November 2010, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/05/AR2010110507023.html>.

³¹ Pao observes that other companies have employed this strategy of citing historical populations because contemporary US audiences demand realism (*No Safe Spaces*, 136).

³² Molly Smith, “Director’s Note,” in *Oklahoma! Program Book* (22 October 2010), 8.

³³ Khady Kamara, “Arena Seasonal Stats 98–14,” personal communication with the author, 15 July 2014.

flags hung along the interior perimeter of the in-the-round stage. The flags enveloped the spectators, actors, and musicians, encouraging inclusiveness in the “brand new state” that promises to “treat you great.” The multiracial cast mediated the optimistic sense that equality is possible under the Stars and Stripes, although such a banner of nationalism often covers up racial material differences.

But multiracial casting can also inspire social change. For audiences of color, seeing performers of color, especially those in leading roles, can provide validation. The affect of joy and hope provoked by witnessing and participating in multiracial harmony can, in turn, provoke actions that make that harmony a reality outside the theatre. Describing the utopian performative of Def Poetry Jam, Dolan writes that

[t]he performance creates a need, a desire to strive for this affective measure of goodwill, so that the glow of intersubjectivity and community might extend not just through the rest of this night, but through many others, as well. By creating this hope, by engaging this anticipatory illumination and watching these fantasy pictures, the performance can change consciousness and move people to change social conditions.³⁴

Particularly in the context of a major theatre institution in Washington, D.C., and one that politicians often patronize, a multiracial *Oklahoma!* can ring a note of hope and progressive policy that resounds across the capital.

Multiracial-Conscious Casting and Interpretation

When casting the musical, the creative team was sensitive to the storytelling aspect of having certain characters played by actors of certain races because of histories of racial representations. Team members were conscious of the multiracial implications of their decisions, in that they anticipated that spectators would pay attention to bodily racial legibility and then map the race of the actors onto the race of their respective characters. As a consequence, they decided that the comic couple Will Parker and Ado Annie should not be played by black actors for fear of recalling minstrelsy, and that Jud should not be played by a black or Native American actor so as to avoid stereotypes of drunk, sexually threatening, working-class male villains of color. The creative team briefly considered casting a Native American actor as Jud because his outsider status and death would resonate with the violent treatment of indigenous peoples by the federal state. The team ultimately claimed that it did not find a suitable singing actor and expressed concerns about offending audiences with such a portrayal. White actors were cast in these three parts, suggesting an apparent unmarked-ness to whiteness that can be safely laughed at or villainized.

To avoid simple tokenism, the creative team cast the rest of the principals, not just a few ensemble members, with actors of color. Ali Hakim, a Persian peddler, was originally played on Broadway by a white Jewish actor, and white actors often continue to play this role in contemporary productions. Casting director Dan Pruksarnukul, however, determined that the role had to be considered “ethnically ‘Persian’ from the outset.”³⁵ Illustrating sensitivity to a history of brownface, he cast South Asian–American-identified actor Nehal Joshi. The creative team actively reached out to African American actress E. Faye Butler, who initially did not think the offer of Aunt Eller was

³⁴ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 112.

³⁵ Dan Pruksarnukul, personal communication with the author, 10 July 2012.

serious because the idea of a multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* felt so far-fetched; her response suggested that multiracial stagings of golden age musicals are rarities.³⁶ Once she accepted, Arena cast another black actress as Laurey—Valisia LeKay. When LeKay left the production shortly before the opening, Arena hired another black actress, Eleasha Gamble, instead of turning to the white understudy. Because the creative team wanted Curly to be of a different race from Laurey, it cast a white Latino–Native American actor, Nicholas Rodriguez. Finally, the ensemble boasted black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race performers, resulting in an *Oklahoma!* where approximately half the performers were people of color.

Arena Stage's multiracial casting practices are unusual and laudable. During the 2010–11 season, actors of color received 8 percent of roles (nine out of 114) at Shakespeare Theatre Company, although nearly all of the roles lacked racial specificity. Signature Theatre cast only three actors of color, one of them being Gamble. Largely focused on new plays by US and UK artists, Studio Theatre and Woolly Mammoth each produced two plays by artists of color, with majority casts of color. The former produced *Marcus, or the Secret of Sweet* by Tarrell Alvin McCraney and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* by Young Jean Lee; the latter, *Oedipus el Rey* by Luis Alfaro and *Bootycandy* by Robert O'Hara. For another look at employment data, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) compiled statistics on race, ethnicity, and casting in New York City. From 2006 to 2011, white actors made up four-fifths of roles on and off Broadway, although white Americans make up only two-thirds of the US population.³⁷ According to the 2010 census, Washington, D.C., residents were 51 percent black, 39 percent white, 9 percent Latina/o, and 4 percent Asian.³⁸ According to the AAPAC, actors of color received less than 10 percent of the roles in which race purportedly did not matter or race was implicitly white, meaning that they typically played parts that correlated with their races.³⁹ Faring better than the average New York professional production, this multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* more accurately reflected US and Washington demographics and provided greater opportunities for performers of color.

Spectators may not have known the specific rationales for the casting of each character, yet the marketing likely prepared many of them for the multiracial production. The subscription brochure avowed that the production was “not your mother’s *Oklahoma!*”⁴⁰ Although the phrase hinted at a kind of daring progressiveness in this production, it also implied a homogeneity—“your mother”—and avoided explicitly naming race. At the top of the performance, Curly, performed by Rodriguez, played “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” on his harmonica as he walked through the audience to reach the stage and Aunt Eller, performed by Butler. Registering racial differences in the actors and audience around the Arena, spectators could actively think about

³⁶ Arenastage1, “A glance behind the scenes at Arena Stage’s 2010–11 season opener ‘Oklahoma!,’” YouTube video, 2:58, 20 October 2010, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKVrzCO1BUg>.

³⁷ Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC), “Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages, 2006/07–2010–11 Seasons,” February 2012, available at http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/ethnic_representation_nyc.pdf.

³⁸ “Washington (city), District of Columbia,” US Census Bureau, 2010, available at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/11/1150000.html>.

³⁹ Asian American Performers Action Coalition, “Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages.”

⁴⁰ Arena Stage, “Great American Musical.”

the performativity and legibility of race. According to casting director Pruksarnukul, “[i]nitially an audience reaction could be wondering, ‘why are people of a certain race?’ But . . . eventually our hope was that that would be such a seamless, integrated, and well-balanced production and cast composition that it would no longer become a thought.”⁴¹ His remark resonates with Harvey Young’s observation of multiracial productions: “[a]s the play progresses, spectators become less conscious of an individual actor’s race as the performer melds into her role and the audience becomes absorbed into the world of the play.”⁴² Pruksarnukul and Young touch on changes and contradictions between modes of reading productions as multiracial, whitened, and post-racial. Arena’s artists wanted to ground the multiracial cast in historical and contemporary demographics and redefine how America and Arena are racialized; at the same time, they wanted patrons to forget race. These contradictory desires reveal the intricacies of racial formation, intention, and reception. Although the creative team cast the production with progressive politics and a multiracial-conscious lens, the production can also serve more conservative ends when spectators view it through different lenses that whiten the characters or render race and racism invisible.

Whitening and Erasing Race

Because of a history of racial inequality and whitewashed productions, a multiracial version of *Oklahoma!*, besides the musical itself, lends itself to whitened readings. As discussed above, when Hammerstein adapted Riggs’s play into a musical, he whitewashed the dramatic narrative, characters, and history. Marvin Carlson’s concept of haunting is useful here for thinking through how white actors in earlier productions of *Oklahoma!* and histories of Oklahoma influence audience’s expectations of revivals.⁴³ Spectators may use the original Broadway production, white community or school productions, or the 1955 film version as sites of authority that position the territory folks as white and therefore haunt contemporary productions.⁴⁴ The more received demographics of the early-twentieth-century frontier as white American pioneers may also paint a white picture. To justify the equal treatment of all the characters in a multiracial revival, some spectators may consider the characters as white, thereby putting them on a level playing field. The solely explicit dialogue engagement with race is the naming of Ali Hakim as Persian, leading to a presumption of whiteness for the other characters. Thus, given the whitened preconceptions of *Oklahoma!*, spectators may reshape their understanding of the multiracial production to fit the white mold.

This whitened view is particularly dangerous because, as scholar-activist Andrea Smith notes, rendering Native Americans invisible is related to coping with and reproducing a US history of genocide.⁴⁵ In the eighteenth century, many tribes were

⁴¹ Dan Pruksarnukul, personal communication with the author, 2 January 2013.

⁴² Harvey Young, “3 Things Actors Should Know about Race on Stage,” *Backstage*, 14 June 2013, available at <http://www.backstage.com/advice-for-actors/backstage-experts/3-things-actors-should-know-about-race-stage/>.

⁴³ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

⁴⁴ For an example of the frequency of such productions, consider when the characters in Young Jean Lee’s *Straight White Men* (2014) recall protesting an all-white high school production and parodying *Oklahoma!* by singing “O-K-K-K!”

⁴⁵ Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” in *The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, ed. INCITE! (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 66–73.

forcibly removed to what became known as Indian Territory. Land runs by settlers from nearby states then resulted in parceling out the area into two territories—Indian and Oklahoma. While an attempt to turn Indian Territory into a state failed, the union of the two territories created Oklahoma, the state, in 1907. This disturbing historical narrative is not accounted for in *Oklahoma!*; the musical demands a simpler one in which, implicitly or explicitly, white characters stand for all the territory folks.

Another portion of the audience may subscribe to the post-racial project, which performs the symbolic violence of erasure to maintain unmarked and unremarked whiteness and its attendant privileges. As opposed to the whitened view, the post-racial view denies the significance of whiteness. This latter view argues that race no longer matters because racial equality has been achieved. Spectators may recognize race, but then disavow it because somehow, in singing, dancing, and casting actors of color, race and racism have been overcome. When seeing a multiracial production of a musical, spectators may conclude that there is no need to unpack the racial dynamics of the production because the country is beyond race.

The very existence of a multiracial cast, or a black president for that matter, paradoxically provides proof that systemic white supremacy no longer exists, even as such a conclusion uncritically equates representation with material equality and is the privilege of those who retain power. Addressing this paradox, Pao describes neoliberal understandings of multiracial casting in plays by canonical white writers as both “a bold way for nonwhite actors to actively redefine national identity not only as individual artists but as representatives of their respective communities [and] a broad move [that] reinstates rather than destabilizes whiteness as the racial and cultural norm by reinforcing the illusion that white experiences, attitudes, and behavior exist outside history.”⁴⁶ By casting actors of color in what is essentially a white version of Oklahoma history, the production legitimizes, to some extent, that narrative as seemingly timeless and universal. Through Rodgers and Hammerstein’s avoidance of naming race, the musical suggests that it does not exist as lived experience. Some spectators could subsequently slip into the post-race belief that race is merely a mask that can be put on and taken off at will. Such is Josephine Lee’s critique of colorblind casting, and the “paradox of seeing and not seeing race—where visible difference is important only to suggest that ultimately ‘color doesn’t really matter.’”⁴⁷ Because the characters were cast racially in ways to limit potential offense, some spectators could more easily erase color; for example, casting a white actor rather than a black or Native American actor as Jud reduces spectator fixation on racial stereotypes and violence performed on the bodies of men of color. Championing a post-racial society could be a utopian performative of territory folks bound by their common humanity, but in the present reality beyond the theatre, there are political consequences for cultural producers perpetuating a belief of equality as already having been accomplished—a belief that many privileged people hold, when in actuality that is far from the case.

Racial difference can exceed, challenge, or conform to spectators’ expectations and demands, which are shaped by different racial projects and understandings. Through careful casting, Arena Stage created a multiracial production that availed itself to multiple readings and therefore popular success. Interpretations of the multiracial

⁴⁶ Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 136.

⁴⁷ Josephine Lee, “Racial Actors, Liberal Myths,” *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics* 13 (2003): 95.

Oklahoma! production as multiracial-conscious, white, and/or post-racial become more concrete yet also more complex when audiences engage with racialized bodies onstage. The principal actors and characters raise different issues for racial legibility and relations among one another.

Reading Racialized Actors/Characters

An actor of mixed heritage, Rodriguez posed opportunities for multiple readings of Curly. Regular theatre patrons of Arena might have remembered him as Fabrizio in the Italy-set musical *The Light in the Piazza* during the previous season, suggesting that the actor convincingly plays “ethnic” whites, although this assumes that Italians look homogeneous. Curly’s dream-ballet double was, interestingly, played by a white dancer, signifying that Rodriguez passed as white for spectators, since they must make the connection between these performers as the same character. Meanwhile, Rodriguez’s recurring role as a gay Latino character on the television soap opera *One Life to Live*, in 2009, also haunts the actor, encouraging audiences to draw comparisons between these different performances. Reviewers called the actor either Hispanic or Latino, likely because his last name is identifiably Latino, resulting in an erasure of his mixed background. Rodriguez identifies his background as Mexican American, Welsh, and Cherokee. Mixed-race people are often racially illegible because they exceed and complicate the boundaries of boxes, be it on census forms or onstage. Difficulty categorizing actors’ race and consequently their characters’ race can cause discomfort, self-consciousness, and critical thinking about the performativity of race. Through a multiracial lens, spectators could see Rodriguez and Curly as Latino, Native American, and/or mixed-race. But because the actor also reads as white and the character does not name race, both may be whitened or read as post-racial. In an interview, Rodriguez emphasized that “I’m not playing Curly as a Latino; I’m just Curly.”⁴⁸ Making a post-racial move, he wanted to transcend race and asserted that “just” playing Curly is necessarily distinct and unmarked, as opposed to “playing Curly as a Latino.”

Aunt Eller as played by Butler also mediated racial signifiers and tensions. With her flirtations, shrewd remarks, and hands on hips, she resembled the sassy black woman and the old, wise black matron—racialized and gendered stereotypes that can be read as empowering, if clichéd. For the spectator using a multiracial reading of the production, her interactions with Curly took on different racial charges. When Curly said to her “I wouldn’t marry you ner none of yer kinfolks, I could he’p it,” the playful line became extremely striking because he could seem to hold both anti-black and anti-miscegenation views.⁴⁹ Curly *would* marry Aunt Eller’s kinfolk and he soon asked for Laurey, portrayed by Gamble. Because Butler and Gamble, two black actresses, played family members, the casting implied that their characters also are black—a choice that Smith often makes as a director.⁵⁰ Discrepancies in the racial makeup of actors portraying relatives often disturb audience members expecting realism and biological “logic” to race;⁵¹ such thinking reveals the mode of equating an actor’s race with her character rather than erasing race.

⁴⁸Wayman Wong, “Nicholas Rodriguez Talks Life, Love and ‘Oklahoma!’,” *After Elton*, 30 November 2010, available at <http://www.afterelton.com/people/2010/11/interview-with-nicholas-rodriguez>.

⁴⁹Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!* (New York: Applause, 2010), 13.

⁵⁰Smith, personal communication.

⁵¹Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 38–40.

Figure 1. Eleasha Gamble as Laurey and Nicholas Rodriguez as Curly in the Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater 2010 production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (Photo: Carol Rosegg.)

Along similar lines, some spectators object to actors of different races playing romantic couples (fig. 1). Arena Stage received criticism from patrons who objected to Laurey's being black, or being played by a black actress, or being involved with an apparently white actor/character. The slipperiness here relates to anxieties over race, but also to uncertainties over meaning. Moreover, a black actress in the role of Laurey has the potential to trouble notions of innocent, white femininity, mainly for spectators ghosted by Shirley Jones in the film version of *Oklahoma!*, among other productions. According to new-play-producing fellow Amrita Ramanan, some patrons complained that the production was "taking away their nostalgic impression of what this musical was meant to look like."⁵² Meanwhile, she added that casting African Americans in lead roles gave local public school students who attended the production "a new sense of inspiration [and] connected to the D.C. cultural zeitgeist at the time."⁵³ These mixed responses demonstrate that audiences are not homogeneous; they cannot be assumed to perceive, withhold, and/or express the same beliefs about race and racism. Both explicit racism and racial progressiveness are vibrant, resonating with Americans' ambivalence toward Obama—another black actor in a typically white role.

White actors played Will, Ado Annie, and Jud, but such casting, expected in white versions of *Oklahoma!*, does not necessarily simplify their racial interpretations and positions in this multiracial production. I will focus on Jud because of his racialized outsider status. Many scholars have written on how he does not sing or dance with the community, and his exclusion largely rests on his racialization as nonwhite. In her chapter "'We Know We Belong to the Land': The Theatricality of Assimilation in *Oklahoma!*" from *Making Americans*, Andrea Most asserts that Jud reads as black, or at least as an instance of "racial otherness."⁵⁴ She points to the smokehouse in which he lives, the resonances of lynching, and the stage direction in "Pore Jud Is Daid" in which Jud sings "like a Negro at a revivalist meeting." Meanwhile, the new edition of the libretto directs, "[r]epeats reverently as if at a revivalist meeting," to avoid characterizing Jud explicitly "like a Negro" today.⁵⁵ Expanding on Most, both Bruce Kirlé and Knapp suggest that the character can be read as Native American, whereas Derek Miller adds that he might be viewed as Jewish.⁵⁶ These readings gain greater legibility on the bodies of nonwhite actors, and another recent multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* provides such an example.

In February 2012, 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle produced *Oklahoma!* with a black actor as Jud, among white principals and a multiracial ensemble from Spectrum Dance Theatre. This significant regional theatre is devoted to presenting and producing musicals, some of which have transferred to Broadway. Many critics cited its casting of a black actor as Jud as "problematic" or "provocative," pointing to when Curly encouraged Jud to hang himself and when Curly was acquitted of Jud's death.⁵⁷ Most mentions both examples to support her interpretation of Jud as black, which gains

⁵² Amrita Ramanan, personal communication with the author, 28 December 2012.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 117.

⁵⁵ Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*, 63.

⁵⁶ Kirlé, *Unfinished Show Business*, 135; Knapp, *The American Musical*, 134; Derek Miller, "'Underneath the Ground': Jud and the Community in *Oklahoma!*," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 2, no. 2 (2008): 163–74.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Misha Berson, "Provocative 'Oklahoma!' hits 5th Avenue stage," *Seattle Times*, 10 February 2012, available at http://seattletimes.com/html/thearts/2017478542_throklahoma11.html.

even more currency in this staging because the actor portraying Curly was white. The theatre company apparently did not anticipate such an uproar, since it subsequently scheduled panels to discuss the casting.⁵⁸ These reactions suggest that some spectators viewed the production in a multiracial mode, translating the race of actors to their respective characters. The theatre company saw its *Oklahoma!* as multiracial, yet, in a post-racial turn, saw beyond race for the casting of Jud, ultimately disavowing black stereotypes and continuing racial inequality.

The 5th Avenue Theatre production throws the Arena Stage production into relief because, for the latter, Jud was cast as white amid a racially diverse cast of principals and ensemble.⁵⁹ When he tried to break up Curly and Laurey's wedding, Jud could be seen as the white who refuses to integrate; therefore his whiteness amplified rather than neutralized his villainy. In this light, his behavior could bring to mind racial tensions not only on the frontier in 1907, but also those of today, when some lament the passing of white majority America. In the multiracial mode, Jud stood for the outlier of the imagined diverse, neoliberal society in Arena's *Oklahoma!* and in the United States. For those communities to thrive, Jud must be removed. Then again, Smith directed Jud as a genuinely possible romantic partner for Laurey, played by a black actress, and sympathetically in his death, creating a long, tense pause after Curly emerged from the knife fight alive. As a consequence, Jud could be read as a white ally who deserves to be mourned. To reconcile the complexities of Jud's outsider status, desire for Laurey, and death, spectators could relinquish racial meanings for a post-racial understanding. The move toward colorblindness can be seductive because it glosses over the complexities of racial power dynamics in order to make sense of the dramaturgy both onstage and off and in this case can exempt white complicity in maintaining racial structures.

Scholars' arguments about Jud as outsider frequently involve Ali Hakim as his counterpart assimilated Other—yet, reading his race is another complicated process. Most offers a compelling case for the character's Jewishness because of his coded mannerisms and dialogue.⁶⁰ Ali Hakim was initially Armenian in honor of director Rouben Mamoulian, and only later became a Persian played by a Jewish actor.⁶¹ When Joshi played Ali Hakim in Arena's production, the actor's South Asian identity related in various ways to the rest of the cast. If the races of the other actors were meant to be reproduced in their characters, as in the multiracial mode, then Ali Hakim was part of that diverse community and would be subsequently welcomed by Ado Annie, her father, and finally his betrothed Gertie Cummings, as he indeed was. But this interpretation disrupts how his character, in the whitened script, is meant to be racially and ethnically distinct from the other territory folks. Joshi used a different accent from the rest of the actors, implying that his actor-character race be taken literally, while those of the other characters were whitened. As with Jud, however, difference and assimilation are not so clear-cut amid a multiracial community.

⁵⁸ See 5th Avenue Theatre's website, available at <http://www.5thavenue.org/show/oklahoma>, for a catalog of reviews and a video of the artistic director interviewing Kyle Scatliffe, the black actor who played Jud, as a way to defuse readings of this production as racist.

⁵⁹ For yet another interesting case study, consider the production of *Oklahoma!* set in an all African American town staged by Portland Center Stage in 2011; see <http://www.pcs.org/ok/>.

⁶⁰ Most, *Making Americans*, 101–18.

⁶¹ According to Carter, Rodgers and Hammerstein at one point intended for the character to sing a coon song and couple with an "exotic" Latina, further suggesting his racialization (*Oklahoma!*, 90, 92–94).

Ultimately, *Oklahoma!* the musical celebrates community, and the multiracial production largely encouraged a multiracial reading of US nationhood. In lyrics that resonate with class and race equality, Aunt Eller teaches the farmers and cowmen, both played by actors of multiple races, to sing together, "I don't say I'm no better than anybody else, / But I'll be damned if I ain't jist as good!"⁶² The choreography for this number mediated this sentiment with grounded footwork and athletic moves that men and women, farmers and cowboys, and the multiracial ensemble performed in sync as if all were strongly and equally capable (fig. 2). Spread out across the stage with their toes turned out and arms akimbo, the actors took up equal shares of space. In this scene, Curly tells Laurey, "[c]ountry-a-changin', got to change with it!"—a line that several reviewers of the Arena production highlighted as racially inflected toward a more diverse America.⁶³ Knapp, among other scholars, points up the musical's marriage trope,⁶⁴ which gathers great significance given the 2010 US census data that 8 percent of all marriages are interracial—a new high—and that 15 percent of new marriages are interracial.⁶⁵ As for children, "the multiracial population has increased almost 50 percent, to 4.2 million, since 2000, making it the fastest growing youth group in the country"—an important statistic because Curly's next line is about children.⁶⁶

Finally, after Jud and Ali Hakim leave the stage, the company sings the rousing titular song to proclaim multiracial, American belonging: "We know we belong to the land."⁶⁷ The black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race performers, led musically by the white Latino–Native American actor playing Curly, formed a circle around a float, an oil rig bedecked with Americana, and faced the audience on all four sides of the arena. In singing their belonging, the performers and characters staked a claim to what constitutes American identity historically, today, and in the future as a multiracial, equal collective. This claim is exceedingly important at a time when Oklahoma, "the Land of the Red People," is one of the most conservative states in the union—*red* in an entirely different way. Musical harmony suggested the possibility of national harmony. When watching this number, I felt brief hope, the affect of Dolan's utopian performative "that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later."⁶⁸

And yet, after leaving the theatre and its *communitas*, I was "seared" by the discrepancy between representation and reality, and how the former has the potential to obscure the latter. Bonilla-Silva uses an apt musical metaphor to diagnose post-civil-rights-era colorblind racism: "[i]ts 'we are beyond race' lyrics and color-blind music will drown the voices of those fighting for racial equality ('Why continue talking about race and racism when we are all Americans?') and may even eclipse the space for talking about race altogether."⁶⁹ Privileging Americanness forms an imagined community of shared

⁶² Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*, 85.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶⁴ Knapp, *The American Musical*, 9, 128, 130, 132.

⁶⁵ Wendy Wang, "The Rise of Inter-marriage: Rates, Characteristics Vary by Race and Gender," *Pew Research*, 16 February 2012, available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/02/16/the-rise-of-intermarriage/>.

⁶⁶ Susan Saulny, "Census Data Presents Rise in Multiracial Population of Youths," *New York Times*, 24 March 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/us/25race.html>.

⁶⁷ Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*, 119.

⁶⁸ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 7.

⁶⁹ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 179.

Figure 2. The company of the Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater 2010 production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (Photo: Carol Rosegg.)

nationality at the expense of racial, gender, class, sexuality, and ability differences and discourses. Moreover, images of racial diversity potentially frame debates over resources as debates simply about representation. Multiracial casts in musical revivals may be pleasing and inspiring utopian performatives, but they do not directly counter hegemony; they can be deployed to maintain power structures. When the multiracial ensemble sings “Oklahoma / OK!,” a largely white middle-class audience can come away with the message that that state of the union is “OK!,” thereby sustaining the status quo of material inequality and the belief that racism is no longer salient. As Pruksarnukul and Young suggest, audiences may begin viewing multiracial actors as multiracial characters, but as the performance progresses, they may see the characters as white or the world as post-racial. When, daily, people of color deal with systemic violence and when many privileged people regard our systems as fair, multiracial musicals can both symbolize hope and do symbolic violence.

Critical Gazes

Reviews of the Arena production represent a range of spectatorship experiences in the modes of being multiracial-conscious, whitened, and/or post-racial. For the most part, critics using the multiracial-actors-as-multiracial-characters frame were extremely enthusiastic. Several of them cited the multiracial casting as the fresh element that justified the production of such a “chestnut” as *Oklahoma!*⁷⁰ The reviewers tended to detail the races of the actors playing Curly, Laurey, and Aunt Eller, but never discussed

⁷⁰See, for example, Bob Mondello, “*Oklahoma!*,” *Washington City Paper*, 12 November 2010, available at <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/40015/oklahoma-at-arena-stage-reviewed/>.

those of Jud, Will, Ado Annie, and Ali Hakim. This implies that performers of color in typically white roles must be named, while whiteness need not be identified because it is presumed. Meanwhile, the silence about Ali Hakim suggests that Joshi's South Asian background was normal or expected, despite a history of casting white actors in that role. These critics celebrated the racial diversity of the United States in both 2010 and the past, registering surprise because of the historical information regarding Oklahoma's frontier diversity in Arena's theatre programs.⁷¹

Other critics adopted more ambivalent views that gestured toward the multiracial mode, but concluded with normative whiteness and disavowals of race. Terry Teachout of the *Wall Street Journal* asserted that "Ms. Smith's 'Oklahoma!' is a perfectly, almost baldly straightforward production that deviates from the norm in only two ways: It is performed in the round by a multicultural cast whose members include a Latino Curly (Nicholas Rodriguez) and a black Laurey (Eleasha Gamble). Otherwise, this is much the same 'Oklahoma!' that your grandfolks loved."⁷² Leslie Milk of the *Washingtonian* similarly wrote that "Smith has assembled a multicultural cast, but to be honest, you hardly notice."⁷³ These reviews work against Arena's marketing and further reveal how the identity of "your grandfolks" and "you" shape conceptions of race—in this case, among privileged white critics who work for bourgeois newspapers and presume that "you" identify similarly. Claiming that the multiracial production resembles earlier productions and that race is hardly noticeable works to depoliticize and ahistoricize race. Moreover, Teachout and Milk use the term *multicultural* instead of *multiracial* to downplay race further, even though the former refers to the characters as "Latino Curly" and "black Laurey." A few reviewers never mentioned the multiracial casting, perhaps not wanting to show that they see race in the first place or, again, not seeing it as significant. Not naming race could also be because production stills accompanied the reviews, allowing the reader to interpret the visual, bodily "evidence" of the actors. Through these reviews, the critics, like Arena Stage, took part in redefining race and America when making sense of the multiracial production of *Oklahoma!*

The review by Peter Marks, chief critic of the *Washington Post*, was noteworthy because he is at present the most powerful critic in the nation's capital, and he negotiated several positions, but primarily that of post-race, remarking that the production had a "cast whose faces reflect the America of this moment. [Molly Smith's] exciting take . . . touches on the uplift you feel merely walking into Arena's newly glittering complex, itself a representation of the nation's optimistic impulse for reinvention."⁷⁴ Like Smith, Marks connected racial diversity with America, Arena Stage, and its new theatre building, using a positive, neoliberal outlook of "reinvention." After identifying the lead actors' ethnicities, he stated that "[b]ut not only is there some historical

⁷¹ See Charles Shubow, "OKLAHOMA Is Simply Superb at Arena," *Broadway World*, 29 November 2010, available at http://dc.broadwayworld.com/article/BWW_Reviews_OKLAHOMA_is_Simply_Superb_at_Arena_20101129_page2#ixzz1tfP0wdSO; Hinton Als, "America, America: Two Plays about the Country's Complexities," *New Yorker*, 13 December 2010, available at <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=2010-12-13#folio=102>; and Susan Berlin, "Oklahoma!," *Talkin' Broadway*, n.d., available at <http://www.talkinbroadway.com/regional/dc/dc502.html>.

⁷² Terry Teachout, "An OK 'Oklahoma!,'" *Wall Street Journal*, 26 November 2010, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704243904575630551833719776.html>.

⁷³ Leslie Milk, "Review: Oklahoma!," *Washingtonian*, 9 November 2010, available at <http://www.washingtonian.com/blogs/afterhours/theater-review/review-oklahoma.php>.

⁷⁴ Marks, "A Grand New State."

support for these choices, it's also a fact that each of them sings like a dream. In the benevolent land of opportunity that is conjured here, they've earned these jobs, on merit."⁷⁵ He highlighted the historical justification for the multiracial cast, implying that he was skeptical before reading the dramaturg's and director's notes. In his praise of the performers, Marks subtly criticized affirmative action, suggesting that not all people of color in other productions, and perhaps in other capacities, have gotten their parts "on merit." He performed a dangerous move here, as if people of color, not white people, are the ones who profit from systemic advantages. Marks also praised *Oklahoma!*, in contrast to Smith's prior direction of golden age musicals like *Cabaret* and *Damn Yankees!*, which "too often seemed to feel the need for intrusive statementmaking and stagy embellishment."⁷⁶ In so doing, he intimated that the multiracial cast in *Oklahoma!* was not "intrusive statementmaking and stagy embellishment," thereby obscuring the profound racial dynamics of the production. For Marks, the key theme of the musical was "American resilience" in an unmarked way, even though he began by remarking on the "faces" of the actors and ended by saying that "that beleaguered-looking guy in the White House might want to swing by one night soon."⁷⁷ His contradictory understanding of this multiracial *Oklahoma!* in seeming to recognize race and at the same time refusing to name race explicitly and recognize racial, material disparity emblemizes the complexity of spectatorship and race. Marks represents the currently hegemonic racial project of *post-race*, which is paradoxically race-conscious. Furthermore, Marks's review likely primed some spectators before they saw this *Oklahoma!*, signifying the power of reshaping and reproducing racial and national identity formation. However, his review does not foreclose resistant readings, as we acknowledge the salience of race and racism, join Dolan in looking for hope in the theatre, and imagine a radical, materially equal, multiracial United States.

Arena Stage's production of *Oklahoma!* demanded that artists and audiences negotiate American identity as multiracial, white, and/or post-racial. The production was not only a celebration of racial diversity in the United States, but also a whitening or erasure of differences therein that have the potential to eclipse struggles for power on the frontier and in the nation's capital. In these ways, multiracial territory folks accommodated different perceptions and desires and resulted in a highly popular and acclaimed production. Moreover, the theatre continues to stage multiracial productions of golden age musicals.

In 2012, Smith directed *My Fair Lady* featuring Manna Nichols, a white Asian-Native American actress, as Eliza Doolittle, an Asian American actor as her father, white actors as Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering, Rodriguez as Freddy, and a multiracial ensemble. Through a multiracial reading, the casting provoked considerations of imperialism and performance of race as intersecting with class. Similar to the treatment of *Oklahoma!*, the marketing and dramaturgy cited historical demographics of Asian immigrants in England to justify the casting. At the same time, audiences could whiten the characters to conform to expectations of *My Fair Lady*, *Pygmalion*, and England or could rationalize race as irrelevant in this allegedly post-race world.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Multiracial musical revivals are a major part of Arena's branding as the largest regional theatre devoted to US performance, and their modes of production and consumption importantly mediate contemporary racial politics. Cara Mazzie, who played Gertie Cummings in *Oklahoma!*, said that she thought the production was successful because it reflected the diversity of the United States, Obama, and *change*.⁷⁸ That final, hopeful word gestures at how the multiracial production of this particular musical staged a utopian performative and keyed into the age of a black president residing in the White House, which is only a few miles from the theatre; it signals a step forward in representation, but also a continuation in structure. Although Arena Stage's multiracial casting decisions can reinforce troubling visions that occlude Native Americans, material difference, and ongoing fights for equality, they can also trouble visions of territory folks as implicitly white farmers and cowmen, offering instead multiracial territory folks who ought to stick together. As scholars, spectators, and theatre-makers, we must attend to the implications of multiracial casting as multiracial, whitened, and/or post-racial and consider the progressive opportunities and symbolic violence of casting practices.

⁷⁸ Arenastage1, "Get to Know the OK! Cast: Cara & Shane," YouTube video, 2:45, 2 August 2011, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g077iuEZ2Zk&list=PL2465CD8DC44EB849&index=2&feature=plpp_video.