

## The Semiotics of Staging National/Cultural (Ethnic) Identity

*[B]eing American and being ethnic American are part of a single cultural framework. Both subjects (and they are not at all easy to distinguish) share the problem of origins—that great existential toothache for which no dentist has yet been found. ... Ethnic discourse is a discourse of foundations.*

—William Boelhower<sup>1</sup>

A “discourse of foundations” is often the inspiration for dramatic investigation. Who are we and how did we get to be who we are? But how much does an *actor’s* identity affect audience reception of the *character* portrayed? *Newsweek* entertainment columnist Marc Peyser describes the process of crossing sexual orientation lines in casting for *Queer as Folk*, an American cable television drama series about the lives of urban gay men in Pittsburgh:

Try as they might, some of the straight actors can’t get used to making out with men, even though it’s not PC to admit it. “What do you do?” says Chris Potter, who plays Dr. David. “Soon as they say cut, you spit. You want to go to a strip bar or touch the makeup girls. You feel dirty. It’s a tough job,” he says. Hal Sparks, who plays Michael, says having a mixed straight-gay cast may help the non-gay viewers. “If it were just gay people, your average straight audience would just go, it’s a gay show, it doesn’t concern me,” says Sparks ... “The nice thing about this show is that, after about 10 minutes, you get so involved with the people, you forget they’re all gay.” At least until the next shower scene.<sup>2</sup>

Sparks’ comment implies that audiences can distinguish actors’ from characters’ identities, and that that distinction may temper offensive or uncomfortable subject material, enabling the audience to eventually see the people behind the labels. His assumption is that where gay actors playing gay characters can be easily marginalized by the mainstream, straight actors playing gay characters give some credibility to gay lives in the eyes of homophobic viewers, especially when portrayals are serious rather than comedic. Thus, it may take mainstream-identified actors to make minority-group stories palatable for wide audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford UP) 10 and 81.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Peyser, “Gay All the Way,” *Newsweek*, 27 November 2000: 79.

Is it the characters as written or the fact that the majority are played by straight actors that allow us to “forget they’re all gay”? Are there elements of being gay or acting gay that are evident outside of shower or kissing scenes? How much a part of a person’s identity is sexual orientation? Perhaps the most crucial question is: what does it mean for our society when actors of a given identity are not allowed to play themselves? Accurate and positive representation of minority groups has been one of the most contentious issues in the performance of popular American drama for most of its history.

The elements of production and reception, casting and identity, form a complex interrelationship that is difficult to discuss effectively without a vocabulary and structure to encompass its variations. In this paper I propose and develop a semiotic theory that accounts for distinctions between actor and character identity as well as variations in audience reception – a differentiated spectatorship. While my field of study is the representation of ethnicity and nationality in nineteenth and twentieth centuries rather than contemporary portrayals of sexual orientation, many analogies can be drawn. For example, producers of the plays my study were intent on reaching wide audiences, since theirs were commercial endeavors, as are those of their television counterparts. Gay characters are now a commodity, enjoying much of the popular interest and controversy of ethnic characters a century ago.<sup>3</sup> Both representations are based on or lend themselves to stereotypes, and both influence the identity formation of their real-life counterparts. This is not to say that ethnic and racial stereotypes no longer persist, for they do, but it is seldom an acceptable convention for actors to cross ethnic lines in casting, especially in realistic media such as film and television, whereas it is completely acceptable, if not preferable,

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<sup>3</sup> Recent examples are the Emmy-winning prime-time television sitcom *Will and Grace* and the Julia Roberts/Rupert Everett feature film *My Best Friend’s Wedding*.

for straight actors to take on gay roles.<sup>4</sup> This may be due to a perception that sexual orientation is a more fluid part of identity than race or ethnicity, despite the growing scientific consensus that the former is not a “choice” or “preference.”

How is ethnicity represented in the theatre? Do audiences look for clues from the actor’s ethnic identity? Or can any actor evoke any ethnicity by executing an established set of signals? Discussions about *what* ethnicity means in the theatre cannot move ahead of the current stalemate (e.g., the August Wilson/Robert Brustein debate<sup>5</sup>) without first articulating *how* this identity factor means on stage. Nor can we ignore the process of staging ethnicity in evaluating theatres of the past. Semiotics, especially analyses of theatrical acting distilled from the Prague School discourses, can illuminate the process through which ethnic identity is communicated in the theatre.

According to a theory suggested by Otakar Zich and developed by Jan Mukařovský, the actor does not create a character. Instead, the actor creates a stage figure. The spectator then sees and hears this stage figure and creates a character based on this perception.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there are four parts of the communication model with an agent, a physical component, a psychological component, and another agent: **Actor** → **Figure** → **Character** ← **Spectator**. These elements are

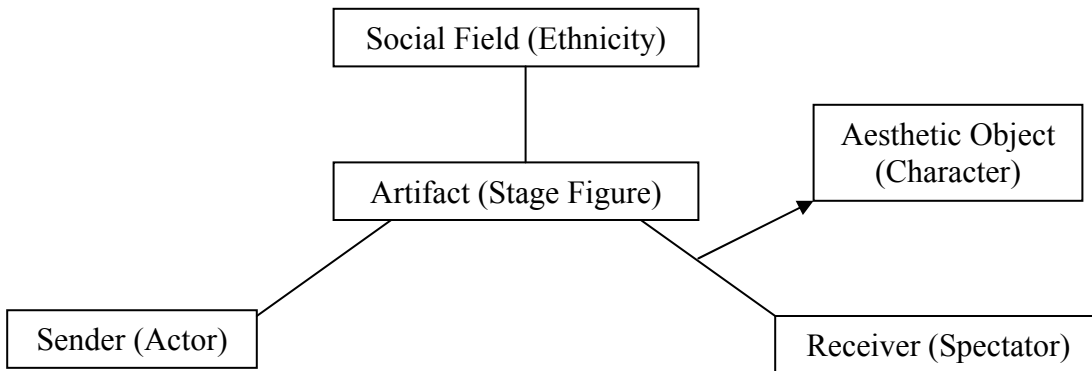
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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this attitude is not shared by many gay and lesbian spectators. For example, theorist Jill Dolan writes: “For lesbian spectators a heterosexual woman would not be believable as a lesbian. As much as she might empathize or do visualization exercises to project herself into a lesbian role, a heterosexual woman will never know, in her body, what it feels like to be queer in a homophobic culture.” *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1993) 145.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson has argued that African American actors are asked to erase their identities in playing “white” characters of the European canon, for example, Hamlet, and should therefore concentrate on performing in African American drama—that is, they should tell their own story. Brustein counters that since the canon and the regional theatres that produce it belong to everyone, diverse casts should appear on stage. See Wilson’s “The Ground on Which I Stand,” *American Theatre* (September 1996): 72.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Quinn, *The Semiotic Stage: Prague School Theater Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) 73.

constructed with respect to a social field (for example, ethnicity), as represented by Karl Bühler's adapted organon-model<sup>7</sup>:



In order to effectively analyze the creation of ethnic characters, we must distinguish between the criteria and the indicia of ethnicity: the *criteria* are the elements that define a collective identity (e.g., regional origin, religion, language), and the *indicia* are elements that can be read from an individual that indicate ethnic membership (e.g., color, physiognomy, surname). These indicia, which also include dialects and accents as well as certain behaviors, are the raw materials from which ethnic characters are created in the theatre. Stylistic and temporal stage conventions determine how actors construct ethnic stage figures and how audiences read ethnic characters. Examples of some contemporary casting conventions are listed below accompanied by a schematic representation of each communication process. E1 and E2 subscripts refer to distinct ethnicities, so the first example refers to an actor of one ethnicity ( $A_{E1}$ ) creating a stage figure of a different ethnicity ( $F_{E2}$ ), which the spectator (S) interprets to be a character of that different ethnicity ( $C_{E2}$ ).

Traditional Casting (e.g., Olivier blacking up to play Othello):

$$A_{E1} \rightarrow F_{E2} \rightarrow C_{E2} \leftarrow S$$

<sup>7</sup> See Quinn 85.

Ethnically Specific Casting (actors represent characters of the same ethnicity; e.g., African-Americans play Walter Lee and Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun*, with a Nigerian immigrant in the role of Joseph Asagai):

$$A_{E1} \rightarrow F_{E1} \rightarrow C_{E1} \leftarrow S$$

Color-Blind Casting (best actors for the part regardless of ethnic background; e.g., in a production of *Three Sisters* with a “multiracial” cast, the spectators still view the characters as Russian):

$$A_{E1} \rightarrow F_{E1} \rightarrow C_{E2} \leftarrow S$$

Conceptual Casting (through casting, the ethnicity of the characters is overtly shifted; e.g., Patrick Stewart plays *Othello* with an African-American cast):

$$A_{E1} \rightarrow F_{E1} \rightarrow C_{E(1)} \leftarrow S$$

Colorful Casting (without changing the ethnicity of a character, the actor’s ethnicity comes into relief during specific moments in the play; e.g., a Chicana playing Lorraine Hansberry in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* states to the audience, “It is clear that I am black.”)

$$A_{E1} \rightarrow F_{E1} \rightarrow C_{E1/2} \leftarrow S$$

All of these examples depend on the actors and spectators sharing the same level of awareness for each social field of ethnicity. In other words, the indicia represented in the stage figure must refer to the criteria of a familiar ethnicity for the spectator to receive the communication and create an appropriate character. In the last two examples, dissonance between the stage figure and the character is part of the aesthetic object.

Sometimes a communication problem develops when the spectator is not familiar with a given stage convention—she becomes an *incompetent* spectator. Assuming that most members of a given audience are competent, the incompetent spectator ( $S_{iC}$ ) will either undergo a learning process during the performance and become competent ( $S_C$ ),<sup>8</sup> or leave confused and dissatisfied.

The blind casting model can show this differentiated spectatorship:

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<sup>8</sup> Kier Elam explains spectator-spectator communication and the homogeneity of response through the processes of stimulation, confirmation and integration; see *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1980) 96-7. Marvin Carlson describes a more violent process: “... the pressure of audience response can coerce individual members to structure and interpret their experience in a way which might well not have occurred to them as solitary readers and, further, which might not have been within the interpretive boundaries planned by the creators of the performance text.” *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1990) 13.

Color-Blind Casting (best actors for the part regardless of ethnic background; e.g., in a production of *Three Sisters* with a “multiracial” cast, the spectators still view the characters as Russian):

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{A}_{E1} &\rightarrow \mathbf{F}_{E1} \rightarrow \mathbf{C}_{E2} \leftarrow \mathbf{S}_C \\ \mathbf{A}_{E1} &\rightarrow \mathbf{F}_{E1} \rightarrow \mathbf{C}_{E1} \leftarrow \mathbf{S}_{iC} \end{aligned}$$

Our incompetent spectator in this case will never believe that, for example, a German-American Olga and an African-American Masha and Irina are really all blood sisters and will probably think that this production is a negligent botch of history. This is a rather humorous (although not fabricated) example, but the issue of differentiated spectatorship has more serious consequences when applied to describe stereotype creation and disparate social fields.

Character types have been around since the theatre began; they are one of the fundamental tools of playwriting that establishes character relationships without resorting to tedious exposition for every character who walks on stage. However, when ethnic stereotypes are created, perpetuated or studied in the contemporary era of explosive identity politics, the “play” is no longer just fun and games. Assuming that the producers of the theatre have an accurate knowledge of a given ethnic group’s criteria, our model can account for spectators who also share knowledge of this social field (aware,  $S_A$ ), as well as those who do not (unaware,  $S_{uA}$ ):

Stereotyping (an actor presents an exaggerated stage figure of a different ethnicity):

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{A}_{E1} &\rightarrow \mathbf{F}_{St2} \rightarrow \mathbf{C}_{St2} \leftarrow \mathbf{S}_A \\ \mathbf{A}_{E1} &\rightarrow \mathbf{F}_{St2} \rightarrow \mathbf{C}_{E2} \leftarrow \mathbf{S}_{uA} \end{aligned}$$

Plays that toured America in the nineteenth century featured largely English and Anglo-American casts who often needed to cross ethnic lines to create humorous characters ( $C_{St2}$ ). Their stereotyped stage figures ( $F_{St2}$ ) exaggerated ethnic indicia for a comic effect and became codified with accompanying makeup, costumes and stage business. Aware spectators, those with first-hand knowledge of the ethnic groups portrayed, could recognize the stereotypes and appreciate their comic value. Unaware spectators might also appreciate the comedy, but not

having outside experience with real people of the parodied ethnicity, they understood the stereotyped stage figures to be ethnic characters. For this portion of the audience – who, if coming from New York’s Uptown to the Bowery, probably did not really know the lower-class residents of that neighborhood – the flattened characters onstage translated into a shallow but sufficient representation of real human beings. Some producers, like Edward Harrigan in the 1880s, attempted in good faith to diversify stereotypes so as to suggest realistic characters. But his acting style was an exercise in the craft of indication: the Method, an approach through which actors actually *identify* with the characters they play, would not come for several decades.

In 1908, successful Shakespearean actor Walker Whiteside left classical roles to play a Russian Jew of Spanish decent in Israel Zangwill’s *The Melting Pot*. David Quixano was the first in a long line of ethnic roles for Whiteside, including Tokeramoo in *The Typhoon*, Wu Li Chang in *Mr. Wu* and the title character in *The Arabian*. Whiteside was known for being a meticulous craftsman, both in his classical roles and as David. After witnessing the premiere of *The Melting Pot* in Washington, D.C., one critic remarked:

The principal figure of the drama is a young musician, a composer of highly sensitive nature. The type lends itself to the emotionality necessary to display the powers of an actor. The burden of interest falls almost entirely on the shoulders of this character, played with wonderful delicacy and intelligence by Mr. Walker Whiteside.... The finest shadings of feeling are depicted in constant play.<sup>9</sup>

While recognizing David as a type, this review demonstrates the texture and depth that Whiteside brought to his portrayal. Whether or not it was an accurate portrayal of a Russian Jewish immigrant, it elicited at least one sympathetic spectator in D.C. This may be in part due to Whiteside’s celebrity. Michael Quinn has pointed out that celebrity has a significant influence on the audience’s perception of the stage figure (88). In this case, Walker Whiteside may have eclipsed the stage figure he created by his very presence on stage. But not everyone was

impressed. After the following year's premiere in the Big Apple, the headline of the *New York Times* review announced: "MR. WHITESIDE ARTIFICIAL." The critic observed that

Mr. Walker Whiteside, who appears as the dreamer Quixano, is an actor with a sympathetic personality and a rich, melodious voice, both of which have probably helped in his undoing. His playing is utterly lacking in variety, and for the most part he maintains the rôle on a plain of artificiality. The character, it is true, is drawn with little semblance to reality, yet its deficiencies would be less apparent in the hands of an actor less inclined to humor the elocutionary possibilities of Mr. Zangwill's speeches.<sup>10</sup>

Where the Washington reviewer can be seen as unaware, or at least taken by Whiteside's presence, the savvy New York reviewer thought otherwise, critiquing both the character as written and the actor's portrayal. Neither questioned the convention of Whiteside crossing ethnic lines to play David.

Over time and especially with the dawn of film, spectator desire for realism grew in this country, indicating a standard for popular drama that would last for at least a century. In 1915, Whiteside starred in the movie version of *The Melting Pot*, and his attention to detail paid off even more on the silver screen:

Whiteside's powers of facial expression are nothing short of extraordinary. One can read every emotion in his features, they tell the story of the play with a faithfulness that almost makes sub-title unnecessary, so far as he is concerned. He is the finished, polished actor, whose every move has a meaning.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time they hailed this Indiana WASP's (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) portrayal of a Russian Jew, critics took note of another casting possibility when they viewed the Kishineff pogrom only diegetically recounted by David in the middle of the play as the mimetic visual prologue for the movie:

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<sup>9</sup> *Washington Evening Star* (6 October 1908): 9.

<sup>10</sup> "New Zangwill Play Cheap and Tawdry," *New York Times* (7 September 1909): 7.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from *The Morning Telegraph* reprinted on a Cort Film Corporation promotional poster. *The Melting Pot* film clipping file (NYPL-BR).

No mere stage production of “The Melting Pot” could drive home the lesson of the evils of race prejudices as did the film, where it was possible to show the charging Cossacks and brutal soldiery hunting down and slaying the hapless Jews.<sup>12</sup>

The types which go toward making the scenes of massacre, tabernacle and steerage exceptional ones, were gathered from New York’s great East Side and are themselves ingredients of the great melting pot, by which name this America of ours is now known.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian scenes are remarkable for their adherence to detail. The fade ins to closeups are particularly smooth and the choosing and direction of the supers are to be favorably commented upon. The types, evidently secured from New York’s Ghetto, used in the Russian scenes, fit into the atmosphere in manner most magnificent.<sup>14</sup>

The conventions of traditional casting and ethnically specific casting coexisted in this film, with the latter being a welcome novelty that would not become a standard for at least fifty years.

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing today, ethnic minority actors and companies have systematically deconstructed stereotypes through their art, sometimes by mimicking them, as in Eddie Murphy’s role of “Buckwheat” on “Saturday Night Live” or Asian American theatre troupes’ parodies of the “engineering major” or the “Oriental driver.” Our stereotyping model can be reworked to accommodate the ethnic actor who generates the stereotype of his own ethnic background:

Self-stereotyping (an actor indicates a stage figure of the same ethnicity):

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{A_{EI}} &\rightarrow \mathbf{F_{StI}} \rightarrow \mathbf{C_{StI}} \leftarrow \mathbf{S_A} \\ \mathbf{A_{EI}} &\rightarrow \mathbf{F_{StI}} \rightarrow \mathbf{C_{EI}} \leftarrow \mathbf{S_{uA}} \end{aligned}$$

While the possibility for an unaware spectator still exists, the exaggeration in mimicry threatens, if not precludes, the creation of a serious character. In addition, ethnic stereotypes on stage are now almost nonexistent, as they have become “politically incorrect.” If they do exist, they must be cast with ethnic specificity—unless, of course, the crossing of casting goes in the opposite direction from tradition. That is, white actors cannot play non-white ethnic stereotypes, but

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Mabel Condon, *Motography*, CFC poster.

<sup>14</sup> *Variety*, CFC poster.

ethnic minority actors can play stereotypes of theirs or other minority ethnicities as well as whites. For example, Anna Deavere Smith's position as an African-American woman in a hyper-sensitized culture (i.e., doubly oppressed) allows her great artistic freedom to represent interviewees of a wide range of ethnic identities.<sup>15</sup> It is unlikely that a white male actor would be able to do such a project, as his portrayal of ethnic minorities, regardless of their accuracy, would probably be construed as stereotypical and thus offensive.<sup>16</sup> The stakes can be even higher when the subjects of stage figures are not real people but fictional.

Colin Cox, the founder of the Los Angeles-based multicultural theatre troupe, Will & Company, wrote a one-person show about racism in America. In *Faces of America*, which tours college campuses, one actor plays nine characters of different ethnic identities, only one of which could be considered "white."<sup>17</sup> Colin would have three strikes against him in taking on this acting task: he is white, male, and native British. So instead, his Filipina-American wife, Fran de Leon, embodies these characters. Reviews and audience comments attest to the believability of Fran's acting:

Fran de Leon ... portrayed nine characters with beautiful clarity and intuitiveness... de Leon captured the essence of each character, staying true to playwright Colin Cox's script in weaving the common thread throughout the vignettes of the many ... cultures that make up our America ... the audience I was in laughed and cried throughout the entire performance.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Her most recent installation of *On the Road: In Search of American Character*, *HOUSE ARREST*, an exploration of the press and the presidency, premiered at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., in 1998 with a multicultural cast of fourteen, many of whom crossed ethnic lines to impersonate characters. The piece's most recent manifestation was embodied solely by Smith at the New York Public Theater in 2000.

<sup>16</sup> However, there are exceptions. Danny Hoch, a New York native who creates socially conscious one-person shows (a recent one being *Hip Hop*), has had much success crossing ethnic lines, mostly due to his accurate study of gesture, character physicality, and not only English dialects, but *Spanish* dialects as well. His virtuosity and careful study lend him credibility, not unlike Walker Whiteside a century earlier.

<sup>17</sup> This character is problematized, as he expresses dismay at not having a box on a survey form that reflects his hybrid European-American identity: "How come there's no box for German-Jewish-Italian-Irish American? ... Just pick one? ... Can I make it up?"

<sup>18</sup> *The Los Angeles Times*. Quoted on the Will & Company website: [http://www.willandcompany.com/production/faces/foa\\_reviews.htm](http://www.willandcompany.com/production/faces/foa_reviews.htm) (May 2001).

[My students] were in utter awe at [Fran's] acting talent ... [her] ability to move from one character to the other so quickly and convincingly.... [she] made them think about matters they had never thought about before.<sup>19</sup>

If Fran can understand all of these people so well that [she] can play each of them on stage, why can't we all understand each other like that?<sup>20</sup>

There are certainly comic moments in this script, some of which pertain to ethnicity, but the characters of *Faces of America* are taken seriously. This happens for reasons related to our model. First, the social propriety of Fran de Leon creating these various stage figures is not in question, as it probably would be if the actor were Colin Cox. Second, at least some familiarity with the social field of these ethnicities is shared by producers and spectators. While recognition of these stage figures as representative types depends on the recognizable indicia delivered by Fran, part of the project is to dispel myths, so stereotypes are elicited and then challenged. Also, *Faces* changes as it travels. After each performance, Colin and Fran engage in a discussion with the audience. Occasionally a spectator will question a given portrayal and the producers will then solicit suggestions to incorporate in future performances. Thus, the social field is consistently monitored by a "community of readers" along the way.<sup>21</sup> The desired audience for *Faces of America* is competent (to allow a Filipina-American to create eight stage figures of different ethnicities, one is the same) and is relatively unaware. Indeed, preaching to the completely aware, a near impossibility considering the range of "faces" presented, defeats the purpose of this project.

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<sup>19</sup> Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson, Chair, Dept. of Modern Languages, La Sierra University. Will & Company website.

<sup>20</sup> Student, University of Puget Sound. Will & Company website. This comment reveals an important phenomenon: the effect of "playing" a character on the understanding of an "other." While this has been used for decades as a successful intervention in the field of drama therapy, there is still much research to be done on the process of understanding the "other" in both actor and spectator psychology.

<sup>21</sup> Marvin Carlson summarizes Stanley Fish's departure from Jauss's "informed reader" and Eco's "modern reader," both isolated, "to a 'community of readers,' socially defined, which shares common values and determines collectively the norms and conventions according to which individual readings will take place" (*Theatre Semiotics*, 13).

For decades, anthropologists have demonstrated how cultural identity is embodied by performance.<sup>22</sup> Actors borrow from ethnic indicia exhibited in the real social field and adapt them to form ethnic stage figures. The resulting characters help constitute what spectators think about the criteria of presented ethnicities, whether they are from inside or outside of the group. Semiotics can help us understand this process. Distinguishing the stage figure as a physical creation of the actor from the character as a psychological creation of the spectator can account for differentiated spectatorship with respect to accuracy of portrayal given a social field of ethnicity. The complex subject of real-world identity is further complicated by its representation on stage. Without a system and a language to discuss this complexity, we are prone to disagree about perceptions of stage practices without knowing why.

Understanding a semiotics of staging ethnicity frees theatre historians from the trap of having to decide if an entire given audience does or does not have a dual consciousness of actor and character. Acknowledging a differentiated spectatorship allows spectator evidence to be more specifically categorized by competence in reading casting conventions and by awareness of given social fields: gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or nationality.<sup>23</sup> We can then acknowledge in our histories *audiences* rather than *the audience*. The intent of the current project is to use semiotics along with other approaches to discover how the stereotyping and casting conventions of the American theatre facilitated the creation of new ethnicities and an emerging sense of nationhood during a period of heightened immigration.

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion on their impact on theatre studies, see Erika Fischer-Lichte's *The Show and Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective* (Iowa City: U Iowa P, 1997) 143 and 219; and Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 113-14.

<sup>23</sup> Other approaches have been used to theorize variations in audience (reader) response. Bennett provides a comprehensive history of these theoretical developments. See her discussion of horizons of expectations and audience coercion, especially 53-54, 73 and 76.

One of the most pressing questions of our time is how representation influences identity formation. This issue is as important in the debate over the effect of television violence on children as it is with respect to the questions we ask and the answers we seek in constructing our histories. Literary critic Norman Holland suggests a two-way assimilation in the process of reading:

[I]dentity re-creates itself.... That is, all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation. We interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work—as we interpret it.<sup>24</sup>

Holland's insight suggests that we have an innate desire to know—to identify with the human characters presented to us, assimilating new information in the process. Holland's psychological reception model can be related to a Marxist model: as completers of the artwork through consumption, we make it like ourselves, but we also grow—become—in the process. In the theatre, however, our interaction with the art is influenced by the experience of our co-consumers. We take in the characters and plots on stage *as well as* the responses of those around us in determining our own reactions. We process information uniquely at the same time that we participate in a common acknowledgment of the real and fictional worlds simultaneously manifested in front of us.

Each area of an individual's identity is constantly in flux, interacting internally with other areas and externally with representations in society.<sup>25</sup> John Higham claims that democracy “requires citizens who are fluent enough in one another's vocabularies and histories to share the

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Bennett 40.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Smith demonstrates how various collective identities—territorial, familial, gender, ethnic, religious, racial, national and class—are interrelated, with any one able to cleave or be cleft by others. *National Identity* (Reno: U Nevada P, 1991) 6-9.

forums of political deliberation and decision on an equal footing.” Henry Louis Gates Jr.

responds:

[Asserting this view] is to suppose that one exists, in some sense, as a cultural atom, that one’s identity exists anterior to one’s engagement in the field of the political. It is to suppose that one arrives at this field already constituted, already culturally whole, rather than to acknowledge that the political might create or contour one’s cultural or ethnic identity.<sup>26</sup>

These conflicting perspectives represent a chicken and egg problem. Does an individual’s identity form before an other can be recognized, or is the self defined as one recognizes differences between oneself and the other? In fact, both perspectives are right; these processes coexist. We are perennially wrought and reshaped by our environment at the same time that we experience moments of identity arrest in which we solidify boundaries in anticipation of an encounter with an other. The process of engagement perforates these boundaries, and we emerge transformed.

My larger project examines a variety of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular plays and productions in search of the means whereby Americans have defined themselves, individually and collectively, as ethnic and national beings. According to Anthony Smith, “a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture. It is through a shared, unique culture that we are enabled to know ‘who we are’ in the contemporary world” (17). But in a nation as ethnically diverse as the United States, a “collective personality and its distinctive culture” has never been easy to pin down. To become American is to maintain a relationship to ethnicity in an ever-shifting demographic landscape.

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<sup>26</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Beyond the Culture Wars,” *Profession* 93 (1993). Reprinted in *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. W. B. Worthen (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2000) 1171.