

## *Introduction*

**Non-Traditional Casting** is the casting of ethnic, female or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability are not necessary to the characters' or play's development.

—BEYOND TRADITION: FIRST NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM  
ON NON-TRADITIONAL CASTING

I hate that term non-traditional casting. I believe that the kind of casting we are talking about is traditional casting. Casting that comes out of the great traditions of this country. I would propose a change of terms. I would prefer to isolate what go percent of our theatres are doing as non-traditional casting since it does not represent what America is—the American people.

—ANNA DEAVERE SMITH

Over the past several years, there has been a sustained and productive convergence of concepts and concerns in the fields of theater and performance studies, American ethnic studies, and national and transnational studies. Scholars working in these areas have conducted complex investigations into the nature and forms of racial, ethnic, and national identity and difference, moving away from traditional conceptual and geographical boundaries. At the same time, theater practitioners, particularly artists from internal racial or ethnic minority groups, have explored and deconstructed conventional notions of identity through new approaches to playwriting, intercultural performance, and performance art. Performance artists, in particular, have taken advantage of the properties of embodiment to revise concepts of human identity.<sup>1</sup>

One strategy for reforming visions of identity, however, often has

been highly controversial in practice but remains relatively lightly explored from a theoretical perspective. This strategy (or more accurately, these strategies) is the rich array of casting practices—designated as multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, color-blind, diverse, innovative, experimental, or nontraditional—that have burgeoned in the United States since the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Unlike forms of performance that rely on the creation of new cultural institutions and original works to engage with long-standing notions of and attitudes toward race and ethnicity, these (re)visionary casting practices, developed more or less systematically during the second half of the twentieth century, issue their challenge to Eurocentric conceptions of American society and culture from inside the very institutions dedicated to preserving a European-American dramatic heritage. This interior positioning is the source of both the potency of casting against tradition and the acrimonious controversies that have often surrounded these practices.

The most enthusiastic supporters of what has commonly been called *nontraditional casting* see these practices as a form both of social action and of artistic exploration. Such advocates are committed to a larger social mission of inclusion and stimulated by the interpretive possibilities opened up when the bodies, minds, and experiences of a new set of actors are brought together with roles that have been performed hundreds or thousands of times since they were originally written. Such innovations in casting solicit original acts of imagination not only on the part of the directors and actors engaged in creating the productions but of the audience members who see them as well. Those ardently opposed to revising established practices are dismayed, even outraged, by the disregard for theatrical tradition and historical “authenticity.” In general, opponents regard nontraditional casting as attempts “to graft a social agenda onto the face of artistic enterprise.”<sup>3</sup> Resistant spectators are unsettled rather than stimulated by the violations of expectations that innovative casting entails. They are distracted by racially mixed casts, finding the results implausible if not outright offensive. Others just don’t see the point.

Given the fact that these new forms of casting were designed to dislodge established modes of perceiving and patterns of thinking, it is not surprising that their initiation has been accompanied by disagreement, both acrimonious and productive. Since the 1960s, these differences have been played out on a daily basis in theaters around the country as productions are planned, directors chosen, casting decisions made, and

performances staged, seen, and reviewed. On several occasions, landmark cases or decisions created highly publicized controversies that brought national attention to casting issues. These include Samuel Beckett's opposition to Joanne Akalaitis's 1984 staging of *Endgame* for the American Repertory Theater, the 1990 *Miss Saigon* controversy over the casting of a Caucasian actor in a Eurasian role, an attempt made in 1992 by Samuel French publishers to prohibit gender-switching in plays they represented by attaching a rider to their standard licensing agreement, and finally the exchanges between August Wilson and Robert Brustein that took place over several months in 1996. In these instances, which will be discussed in more detail in this introduction and in subsequent chapters, the rights of playwrights and their estates have been opposed to those of directors, the principle of artistic freedom weighed against larger moral and social considerations, and the value of culturally specific theaters measured against the benefits of greater diversity in regional and commercial theaters.

## History and Terminology

Many of these issues crystallized during discussions over the very terminology used to describe the casting practices and their evolution over the past forty to fifty years. The efforts to change the complexion of American theater institutions and make a lasting impact on the way plays were cast emerged as a concerted endeavor in the 1950s and 1960s. The primary impetus for changing not just casting but hiring practices in regional and commercial theaters was the desire to achieve racial integration in all social, political, educational, and cultural institutions in the United States. The New York Shakespeare Festival under the leadership of Joseph Papp, Washington, DC's Arena Stage, headed by Zelda Fichandler, and the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center were among the first theater companies to make integrated casting central to their artistic policies. While different race-conscious and race-neutral methods were tried, the most common and readily accepted approach was one that did not call attention to the race of the actors. By the 1970s, the term *color-blind* was being applied to this approach, but in popular usage it was also often being used rather indiscriminately to include various color-conscious strategies that were being devised.

The expression *nontraditional casting* gained currency in the 1980s, largely because of the work of the Non-Traditional Casting Project

(NTCP), an advocacy group formed in 1986 under the leadership of Harry Newman and Clinton Turner Davis to promote the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities, women, and the disabled in all areas of theatrical activity—performing, directing, designing, managing, producing. The NTCP worked to accomplish its objectives through national and regional conferences, forums, seminars, and roundtables on casting and diversity; publications such as a national newsletter, *New Traditions*, and a resource guide for employers of actors with disabilities; and a national talent bank of Artist Files, which contains the résumés and pictures of actors, directors, writers, designers, choreographers, and stage managers of color or with disabilities. The organization recently changed its name to the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts.<sup>4</sup> As the original name suggests, however, the initial incentive for the founding of the NTCP and its most prominent achievements have been in the domain of casting practices. In addition to the umbrella term for the new philosophy of casting quoted at the beginning of this introduction, four subcategories were put forward to make finer distinctions among the strategies being employed:

COLOR-BLIND CASTING. Actors are cast without regard to their race or ethnicity; the best actor is cast in the role.

SOCIETAL CASTING. Ethnic, female, or disabled actors are cast in roles they perform in society as a whole.

CONCEPTUAL CASTING. An ethnic, female, or disabled actor is cast in a role to give the play greater resonance.

CROSS-CULTURAL CASTING. The entire world of a play is translated to a different cultural setting.

Harry Newman, the first executive director of the NTCP, stipulated that “the concepts and definitions of non-traditional casting . . . are in no way meant to become new formulas to replace existing ones. These definitions and ideas are presented solely to stimulate creative decision-makers to begin thinking in the broadest terms.”<sup>5</sup> In actual practice, the approaches frequently overlap and new variations are constantly being developed.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the term *nontraditional casting* was widely adopted among theater professionals and the mass media. At the same time, as Anna Deavere Smith’s words in the epigraph indicate, dissatisfaction with this designation surfaced along with questions as to whether it is always clear when race, ethnicity, or gender is central to the

development of a particular character or play. The qualification *nontraditional*, however, does have certain advantages. It is inclusive in terms of both the people affected and the approaches developed. Perhaps even more importantly, it foregrounds the fact that what American audiences were accustomed to seeing on the stage before the era of multiracial casting was not a truthful correspondence to reality, as one might think from hearing many of the objections, but the application of historical conventions. In the Anglo-American theater tradition, biologically appropriate casting dates back only to the Restoration in the case of gender, and it is a twentieth-century phenomenon in the case of race. In professional theaters in the United States, up through the early decades of the twentieth century, it was still possible to have black characters played by white actors in blackface without disrupting audience reception. Caucasian actors commonly played Asian and Asian American characters through the 1970s until a landmark decision by the New York State Human Rights Division in 1973 (see chapter 5) and the 1990 battle over *Miss Saigon* made that practice untenable in professional theaters. Until very recently, non-Hispanic actors were regularly being cast in major Latin American and Latino roles in theater and film. Cases that provoked protests by Latino actors include the Broadway production of *Death and the Maiden* (1992), in which the characters Paulina Salas, Gerardo Escobar, and Roberto Miranda were played by Glenn Close, Richard Dreyfuss, and Gene Hackman respectively. Luis Valdez's plans for a film biography of Frida Kahlo in the early 1990s also had to be abandoned after Latino actors vigorously protested the announced casting of an Italian-American actor as the iconic Mexican artist.<sup>6</sup> The 2009 bilingual Broadway production of *West Side Story* represents a breakthrough with the casting of Latino and Latin American actors as the Puerto Rican characters, who speak and sing in Spanish or a mixture of English and Spanish when they are interacting with each other.

Perhaps the most desirable attribute of the qualification *nontraditional* is its foreshadowing of its own obsolescence. As racially diverse casting becomes the established practice in theaters across the country, a new tradition is being forged. Even now, following the turn of the century, use of the expression has declined noticeably. Theater companies who have adopted racially diverse casting as a regular practice now are most likely to describe their practices as *multicultural* casting. Paralleling the ascendancy of the term in general usage, this move may be interpreted to serve both progressive and conservative inclinations. From a

progressive point of view, multicultural casting is one manifestation of the greater “multiculturalist project,” which “calls for decisive changes, changes in the way we write history, the way we teach literature, the way we make art, the way we program films, the way we organize conferences, and the way we distribute cultural resources.”<sup>7</sup> The premises and goals of multicultural casting are the same as those of a national diversity project. In Stam’s words the task is “at once one of deconstructing Eurocentric and racist norms and of constructing and promoting multicultural alternatives.”<sup>8</sup> In a specifically theatrical context, this means not just superficially using the visible racial characteristics of actors, often in ways that inadvertently promote stereotypes or essentializing models of difference, but having artists of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds actively and assertively contribute to the creative process.

At the same time, speaking of different “cultures” rather than different “races,” and emphasizing culture rather than color can be seen as a concession to the sensibilities of residential theaters’ traditional subscription audiences, who have been and remain predominantly, in some communities even exclusively, white and middle class. The rhetoric of “multiculturalism” has proven to be highly compatible with traditional American narratives of cultural pluralism, which include groups of European origin, and consequently has been employed to reassure potentially resistant audience members that diverse casting is “not political.”

## Art, Politics, and Employment

In actuality, it is difficult, even impossible, to separate the history of casting practices and the discourses surrounding them from contemporaneous political and social developments. Initially, with the moral and political convictions of theater professionals providing the driving energy for artistic activity as a form of social engagement, casting policies formed part of a national discourse on social justice. A generation later, the pervasive structural transformations brought about by the civil rights movement and the attendant salutary changes in the manner and extent to which racial and ethnic minorities were represented in visual, dramatic, and narrative mediums (textbooks, television, movies, print media, etc.) created conditions that brought an influx of young black, Latino, and Asian actors into the acting profession. Increasingly, arguments for casting actors of color in “white roles” (a tellingly ambiguous term in itself) were advanced in the name of equal employment opportunities, under-

standably the primary concern of most of the actors involved. In response to this growing constituency, the Actors' Equity Association began to play a more prominent role in bringing collective pressure to bear on institutions and decision makers who continued to have artistically or economically motivated reservations regarding nontraditional casting. As Morris Kaplan, lawyer and labor negotiator for the League of Resident Theatres, stated, "We cannot defer to a social objective, however desirable, at the expense of the art."<sup>9</sup> Currently, Equity contracts negotiated with major regional, Broadway, Off-Broadway, and other commercial and not-for-profit theaters and producers include both a nondiscrimination clause and an advisory clause that specifically encourages racial diversity in casting.

Such initiatives were readily accepted, but in 1990, the governing board of Equity ventured beyond the safe territory of attaching recommendations to documents that regulated salaries, benefits, and working conditions. The board took a proactive role in blocking the casting of a Caucasian actor in a starring Eurasian role in the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*. The organization quickly found itself embroiled in a transcontinental and transatlantic controversy over the boundaries between legitimately protecting the professional interests of the union's ethnic minority members and upholding moral principles on the one hand and interfering with artistic decisions on the other. Highly publicized and often highly emotional positions were taken by theater practitioners, critics, public figures not professionally involved in the arts, and ordinary theatergoers. In the end, Equity's actions did not affect the original Broadway casting of the musical, but the case demonstrated the impact that centrally organized and authoritative bodies could make. (See chapter 2 for further discussion of the *Miss Saigon* casting controversy.)

At the same time that union activities responded to the frustrations of talented actors of color who faced limited opportunities, the importance of placing these interests in a broader perspective was recognized. As Zelda Fichandler has stated, "Nontraditional casting in the end becomes a matter not of employment, but of politics and of art."<sup>10</sup> There was a clear need for an organization equally devoted to promoting awareness of the interpretive possibilities of casting against tradition; facilitating contacts between ethnic minority actors and those responsible for casting productions in theater, film, and television; and securing the support of the most influential and authoritative bodies of theater professionals and institutions. The language of the Non-Traditional Casting Project's

mission statement reflects the general contemporary trend to portray American race relations in terms that are at once more inclusive and more benign than the discourses of the 1960s:<sup>11</sup>

NTCP works to increase the participation in theater, film and television of artists of color—African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American; female artists; Deaf and hard-of-hearing artists; and artists with disabilities—ambulatory disabled, blind and low vision. Our principal concerns are that ethnic, female and disabled artists are denied equitable professional opportunities; that this lack of participation is not only patently discriminatory, but a serious loss to the cultural life of the nation and has resulted in a theater that does not reflect the diversity of our society.<sup>12</sup>

The founding of the NTCP was prompted by the state of affairs revealed by a Theatre Communications Group survey of American professional theaters in the mid-1980s. The study revealed that more than twenty years after integrated casting had been established as a practice in key urban theaters, approximately 90 percent of theater productions were continuing to feature all-white casts, only 10 percent of roles on Broadway were cast with black actors, and nonwhites were being hired in regional theaters for 9 percent of available roles.<sup>13</sup> In the leading American Shakespeare festivals, the ratio of racial majority to minority actors was nine to one.<sup>14</sup> Apparently, artistic directors and producers who were personally committed to artistically innovative and culturally inclusive casting were already actively engaged in the process. In an effort to encourage more institutions to follow suit, in November 1986, the NTCP organized the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting at the Broadway Shubert Theatre, bringing together almost one thousand producers, artistic directors, directors, playwrights, actors, casting directors, agents, critics, and educators. A smaller Second National Symposium, held in January 1990 at New York University, was organized to focus on nonprofit professional theaters, which were seen as being in a stronger position to implement culturally diverse hiring policies because of their institutional base. In addition to these national conferences, the NTCP cosponsored or served as advisors for regional conferences held in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, DC, Boston, Philadelphia, Rochester, Toronto, Hartford, and Dallas, and also helped organize over ninety local forums on the topic for theater organizations, community



groups, colleges and universities, and student organizations. At the national symposiums and regional conferences, influential figures from the national, regional, or local theater worlds participated in panels with titles such as “Non-traditional Casting: What Tradition?” “Realizing the Play, or Playing with Reality?” “Re-viewing the Audience,” and “The Next Tradition.” The program included the staging of scenes from the classical tragedies and comedies and the modern and contemporary dramatic repertoire with ethnic, female, and disabled actors in principal roles.

During the 1990s, the NTCP worked with organizations such as Actors’ Equity, the Casting Society of America, the League of American Theatres and Producers, the Dramatists Guild, the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers (SSDC), the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and the Screen Actors Guild to promote culturally inclusive practices. In 1996, representatives of the governing bodies of the first four of these organizations ratified a joint “Document of Principle” in support of greater diversity in the theater. The statement endorsed “the goals of diversity, inclusion, and the principles of equal opportunity for all who work in the theater industry” and condemned “racism, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion in the theater.”<sup>15</sup> These goals were to be attained through a two-pronged approach: providing employment and production opportunities and challenging stereotypical representations.<sup>16</sup> The text of the document was disseminated to members of the League and to the unions and guilds through their membership publications.

Many people in the theater world celebrated these developments and the noticeable increase in racially diverse productions and staffs they helped bring about. But at almost the same time that the Document of Principle advocating diversity in American theaters was being drafted and ratified, a high-profile attack on the participation of racial minorities in “mainstream” theaters was being launched from a new direction. In his keynote address at the June 1996 National Conference of the Theatre Communications Group, August Wilson denounced racially mixed theaters in general and color-blind casting in particular as renewed expressions of white dominance through assimilationist cultural policies. He called instead for support for black theaters and playwrights, and in the process criticized Robert Brustein for his disparaging comments about the artistic merit of culturally specific theaters. Brustein replied by denouncing institutional separatism along racial lines as a throwback to

the pre-civil rights era and by decrying the politicization of arts funding. The debate was carried out on the pages of *American Theatre* magazine through the fall of that year and concluded in January 1997 with a face-to-face confrontation on the stage of New York City's Town Hall. By then, the battle had been joined by theater practitioners, critics, and scholars, whose views appeared in articles, editorials, and letters in major newspapers and trade publications including the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Variety*, and *Back Stage*. (See chapter 2 for an analysis of the debates and their aftermath.) The words exchanged orally and in print demonstrated yet again theater's deep engagement with the racial formations of the country.

### Race, Ethnicity, or Culture?

Whatever the context in which casting practices of the latter half of the twentieth century and the opening decade of the twenty-first century are being discussed, the ways in which the key terms *race*, *ethnicity*, and *culture* (whether with or without the ubiquitous prefix *multi-*) have been used are, as one might expect, highly inconsistent, varying from one situation to another and from one speaker or writer to another. These variations underscore the need to treat these terms not as abstract categories but as material signifiers that acquire meaning through specific instances of usage, which are far from consistent. The meanings may shift even in the course of a single sentence, as the NTCP's very definition of nontraditional casting demonstrates: "the casting of ethnic, female or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability are not necessary to the characters' or play's development."<sup>17</sup> The first adjectival "ethnic" serving to qualify the type of actor would seem to subsume race. (This would be contrary to popular American usage, which sees ethnicity as a subcategory of race.) The brief enumeration of pertinent aspects of the role, however, separates race and ethnicity as distinct characteristics. In an open letter to the members of the American theater community, Clinton Turner Davis addressed the failure of theater companies to invite and employ "black and ethnic" artists, asking:

Why is it certain theater companies can only identify one or two ethnic directors and designers to work in their theaters? . . . Why does the hiring of one ethnic director often preclude the hiring of others? Why is s/he hired to direct or design only the ethnically specific

work? Is it a question of willful ignorance of the talent pool, or of finding one's level of comfort with an ethnic artist? Is it a belief that ethnic artists are not capable of creating beyond their own ethnicity? Is the black artist, the ethnic artist, still perceived monolithically—under the assumption that the one who is hired can speak of and for the entire race? Or are we being blacklisted because we continue to ask difficult, uncomfortable questions, to name names.<sup>18</sup>

The flexibility of the terminology in these examples is typical of the language used to talk about casting practices and the inclusion of artists, administrators, and audiences who cannot be identified as “white.” At times *race* and *ethnicity* are used interchangeably; at times *race* designates a black-white distinction with *ethnicity* reserved for Asians and Latinos, sometimes ethnicity is seen as a subcategory of race, and sometimes the opposite is suggested.

This slippage is not just a matter of linguistic carelessness. It derives from the complex and varied histories of colonization and immigration that shaped the nation. As far as the fundamental distinction between race and ethnicity goes, theatrical practice has on the whole been consistent with current general usage in English-speaking societies, where “a physical feature is taken to indicate that an individual is to be assigned to a racial category while a cultural feature is taken as a sign that the individual is a member of an ethnic group.”<sup>19</sup> But in the United States, the term *ethnicity* has been used in a particular way that reflects the composite nature of American cultural identity. Popular and official usage alike have supported the transformation of the former nationality of first-generation Americans into their “ethnicity”; for the second generation and after, ethnic identity is defined by the national origins of the ancestors who emigrated to the United States. This model is readily applicable when the point of origin is in Europe, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. Large-scale immigration from these regions took place after national borders had been drawn and under circumstances that permitted ongoing contact with the country of origin. In the case of African Americans, however, the forced mass migration of West Africans took place long before the continent was divided into postcolonial national entities and under conditions that severed ties with homelands—ties that would have allowed a sense of specific ethnic origin to be retained through subsequent generations. Race therefore superseded ethnic or tribal origin for black Americans. As tribal and ethnic distinctions became increas-

ingly blurred, “cultural features” became attached to the racial group as a whole. In the past couple of decades, however, renewed voluntary emigration from Africa and the Caribbean has begun to modify this situation as patterns of cultural identification among newer African Americans come to more closely resemble those of other twentieth- and twenty-first-century immigrants.

While race and ethnicity are consequently equally active cultural categories both in contemporary American society and in the language of nontraditional casting, this is not true where actual *practices* of nontraditional casting are concerned. Experience has demonstrated that the functional category is very much race rather than ethnicity or nationality, although the constructed nature of racial and ethnic classifications quickly becomes evident.<sup>20</sup> Harry Newman has described how the guiding principles of the Non-Traditional Casting Project were put into practice with the original arrangement of the organization’s Artist Files. Initially, the actors’ résumés and photographs were placed in two parallel files. One was organized according to four categories commonly used to classify U.S. “ethnic minorities”: African American, Asian / Pacific Islander, Latino, and Native American. The second was organized by character type (e.g., leading man or woman, older character actor, etc.) with actors of all races and ethnic origins mixed together. This file remained unused and was eventually discontinued.<sup>21</sup> This state of affairs has been corroborated by the testimony of many actors who found themselves rejected for parts for *looking* too Asian or black or Hispanic, for instance, or not Asian, black, or Hispanic enough.<sup>22</sup> Rarely, if ever, has an actor been rejected for looking or not looking (much less being or not being) Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, or Mexican, Chilean, or Puerto Rican. It becomes clear that in the vast majority of cases, what is involved and being reinforced are visually identifiable characteristics associated with broad racial categories rather than more specific ethnic identities. The erasure of cultural, ethnic, or national specificity has taken on new inflections with the growing presence of Middle Eastern Americans and South Asian Americans in the theater, film, and television industries, and a rising number of Middle Eastern characters appearing in movies and on television. In response to these developments, the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts updated its Artists Files categories to include both Arab Americans and Persian Americans. In practice, however, any actor with an ancestor originating from anywhere along the geographical band extending from North Africa to South Asia would be considered an “authentic”

casting choice for an Egyptian, Saudi Arabian, or Iraqi character.

If questions of ethnicity do come into play, it is most likely to be in culturally specific theaters.<sup>23</sup> At the NTCP's First National Symposium, an audience member who identified himself as an unemployed Puerto Rican actor observed:

We have a lot of so-called ethnic companies that do not hire too dark Hispanic [actors] or too light Hispanics or too dark blacks or too light blacks within our own realm. I find it hypocritical, because I hear all the time from my Japanese actor friends and my Chinese friends that they couldn't get the part because they were not Japanese, in an "Asian play," or because they were Japanese and the part called for a Chinese, even though there was not a Chinese actor to fill the part.<sup>24</sup>

The degree to which culturally specific companies will take ethnic, or in the case of Native Americans, tribal origin, into consideration varies considerably. As their mission statements reveal and the cast lists of productions confirm, Asian American companies that perform dramatic works are predominantly pan-ethnic both by necessity and by choice.<sup>25</sup> In order to form a company or cast of the most talented and experienced performers, artistic and production directors prefer to sacrifice ethnic distinctions. Latino or Hispanic companies—most notably those formed by Puerto Ricans, Cubans, or Chicanos—on the other hand, have historically been far more conscious of national origins.<sup>26</sup> It is relatively recently that, in order to achieve critical mass and influence "mainstream" casting practices, Latino actors and other theater artists have increasingly acted as a united group. The pan-ethnic nature of a company or a cast for a particular production reflects the larger social and political situation in the United States that has predominated up until the present: national origin and ethnic descent are eventually used in conjunction with, if not replaced by, identification according to racial categories.

The practices of both major regional and culturally specific companies further reveal the simultaneous resilience and arbitrariness of ethnic and racial categories. When a company requires a particular racial background, very often the criterion reverts to a genetic definition. One of the most vivid examples of this was offered by the National Asian American Theatre Company's all-Asian American production of *Othello*. In appearance, the actor playing Othello was white, while all the other actors were visibly of East Asian descent; the production thereby pre-

served the critical factor of Othello's difference in relation to the other characters. The actor's website at the time described him as being of "British, Filipino, Spanish, Russian and Turkish descent."<sup>27</sup> The Filipino fraction, although neither a noticeable factor in his physical appearance or a formative element in his lived cultural experience, enabled the National Asian American Theatre Company to remain faithful to its founding mission to promote and support Asian American actors, directors, designers, and technicians.

When I and those I quote use the terms *Chinese*, *Japanese*, *Mexican*, *Spanish*, and so on, the issue has never been an individual's nationality—that is, his or her citizenship. The process of immigration to the United States, supported by academic and official discourses and common usage over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has effected the transformation of national identity into ethnic identity. In the discourses and practices associated with nontraditional casting, while the concepts of race and ethnicity have received considerable attention, the terms *nation*, *nationality*, and *nationalism*, although often implicit, rarely surface. When they have been used, it has most often been to describe culturally specific theaters as institutions promoting cultural nationalism, most notably black nationalism. The absence of any constituency for "multinational" casting as a practice or a term is telling—a constant reminder of the need to consider casting practices not just in terms of discursive categories and ideological interests but also as an employment policy subject to many of the same pressures and policies as other forms of work and commerce. At the same time, as Anna Deavere Smith reminds us, while national identity in itself may not be a criterion when matching an actor with a role, it is very often at the heart of the debates over nontraditional casting.

## Scope and Structure

As the proponents of nontraditional casting have contended, when casting is approached with an open mind, the possibilities are boundless. Any attempt to study the field of accomplishments and possibilities in this area, however, cannot share the same latitude. As its subtitle indicates, the purpose of this book is to study multiracial casting in live theater in the United States. This restricted purview ensues from the foundational premise that in order to be profitably examined, casting practices must be understood in terms of both the semiotic properties

specific to a particular medium and the context of social and political conditions that affected designated groups in the history of a given nation. This means that I will not be systematically considering nontraditional practices that focus on cross-gender casting or the casting of differently abled actors. Like members of racial and ethnic minorities, women and people with sensory impairments and physical disabilities have been subject to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices; the biologically defined characteristics of their bodies have been invested with social significance through the combined action of discursive practices, institutional regulation, and everyday experiences. But racial markers, sex-linked traits, and alterations to and limitations of sight, hearing, and mobility all inflect the human body in ways that are radically different from one another. While often intersecting, the histories of semiotization and regulation of the bodies of women, of racial and ethnic minorities, and of people with disabilities have each had their own trajectory. The interconnected yet ultimately distinct nature of the three trajectories is evidenced in the modifications to the mission statement of the Non-Traditional Casting Project / Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts and shifts in the focus of the organization's activities over the past two decades. The original mission statement of the 1980s, previously quoted, named "artists of color—African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American; female artists; Deaf and hard-of-hearing artists; and artists with disabilities—ambulatory disabled, blind and low vision" as the focus of NTCP initiatives. Women as a category no longer figure in the Alliance's revised mission statement, which now reads:

The only organization of its kind in the country, the Alliance's principal concerns are that artists who are African American, Asian Pacific American, Caribbean Black, South Asian, Latino, Arab American, Persian American, Native American, Deaf and hard of hearing, blind and low vision, artists who have mobility, physical, developmental or intellectual disabilities are denied equitable professional opportunities; and that this exclusion represents a serious loss to the cultural life of the nation.<sup>28</sup>

The Alliance's website (<http://www.inclusioninthearts.org/missionframe1.htm>) clearly reflects the Alliance's increased attention on projects that promote awareness and inclusion of artists with disabilities. The

homepage features links to three resources: DEAL (Disabilities in Entertainment and the Arts Link), a project of the Alliance that is described as “a collective of arts and entertainment professionals dedicated to the full inclusion of people with disabilities—physical, developmental, intellectual, and sensory—in all sectors of American arts and entertainment”;<sup>29</sup> “Written on the Body: A Conversation about Disability”—a 2006 panel discussion for writers, directors, actors, and filmmakers about “what distinguished authentic portrayals from clichéd, symbolic, or token representations of disability” and the “natural connections between disability and other social issues (poverty, race, sexuality, family)”;<sup>30</sup> and “Listening With an Open Eye,” the first in a series of resource guides intended “to provide employers background and practical information with respect to working with Deaf and hard of hearing actors in auditions, rehearsal and performance.”<sup>31</sup>

The time period I will be covering begins with the 1960s and continues to the present. While, as I have already indicated, there has been a history of cross-racial casting and adaptations of European classics in African American culture since the nineteenth century and isolated examples of companies or productions with black casts that would play to mixed-race audiences (the African Company of the early 1820s, the Astor Place Company of Colored Tragedians of the 1880s, and performances by the Negro units of the Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s provide notable examples), it was not until the civil rights era that concerted and sustained efforts to institutionalize multiracial casting in regional and commercial theaters across the country were initiated.

This was a period of highly creative and often controversial variations in casting, which closely reflected the radical shifts in institutionalized race relations that began with the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s and has continued to the Supreme Court’s reaffirmation of the constitutionality of affirmative action policies in 2003. The convergence of these currents with the various forms and modes of dramatic representation would result in new artistic conceptions and sociopolitical implications of cross-racial casting that differed significantly from earlier manifestations. The mid-twentieth-century drive to stage classic dramas, from ancient Greek tragedy to contemporary American domestic drama, with racially mixed casts would participate in the restructuring of the racialized sociopolitical order that had prevailed since the first Africans were brought to the American colonies as slaves. No longer were cross-racial or mixed-race stagings just isolated opportunities for black actors



to perform in plays recognized to be among the most complex and important works of the English-language repertory. For many African American artists, such performances had been viewed both as marks of professional achievement and as contributions to the advancement of the black race, particularly when these performances took place before white audience members.

When exercised in the context of the radical structural changes initiated by the civil rights movement, cross-racial and particularly mixed-race casting became highly, even aggressively, politicized acts. Racially mixed companies and productions became instances of the integration of the workplace, schools, and residential neighborhoods that was being legislated and celebrated on one side and often very violently opposed on the other. As a result, new tensions and new energy surrounded the presence of actors of color and racially mixed casts. For directors and administrators of theaters that attracted predominantly if not exclusively white audiences, even before the civil rights era, the decision to cast actors of color in canonical Euroamerican plays was an acknowledgment of the abilities of black and other racial minority Americans and of their rightful claim to all aspects of the national cultural heritage. It was also an implicit or explicit expression of support for their struggles against racial discrimination and for equal rights and opportunities. In the climate of the 1960s and 1970s, the stakes were raised as nontraditional casting choices were intended and received as strong statements of a broader political position. A new element of risk was introduced when resentment against government-mandated integration in other areas of life and anxiety over racial activism carried over into the theater. Whereas in the past, watching black actors playing white characters could be regarded as an entertaining novelty with no wider ramifications, this was no longer the case. With the disruption to and the reconfiguration of all areas of public life, the symbolic force of cultural institutions and works that had been designated as bearers of the nation's prestige was intensified. The power and privilege to define dominant social and cultural values that had been assumed and protected as the exclusive privilege of white Americans of European (preferably northern or western) origins was very visibly challenged by cross-racial and interracial casting, as black bodies both literally and metaphorically were placed in roles previously assumed only by whites.

The elevated levels of both positive energy and antagonism extended well beyond the most turbulent years of the 1960s as a result of both vol-

untary projects and coercive measures. Many leaders in the world of theater—governing boards, producers, administrative and artistic directors—actively built multiracial companies and casts, developed and produced plays by writers of color, and sponsored outreach programs to diversify audiences. At the same time, federal, state, and local government funding policies increasingly required theater organizations to demonstrate that they had made concerted efforts to promote racial and ethnic diversity in order to be eligible for public support. Adopting the tactic, common in the civil rights era, of organizing protest demonstrations to call attention to the exclusion of minorities or the perpetuation of racial and ethnic stereotypes, activists—some of whom were professionally involved in the theater, film, and television industries and many of whom were not—continued to exert high-visibility pressure when they felt it was called for. For fifty years now, even with all the changes that have taken place in the theater and in society, these three driving forces have retained the potential to generate enthusiasm and to provoke alienation among theater practitioners, audiences, and, on occasion, the general public. Although originally motivated primarily by social and political rather than artistic concerns, these initiatives, incentives, and disincentives have had the cumulative effect of irreversibly altering many of the core conventions of modern dramatic representation.

For the most part, I have proceeded on the assumption that the most telling material would be located at the sites of greatest resistance—social, cultural, institutional, and literary resistance. This meant focusing on productions staged for major residential and commercial theaters with long traditions of staging canonical European and Euroamerican plays for aesthetically conservative and predominantly white audiences. I have not analyzed the productions of smaller companies and venues that cultivate directors, actors, and audiences with a shared interest in pushing the boundaries of performance and challenging social norms. Such institutions have certainly produced fascinating treatments of dramatic works by manipulating race as a category and a sign. In these instances, however, the primary insights are revelations regarding the play itself rather than the milieu in which it is produced. When the commentary on social or racial issues is a shared discourse between the artists and the audience, the stagings do not put pressure on the audience's sensibilities, nor is the audience pressured in a way that exposes sociocultural fissures and ideological differences.

Similarly, community-based theaters like the Classical Theatre of

Harlem, the African American Shakespeare Company in San Francisco, or the Latino Shakespeare Company may present radically altered adaptations of canonical works, but the company's mission authorizes departures from established traditions of performance and even textual fidelity. It is ironic that when community companies acquire sufficient funding to employ more experienced professional actors and mount more elaborate productions, they become subject to the evaluation of spectators (e.g., professional drama critics) who often apply protocols and standards of reception that do not match the performance context. When such encounters have involved the staging of the particular plays I have chosen as points of concentration, I have included nonresident theater productions in the discussion. I have also given considerable attention to productions of one culturally specific theater group—the National Asian American Theatre Company. Unlike other culturally specific companies, which promote new work by minority playwrights and adaptations of European and Euroamerican classics in settings that justify their performance by minority actors, NAATCO's founding mission was to stage "European and American classics as written" with all Asian American casts. The initial funding statement emphasized that the plays were to be presented without any transposition to an Asian milieu. More recently, NAATCO has expanded the scope of its activities to include adaptations of these classics by Asian American playwrights (but with "no forced Asian cultural associations"), and the staging of "new plays—preferably world premieres—written by non-Asian Americans, not for or about Asian Americans, but realized by an all Asian American cast."<sup>32</sup> In making the casting rather than the writing the key to bring new meanings to a play, NAATCO's philosophy more closely resembles that of "mainstream" companies and so provides a different and often illuminating perspective on many of the same theoretical issues.

While I have attempted to achieve some degree of geographical representation, my purpose has not been to be comprehensive. The sheer volume of productions using different forms of racially significant casting over the past forty to sixty years makes such an enterprise impossible, even undesirable since the critical issues would risk being buried under the weight of examples. Instead, I have focused on a number of exemplary high-profile cases where the intersection of generic properties and nontraditional casting practices has introduced new ways of producing meaning that enlighten us on the functioning of particular dramatic works, dramatic genres, theatrical institutions, and social communities.

Since my aim was to contribute to an understanding of nontraditional casting as a sociocultural practice, I concentrated on source materials that constituted the public discourses, whether supportive or resistant, surrounding and constituting the development and promotion of cross-racial casting. These materials included articles, interviews, letters, and critical reviews published in mass circulation newspapers and magazines; programs and publicity material produced by the theater companies (photographs; newsletters and other publications produced for season subscribers or members; archival material made available on company websites); and critical essays and performance reviews in publications intended primarily for theater and academic professionals. The body of published reviews generated by specific productions generally contained the most revealing evidence of gaps or frictions that reflected conflicting social values or aesthetic standards.

In her introduction to *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, Ayanna Thompson addresses the problem of attempting to theorize color-blind casting practices. She observes: "In some ways, it is difficult to write about color-blind casting because its theoretical underpinnings are so unstable that they make the practice itself not one practice but a set of practices that not only are in competition with one another but also are deconstructing one another."<sup>33</sup> This problem is magnified when not just color-blind but all varieties of nontraditional casting are the subject of study. The structure as well as the content of this book reflects my solution to this problem, offering an overarching account of the ways in which nontraditional casting practices function as meaning-making theatrical and social practices while at the same time respecting the vast and unruly variety of insights that particular productions provide into the relationship of theater and society, of race and performance, and of bodies and identities. The first two chapters of this study lay the theoretical and historical foundations for the following four chapters, which are devoted to four principal categories of text-based American theater: classical forms of tragedy and comedy (e.g., ancient Greek and Roman, neoclassical, English Renaissance and Restoration, seventeenth- to nineteenth-century comedy of manners), modern domestic drama, antirealistic drama, and the Broadway musical. These forms share common venues of performance; are created by the same pool of actors, directors, and writers formed by the same traditions of training; and are evaluated by a common corps of professional critics. The first chapter, "Bearing the Weight of Reality: The Theatricality of

Cross-Racial Corporeal Encounters,” examines nontraditional casting as an eminently theatrical practice, one that is enabled by the unique semiotic and phenomenal properties of live theater at the same time that it illuminates those qualities. I analyze properties, notably those associated with the paradoxes of the actor, that enable cross-racial casting in live performance. A central premise here is that the complexly produced “reality effect” central to text-based theater in the European tradition depends on genre-specific contracts between actors and spectators, which must be renegotiated in particular ideologically informed ways when the various forms of nontraditional casting are deployed. The second chapter, “Re-casting Race: Nontraditional Casting Practices and Racial Formation,” demonstrates the homologous relationship that exists between the main paradigms of nontraditional casting that emerged between the 1960s and 1980s and the paradigms that dominated contemporaneous American racial theories.

I have made dramatic genres the central organizing principle for the chapters that focus on specific productions with the understanding that generic classifications, however arbitrary, identify significant patterns of textual features and sets of spectatorial conventions. For each form, I consider how the generic conventions (notably the underlying assumptions regarding the relationship between the theatrical representation and reality) frame the very intimate encounter between a character of one race and an actor of another. The individual works I focus on are all considered “classics” of their genre, meeting one or more of the following criteria: they are widely regarded as having historical significance in the development of the genre; they are considered outstanding examples of the dramatic or theatrical form; they possess some kind of enduring moral or social value; they have been accorded canonical status in the repertoires of American theater companies. Chapter 3, “Bodies Like Gardens: Classical Tragedy and Comedy in Color,” begins with a brief overview of the casting actors of color in classical tragedies and comedies in the twentieth century, and then contrasts the course of multiracial casting in urban centers with diverse populations with the history of racially mixed casts and casting in a regional theater, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, located far away from large cities. The second part of the chapter focuses on three productions of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in which racial permutations were used to underscore traditional interpretations of the work or to introduce new inflections. In chapter 4, “Beyond Type: Re-casting Modern Drama and National Identity,” I begin by probing the

semiotic bases for the continued reluctance on the part of many theater artists, audience members, and critics to accept multiracial casting in modern domestic drama long after such casting in classical tragedy or comedy and historical dramas has been widely accepted. This resistance is then linked to the higher stakes involved, namely the fashioning of a national identity, when dramas by writers like Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, and Tennessee Williams are cast interracially. If the strong reservations about unconventional casting in modern realistic drama are readily explained by the defining characteristics of the genre, it follows that nontraditional casting of modern antirealistic plays should arouse the fewest objections. It was therefore rather surprising to find that some of the most controversial instances of nontraditional casting involved works that rejected a mimetic relationship to reality. In chapter 5, "The Theater, Not the City: Genre and Politics in Antirealistic Drama," I consider the controversies surrounding the casting of nonwhite actors in plays by Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and Thornton Wilder. These cases effectively demonstrate how, by disregarding or misconstruing the conventions of representation, individuals or groups were able to use works defined by their "scorn of verisimilitude" to reinforce or undermine the structure of actual social relations. The final chapter looks at racial and ethnic transformations in four Broadway musicals from the 1960s to the present: *Hello, Dolly!*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Falsettoland*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Productions of these works provide unusual insights into the ways "ethnicity" operates as a category distinct from "race" as nontraditional performances of Jewishness are staged.

An afterword assesses the status and lasting impact of multiracial and cross-racial casting practices in the early part of the twenty-first century, when such practices have become a well-established tradition and proven their ability to act as a powerful revitalizing force in American dramatic theater.