

Jennifer Birse

Professor Solga

Eng 2470

Saturday April 4th, 2009

Erasing Difference: The Implications of White Cross-Racial Casting in Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement* and Sears' *Harlem Duet*

In the past two decades, the concept of cross-racial casting has sparked much controversy among theatre theorists. While some members of the theatre community advocate the transgression of racial boundaries on stage as a positive move toward overturning racism and creating unity between ethnicities, others see this erasure of racial lines as troubling. Many theorists wonder if the voices of characters, specifically those of minority characters, can be represented accurately if portrayed by a member of a different race. Would the impact of the story be lost through inaccurate racial casting, or would the story be given more significance by being portrayed as a universal tale? Additionally, many specifically wondered about the political implications of casting white actors into non-white roles. Would it be a symbol of unity, or simply another means of silencing an already underrepresented voice? An examination of the effects of casting white actresses into the roles of black feminist, Billie, in Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* and aboriginal activist Annie Mae, in Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement*, suggests that cross-racial casting in political plays is inherently problematic.

The casting of white actresses in such roles wrongfully propagates the idea of a universal sisterhood that can reach beyond racial borders. Although some may think that this would create

a sense of cross-racial solidarity, it is also a form of voice appropriation. By privileging the performance of gender over the performance of race, any white productions of these plays, no matter how noble their intentions, do their audiences an injustice by presenting them with a *false reality*. The idealized vision of female unity presented in these political plays through cross-racial casting furthers the oppression of minority women by failing to recognize an important component of their continued subjugation: race. Without addressing all contributing factors of Annie Mae and Billie's oppression in North America, how is a true examination of the oppression of these minoritized characters possible? It is only by considering the importance of race on the stage that we can hope to understand the divisive role it still plays in our society. By negating race-performance through white cross-racial casting, we are not creating a colour-blind world; we are merely sweeping our racism under the rug. It is only by addressing race through the use of traditional casting (having a black actor play Billie and a native actor play Annie Mae) that we can hope to understand the suffering of each of these minority women.

According to theorist Susan Gubar, the placement of white bodies into non-white roles is not a form of racial oppression, but rather a way to interrogate racism. For Gubar, strategies like cross-racial casting and racial imitation are essential performance tools that expose the falsity of cultural homogeneity, thereby allowing "the inexorable reality of racial interdependency" (256) to be revealed. This type of casting, dubbed "racechange" by Gubar, hopes to combat ghettoization by revealing the commonalities existing between members of different races. Gubar specifically advocates for the placement of white-bodies into non-white roles because she feels it is the most effective way for "white viewers to [become] conscious about the uses to which they put racial categories" (249). As the majority of theatergoers in Canada is white, Gubar feels that white cross-racial casting is an indispensable tool in the fight against racism.

Furthermore, Gubar asserts that the white performers taking on non-white roles are not performing voice appropriation because they “neither abandon origins nor pass into the other group’s world” (249). Rather, these performers are merely using their representation as a way to “crack open any monolithic notion one might have about the coherent racial self” (249). Essentially, Gubar believes that white cross-racial casting helps combat racism by emphasizing cross-cultural commonalities and deconstructing racial stereotypes. Gubar’s strategy would favour the casting of white actors into the roles of Billie and Annie Mae.

Although Gubar’s argument is well-intentioned, it is far too idealistic and simplistic. Placing a white body in a non-white role will not necessarily unify races and instill white viewers with a sense of social responsibility. It is unlikely that audience members will necessarily abandon historically reinforced racial prejudices just because a production employed cross-racial casting. It is likewise implausible to suppose that minoritized subjects, historically and presently subjugated by the white majority, will look kindly on having their stories told by their oppressors. Simply telling members of ethnic minorities that the white bodies portraying their stories to audiences are not appropriating their voice, but paying homage to it, will not be enough to create racial unity. When white bodies are placed into non-white roles, a false vision of universality, not commonality, is conveyed to the audience. Whether it is the intention of the director or not, white cross-racial casting does not simply highlight similarities between members of different races; it also erases important racial differences.

As a result, productions that employ white cross-racial casting wrongfully communicate that race is an insignificant boundary within the human experience. This message is especially troubling considering that many plays revolving around minority characters, such as *Annie*

Mae's Movement and *Harlem Duet*, are aimed at identifying racism as a part of their protagonist's everyday struggle. Plays like these, which interrogate race for a political purpose, certainly cannot employ white cross-racial casting without undermining the integrity of the play. This idea is supported by the Actor's Equity organization, which insists that cross-racial casting of any kind should not be done unless it is "not germane to the character's development" (Sun 87). When plays centrally engage the issue of race, cross-racial casting cannot occur without serious consequences. This can be observed when considering the false universality of female solidarity that is created by placing white bodies into the roles of Bille and Annie Mae.

In *Harlem Duet*, Djanet Sears uses Billie, a black woman living in Harlem, to examine the problems black women face in America. Sears uses her play to expose the double marginalization that black women faced, and continue to face, as targets of sexism and racism in America. Although it is clear that Sears believes ethnic and gendered oppression are inextricably linked, she foregrounds race as Billie's key source of subjugation. Constructing Billie as a black academic struggling against racism in the 1990s, Sears uses creative time play to allow her protagonist to portray the historical oppression of her people by taking on the roles of a slave and an entertainer in two other time periods. Billie is shown chained in the 1860s, forced to work for survival in the 1920s, and required to face the racist gaze of the white majority in the 1990s. These representations remind the audience that although racism is rooted in history, it is alive and well in the present.

Billie, herself, emphasizes the continuous existence of racial prejudice against blacks through her dialogue. She often questions the historical oppression of her people, asking what "years of slavery did to the African American psyche" (Sears 365). Seeing herself as "trapped in

history” (Sears 364), Billie understand her present plight as being linked to a history of racial subjugation. She states that every time she is not served at a restaurant or is closely watched while shopping in a store, she knows it is “because [she is] Black” (349). She likewise states that she takes little joy in her post-graduate education because she feels she is only doing it so that she can prove she is “as good as” (352) the white majority. Clearly Billie is so marginalized by racism, that she can think of nothing else except how she remains oppressed by a white majority.

Although Sears focuses on race as the main source of Billie’s oppression, she also makes reference to gendered marginalization by referring to her character as a “Black feminist” (354). This definition of Billie is important because it distinguishes her from white feminism which was, as Billie explains, a very different movement. As a Black feminist, Billie did not have the same experience as white feminists because of her racial oppression. While many white feminists sought entrance into the workplace, black women were already familiar with working for a living. Historically, black women were brought to North America as slaves, and were forced to labour “like mules” (354) to survive in their new land. Despite the abolishment of slavery, racism still persisted and so very little changed for black women. Although they were now paid for their services, they mainly remained in roles of white servitude, often taking on the roles of housekeeper and nurse to earn a living. The classification of black people as “the other” continued to prevent black women from fully participating in dominant white society. Since the feminist movement was “exclusively white” (Maracle 126), Billie is exaggerating little when she states that black women were “hired to hold [up the] tits” (355) of white bra-burning, feminists.

In *Annie Mae’s Movement*, Yvette Nolan dramatizes the true story of aboriginal activist Annie Mae Aquash, in order to examine issues surrounding the aboriginal female experience.

Nolan uses her play to expose the double marginalization that these women face due to racism and sexism. Annie speaks of the many injustices her people are forced to suffer because they are ethnic minorities in North America. She discusses how easy it is for the ruling class, composed of white people, to “disappear Indian people” (Nolan 4) by throwing them into jail or “keeping them underfed, [...] poor [and] prone to sickness and disease” (3). She also makes it clear that even aboriginal children are not safe from white oppression as they are often “scoop[ed]” up (3), “adopt[ed]” (3) out and separated from their families forever. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, Annie’s description of the disappearance of aboriginal children is a reference to the federally funded Canadian Residential school system which forced aboriginal children to move to church-run boarding schools so that they could be effectively assimilated into white Canadian society. While attending these schools, many aboriginal children suffered sexual and physical abuse and many more died due to unsanitary living conditions. By including all of these examples of specifically aboriginal abuse in Annie’s tale, Nolan establishes her protagonist as a racially marginalized figure.

However, Nolan would be remiss in her dramatic representation of Annie Mae Aquash if she did not also use her play to demonstrate how Annie was a victim of misogyny. In Annie’s first monologue, she reveals that because she was an aboriginal woman, she was told that “fighting was not for her” (3). The American Indian Movement (AIM) did not think she was worthy of taking up arms and fighting for aboriginal rights because of her gender. Although Annie was able to change the minds of a few aboriginal men, demonstrated by the fact that she became an integral member of AIM and took part in the group’s historic occupation of Wounded Knee, among other protests, she still faced sexism on a regular basis. Annie’s gender oppression is demonstrated in several instances throughout *Annie Mae’s Movement*, such as when Dennis

condescendingly refers to her as a “little warrior woman” (15) or when Russ accuses her of attempting to disrupt the “natural balance” (24) of things by taking on a man’s role within the AIM. However, the most poignant example of Annie’s gender subjugation is her rape and subsequent murder. The degradation of Annie Mae’s body by a mythical figure possessing characteristics of both white and aboriginal male characters exemplifies the misogyny that Annie Mae faced. Annie’s resistance speech during this scene, in which she calls for her “sisters” (53) to carry on her work after her demise, shows her dying hope that one day aboriginal women like her will not have to face the double marginalization which led to her demise.

Based on the above descriptions of Billie in *Harlem Duet* and Annie in *Annie Mae’s Movement*, it should be apparent that casting white bodies in these roles seriously undermines the integrity of each playwright’s message. In the case of Billie, the combination of a white face and the word “feminist” could be enough to confuse audience members into falsely believing that there is a well-established solidarity between present day black and white feminists. Similarly, the visual presentation of a white actress uttering Annie’s final words, and specifically her call for sisterhood, risks collapsing aboriginal women’s fight for gender equality with white feminism. These connections between white feminism and black or aboriginal women’s movements are troubling because they ignore the historical and present exclusivity of the white feminist movement.

Historically, the white feminist movement fought for the rights of white middle-class women. Women who belonged to the working-class or were members of ethnic minorities were, therefore, deemed unworthy of attaining more rights in society. Through their selectivity, suffragettes made sure that “15 million women in North America [became classified as] non-

women" (Maracle 123). Many of these fifteen million dismissed women were black or aboriginal. According to aboriginal author, Lee Maracle, "suffragettes did not get [non-white women] the vote" (123) because they did not care about the suffering of women in doubly marginalized positions. The only concern these white liberal feminists had was achieving "white male status for themselves" (126). The desire of white liberal feminists for equal status to white males was such that even when they became more inclusive and began to acknowledge minority females as *women*, they continued to oppress these women by failing to understand that many of them had different views on female oppression. For example, many white women failed to acknowledge the black feminist belief that racism and sexism are inextricably linked. They falsely believed that men alone were responsible for female oppression and failed to acknowledge that they, as members of the white majority, also played a part in the oppression of non-white females. Similarly, white liberal feminists also disregarded the fact that many aboriginal women believed in maintaining specifically gendered tasks and saw no need to insert themselves into the traditional roles of men. This fact became apparent when some white feminists publically criticized aboriginal women for taking on "inferior, subservient roles" (Mihesuah 163) at Wounded Knee by allowing men to deliver all speeches to protestors and the media. These white feminists failed to accept that many aboriginal women believed the "invisible" (163) roles they played at Wounded Knee were just as important for "tribal survival" (163) as the highly publicized roles of their male counterparts.

Although present day white feminism attempts to be more understanding of women of colour, it is still a movement largely dominated by white women. Despite significant movements in Third World, postcolonial and Indigenous feminism over the last two decades, the majority of feminist theorists today are white women, many of whom continue to fail to recognize "the

heterogeneity [existing] among women, specifically women of colour” (Miheisah 4). These women continue to separate themselves from non-white women by attempting to create generalized theories that fail to recognize the inherent differences existing along racial lines. Whether they are imposing strictly white feminist theories to non-white women, or are applying the same feminist theory to both aboriginal and black women without noting their different cultural experiences, white feminist theorists continue to oppress minority women by misrepresenting their voices.

An examination of the implications of casting white actresses into the roles of Annie Mae and Billie reveals the problematic nature of employing white-cross racial casting in political plays. Although cross-racial casting may promote a sense of unity among races, it does so by refusing to acknowledge race as a source of conflict within our society. Placing white bodies into the roles of non-white individuals simply communicates the message that race has nothing to do with the formation of one’s identity. As minoritized figures in North America continue to suffer oppression due to racial prejudice, white cross-racial casting sends audiences a problematic message. The practice seems to be suggesting that the way to combat racism is to simply forget it exists. However, as theorist William Sun notes, “in order to enter the ideal era where colours don’t matter, we now have to face the fact that they do matter everywhere” (93). To solve the problem of racism, we must interrogate it. To interrogate it properly, we must allow it to be effectively represented on stage through traditional casting methods. This is especially true in the case of political plays that, like *Annie Mae’s Movement* and *Harlem Duet*, seek to bring the issue of racial prejudice to the forefront. Plays like these must visually represent the race which they are seeking to examine in order to truly have their message heard. Otherwise, they risk causing audience members to draw false conclusions about their political agendas —

inviting, for example, false connections between Annie Mae or Billie's politics, and white feminism. The only way these false conclusions can be avoided is by ensuring that political plays concerned with minority individuals continue to employ traditional casting methods. Not only would this technique prevent voice appropriation by allowing minority actors to present their cultural stories to an audience, but it would also afford non-white actors more opportunities to make a living through performance. Historically, the white majority has dominated theatre in the western world. Most roles called for white actors and even those that did not, such as Shakespeare's Othello, were portrayed by white actors. Even today, the number of roles written for white performers in North America far exceeds the number of roles allocated for performers belonging to any other racial group. As such, many minority actors struggle for financial stability. In order to remedy this racial injustice and create a much more accepting and representative stage in North America, white cross-racial casting in political minority plays must be discounted as a viable casting technique. It is only by giving members of each race an equal opportunity to perform their cultural stories on the North American stage that we can ever hope to create a community of transcultural study and understanding.

Works Cited

- Gubar, Susan. *Race Changes: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Maracle, Lee. "Racism, Sexism and Patriarchy." *Returning the Gaze*. Ed. Himani Bannerji. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993.
- Mihesuah, Devon Abbott. *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Nolan, Yvette. *Annie Mae's Movement*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 1999.
- Sears, Djanet. "Harlem Duet." *Modern Canadian Plays Volume II*. Ed. Jerry Wasserman. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001.
- Sun, William. "Power and Problems of Performance Across Ethnic Lines: An Alternative Approach to Nontraditional Casting." *TDR (1988-)* 44.4 (2000): 86-95. *JSTOR*.
6 April 2009
< <http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.lib.uwo.ca:2048/stable/1146864>>