APPROPRIATING BLACKNESS

Performance and the Politics of Authenticity

E. Patrick Johnson

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Excerpt from “kevin the faggot”
in chapter 3 used with the
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For Jake McHaney,

Ray "Boot" McHaney, Mary Lee Jones, and

Johnny "Shaw" McHaney

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On July 20, 1996, my hometown of Hickory, N.C., celebrated "Dr. E. Patrick Johnson Day." I was given this honor because, to the town's knowledge, I am the first African American born in Hickory to earn a Ph.D. The celebration was initiated by a number of black leaders, namely city councilwoman and family friend Z. Ann Hoyle, who wanted to send a message not only to the whites of this small town in the foothills of western North Carolina, but also to the younger black children in the community aspiring to make something of their lives. The two running themes of that day, both of which were printed on the program and the cake, were "From Zero to Hero" and "They Said It Couldn't Be Done." While I was a little perplexed by the former (I've never thought of myself as ever being a "zero"!), the latter spoke to this black community's indictment of the institutionalized racism that for many years kept the educational system in Hickory separate and unequal. Held in the neighborhood where I grew up and in the gymnasium of the old black high school—Ridgeview High—the ceremony, while *for* me and in my honor, ultimately was not *about* me, for this community had come together to commemorate its fortitude, its undying determination to persevere in the midst of adversity. Indeed, the black folk of Ridgeview were thumbing their noses at *them*—the white folk of Hickory—that said "it couldn't be done." That is, produce children who would make not only the black community of Hickory proud, but all of its citizens. This book, therefore, is in no small part indebted to the folks of Ridgeview who knew not only that it could be done, but also that it *would* be done.

In the same way that a community raises a black child, books are never written alone and are never, therefore, one's own, even though the author is ultimately the one praised or criticized for what is contained between the two covers. The writing of this volume is no exception, and it would never have become a book project had it not been for the suggestion of Lyn Di Iorio to combine what looked like, at the time, six disparate essays. I thank her for giving me the "through line."

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APPROPRIATING BLACKNESS

INTRODUCTION

"Blackness" and Authenticity:

What's Performance Got to Do with It?

Have you ever noticed how white always seems to
attract stains?—Crest toothpaste commercial

Color, for anyone who uses it,
or is used by it, is a most complex, calculated
and dangerous phenomenon.
—James Baldwin

From the natural to the jheri curls to shaved
heads; from break dancing to rock; from platform shoes
to Reeboks; from large church congregations to empty
Sunday schools; from Jack and Jill to the Bloods and the
Crips; from Shirley Chisholm and Jesse Jackson to Al
Sharpton and Colin Powell; from Motown to Def Jam
Records; from *Good Times* to the *Jeffersons* to *In Living
Color;* from *Soul Train* to *Yo! MTV Raps*—these
outward manifestations have become signs of
the ways African Americans perceive
their culture, themselves.
—Randall Kenan

how do i get in touch with my blackness?
"blackness where are you?"
—Marvin K. White, "for colored boys"

The fact of blackness is not always self-constituting. Indeed, blackness, like performance, often defies categorization. Richard Schechner's comparison of performance to a sidewinder snake is apropos to blackness: "Wherever this beautiful rattlesnake points, it is not going there."[1] Blackness, too, is slippery—ever beyond the reach of one's grasp. Once you think you have a hold on it, it transforms into something else and travels in another direction. Its elusiveness does not preclude one from trying to fix it, to pin it down, however—for the pursuit of authenticity is inevitably an emotional and moral one.[2] Many times these arbiters of authentic blackness have the economic and/or social clout to secure particular attributes of blackness—for example, dreadlocks, vernacular speech, living in a particular part of town, etc.—as the components of the template from which blackness originates. Often, it is during times of crisis (social, cultural, or political) when the authenticity of older versions of blackness is called into question. These crises set the stage for "acting out" identity politics, occasions when those excluded from the parameters of blackness invent their own.

I suggest here, however, that the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes "black" culture.[3] But how does one theorize these various citations and cultural significations and the politics they engender? What happens when "blackness" is embodied? What are the cultural, social, and political consequences of that embodiment in a racist society? What is at stake when race or blackness is theorized discursively, and the material reality of the "black" subject is occluded? Indeed, what happens in those moments when blackness takes on corporeality? Or, alternatively, how are the stakes changed when a "white" body performs blackness?

The chapters in this book foreground and engage these questions of identity and cultural performance by examining six highly different examples of racial performance. They illuminate the often contradictory, resistive, subversive, and celebratory effects of blackness as they are cited both inside and outside black American culture. Collectively, the subjects in this study all cite, conceal, limit, expand, and give power to the elusive signifier called "blackness."

The title of this book suggests that "blackness" does not belong to

any one individual or group. Rather, individuals or groups *appropriate* this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups. When blackness is appropriated to the exclusion of others, identity becomes political. Inevitably, when one attempts to lay claim to an intangible trope that manifests in various discursive terrains, identity claims become embattled, or as noted in the quotation above by Baldwin, "color" or "blackness" becomes a "dangerous phenomenon." Because the concept of blackness has no essence, "black authenticity" is overdetermined—contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of its production. Moreover, in the words of Regina Bendix: "the notion of [black] authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic."[4] Authenticity, then, is yet another trope manipulated for cultural capital.

That said, I do not wish to place a value judgment on the notion of authenticity, for there are ways in which authenticating discourse enables marginalized people to counter oppressive representations of themselves. The key here is to be cognizant of the arbitrariness of authenticity, the ways in which it carries with it the dangers of foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. reminds us: "No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world."[5]

When black Americans have employed the rhetoric of black authenticity, the outcome has often been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included.[6] The multiple ways in which we construct blackness within and outside black American culture is contingent on the historical moment in which we live and our ever-shifting subject positions. For example, black Americans, whose vocality, leadership, and rhetoric flourished at the historical moment in which they lived, contested popular constructions of blackness in order to further their own political agendas and occasionally to stake out a space from which to argue for the inclusion of other signs of "blackness."

Indeed, if one were to look at blackness in the context of black American history, one would find that, even in relation to nationalism, the notion of an "authentic" blackness has always been contested:

the discourse of "house niggers" vs. "field niggers"; Sojourner Truth's insistence on a black female subjectivity in relation to the black polity; Booker T. Washington's call for vocational skill over W. E. B. Du Bois's "talented tenth"; Richard Wright's critique of Zora Neale Hurston's focus on the "folk" over the plight of the black *man;* Eldridge Cleaver's caustic attack on James Baldwin's homosexuality as "anti-black" and "anti-male"; urban northerners' condescending attitudes toward rural southerners and vice versa; Malcolm X's militant call for black Americans to fight against the white establishment "by any means necessary" over Martin Luther King Jr.'s reconciliatory "turn the other cheek"; and Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" over Louis Farrakhan's "Nation of Islam." All of these examples belong to the longstanding tradition in black American history of certain black Americans critically viewing a definition of blackness that does not validate their social, political, and cultural worldview. As Wahneema Lubiano suggests, "the resonances of [black] authenticity depend on who is doing the evaluating."[7]

White Americans also construct blackness.[8] Of course, the power relations maintained by white hegemony have different material effects for blacks than for whites. When white Americans essentialize blackness, for example, they often do so in ways that maintain "whiteness" as the master trope of purity, supremacy, and entitlement, as a ubiquitous, fixed, unifying signifier that seems invisible.[9] Alternately, the tropes of blackness that whites circulated in the past—Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, Jim Crow, Sambo, Zip Coon, pickaninny, and Stepin Fetchit, and now enlarged to include welfare queen, prostitute, rapist, drug addict, prison inmate, etc.—have historically insured physical violence, poverty, institutional racism, and second-class citizenry for blacks.

An even more complicated dynamic occurs when whites *appropriate* blackness. History demonstrates that cultural usurpation has been a common practice of white Americans and their relation to art forms not their own. In many instances, whites exoticize and/or fetishize blackness, what bell hooks calls "eating the other."[10] Thus, when white-identified subjects perform "black" signifiers—normative or otherwise—the effect is always already entangled in the discourse of otherness; the historical weight of white skin privilege necessarily engenders a tense relationship with its Others.

In contemporary society, one of the most palpable examples of the arbitrariness and politics of authenticity is in language use. Particularly among young black American and white American youth, whose cultures overlap in multiple and complicated ways, there exists a crisis of blackness involving language use that remains a permanent schism in identity politics.[11] For example, his inner-city cousins may ridicule the young black professional who lives in the suburbs because, according to them, he talks like a "white" man. In this instance, talking "white" is equivalent to speaking Standard English and talking "black" is equivalent to speaking in the black vernacular. (Race and class are also elided in this instance because many white men do not talk "white" either.) The black American who either chooses not to or simply cannot speak in the (black) vernacular is cast as a traitor to the race—indeed, as "white." On the other hand, the same might be true for white teenagers whose parents chastise them for talking "black" when they speak in the black vernacular. These teenagers may have learned to speak this way from black friends at school or, ironically, from other white friends or from films or television shows that may or may not have been produced by blacks, or from black Hollywood actors whose blackness is implicated in the production/construction of racist stereotypes. "Black" speech parroted in the mouths of white youth, then, cannot be traced to one particular origin. For their part, whites construct linguistic representations of blacks that are grounded in racist stereotypes to maintain the status quo only to then reappropriate these stereotypes to affect a fetishistic "escape" into the Other to transcend the rigidity of their own whiteness, as well as to feed the capitalist gains of commodified blackness.[12] The proliferation of white rap artists such as Vanilla Ice and Eminem, and movies such as *Whiteboyz* are just a few examples. On the other hand, blacks' vernacular performances redound similar results as white appropriations and are also sometimes deployed for monetary gain. As Bendix suggests, "the transformation from felt or experienced authenticity to its textual or material representation harbors a basic paradox. Once a cultural good has been declared authentic, the demand for it rises, and it acquires a market value."[13]

In the instance of both the "white-talking" black and the "black-talking" white, the person's authenticity is called into question by his or her "own" based not solely on phenotype but also on the symbolic

relationship between skin color and the performance of culturally inscribed language or dialect that refers back to an "essential" blackness or whiteness. Within racially and politically charged environments in which one's allegiance to "race" is critical to one's in-group status, one's performance of the appropriate "essential" signifiers of one's race is crucial. The white is condemned as a "wigger" ("white nigger") or the more pejorative "nigger lover," and the black is dismissed as an "Oreo" (black on the outside but white in the middle).

And yet human comingling necessarily entails the syncretism whereby cultures assimilate and adopt aspects of each other. Indeed, as "white always seems to attract stains," black similarly seems to absorb light. Given that, is all cross-cultural appropriation an instance of colonization and subjugation? Have not there been instances where the colonized have made use of the colonizer's forms as an act of resistance? Has not the colonizer become more humanized by the presence of the colonized? I suggest that some sites of cross-cultural appropriation provide fertile ground on which to formulate new epistemologies of self and Other.

The trope that I believe facilitates the appropriation of blackness is performance. The term "performance" enjoys currency among various fields and disciplines in the academy. Catapulted into a catchall for aesthetic, cultural, and social communicative events, interpretive practices, and critical methodologies, performance has become, as Mary Strine, Beverly Long, and Mary Frances HopKins suggest, "bound up in disagreement about what it is." Further, the "disagreement over its essence is itself part of that essence."[14] Indeed, the contested nature of performance may, on the one hand, reveal the seams of rigid disciplinary boundaries while, on the other, delimit the qualities of what constitutes performance in order to describe, interpret, evaluate, and theorize a specific text or sociocultural phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the recent shifts and turns in performance studies provide an encouraging sign that performance is more than a trendy critical trope.[15] Its longevity as a disciplinary practice, along with its recent reconfiguration in other disciplines, suggests that, rather than diminishing as a valuable interpretive strategy, performance continues to offer nuanced methodologies and interpretive frames in which to theorize. That is, performance is dynamic and generative, enabling

difficult and controversial stances and poses that ultimately help us better to articulate our objects (and subjects) of inquiry.

My purpose here is to utilize performance to interpret various sites of performed "blackness." In doing so, I wish to demonstrate how performance is useful in studying blackness and vice versa. As an interdisciplinary research practice, then, performance has allowed me to draw on theories from various fields, including folklore, literary and cultural studies, philosophy, anthropology, and performance itself to consider the social, political, and cultural aspects of performance. In turn the sociopolitical and cultural implications of performance inform my analysis of various performance practices found within black American culture. In fact, the performance paradigm illuminates the mirroring that occurs in culture, the tension between stabilizing cultural forces (tradition), and the shifting, ever-evolving aspects of culture that provide sites for social reflection, transformation, and critique. More simply put, I use performance to study black American culture, and I use black American culture as a means of studying performance theory.

In addition to being two contested terms, blackness and performance are two discourses whose histories converge at the site of otherness. It is this particular historical convergence that I find methodologically useful here, for the deployment of these terms in academia is necessarily implicated in the currency of each term as well as in the status of the bodies that have come to be associated with them. Racist constructions of blackness, for example, associate it with denigration, impurity, nature, and the body. Similarly, as Dwight Conquergood notes, performance is also "associated with feelings, emotions, and the body" and "is constructed in opposition to scientific reason and rational thought."[16] In addition to the "antitheatrical prejudice,"[17] the devaluation of performance in Western intellectual traditions simultaneously coincides with the devaluation of black people as subjects of inquiry in the academy and in society as a whole. Black performance (e.g., spirit possession, music, dance, speech, etc.), then, becomes the site at which people and behavior are construed as "spectacles of primitivism" to justify the colonial and racist gaze.[18]

Performance becomes a vehicle through which the Other is seen and not seen, according to Patricia Williams, "depend[ing] upon a

dynamic of display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion."[19] The position of the voyeur's "zoom lens" is necessarily predicated on his or her power and privilege. Williams continues: "There is a long tradition of voyeurism as a means of putting culture not just on display but at a condescending distance" (22); thus, the consequences of fetishistic voyeurism are not only the maintenance of the status quo but also the establishment of the sometimes shallow, unself-reflexive appropriation of blackness. This phenomenon takes place among black Americans as well because class, gender, and sexuality also grant authority to various constituents of the "black" community. As I discuss in chapter 2, it is not uncommon for heterosexual black men to appropriate "queer" performances of blackness in order to call into question the authenticity of the black gay subject. Again, the "B(r)Other as Performer" trope, to riff Conquergood's construction, is deployed here in ways that confound queer performance with underdeveloped masculinity and inauthentic blackness.

While the above discussion implies a dialogic relationship between blackness and performance, there is also a dialectic forged between the two. In other words, blackness is not always facilitated by performance. There are ways in which blackness exceeds the performative through what Williams calls in her essay title the "pantomime of race." In other words, blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the "living of blackness" becomes a material way of knowing. In this respect, blackness supercedes or explodes performance in that the modes of representation endemic to performance—the visual and spectacular—are no longer viable registers of racial identification. No longer visible under the colonizer's scopophilic gaze, blackness resides in the liminal space of the psyche where its manifestation is neither solely volitional nor without agency. Indeed, one may experience what Williams calls "a sense of split identity" (27) in a context where one's experience of living blackness (i.e., one's politics, class position, gender, etc.) and the "fantasy of black life as theatrical enterprise" (17) are at odds.

Such examples are chronicled in countless autobiographical narratives where particularly upwardly mobile blacks find themselves in the

company of whites who see them as "exceptional" or as a "credit" to their race. These instances usually occur at exclusive "invitation only" white gatherings. The black who has been accepted into the elite circle of whiteness is expected to bracket the blackness that proffered his or her (temporary) invitation to the welcome table of whiteness and in the face of the dissonance he or she feels in relation to the black hands extending the hors d'oeuvre tray. In these instances, Williams suggests, "You need two chairs at the table, one for you one for your blackness."[20] Alternatively, blackness may be deployed as resistance in the face of white colonization.[21] In these instances blackness is not only both pawn and consequence of performance but also an effacement of it. The implication of this construction of blackness in relation to performance is not that performance is, as suggested by its naysayers, anti-intellectual, but rather it suggests that performance may not fully account for the ontology of race.

Racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning.[22] Yet I must reemphasize, following Rinaldo Walcott, that "to read blackness as merely 'playful' is to fall into a willful denial of what it means to live 'black.' "[23] Indeed, blackness offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society. Although useful in deconstructing essentialist notions of selfhood, performance must also provide a space for meaningful resistance of oppressive systems.

Ultimately, performance and blackness are distinct discourses with their own agendas, "sidewinders" traveling in their own directions. In this volume, however, I examine the sites where these slippery signifiers both cross paths and diverge, taking advantage of a dialogical/dialectical relationship that offers a unique perspective from which to understand the maintenance and transformation of identity, difference, and culture more generally.[24]

By capitalizing on the endemic relationship between performance and blackness, I deploy performance in each of the chapters in this book as methodology and disciplinary praxis. In previewing the ways in which this study engages performance as methodology and communicative event, my goal is to lay the groundwork for my analysis of black cultural performance and the politics of appropriation and authenticity those performances evince.

Because I lived with and among many of the subjects I interviewed for this book in order better to comprehend the meaning of their performances, my presence undoubtedly affected the performances of my informants and vice versa. The multiple identities I performed—black, middle class, southern, gay, male, professor—influenced my ethnographic experience as/of the Other. Therefore, I construe my ethnographic practice as an "impure" process—as a performance. Moreover, rather than fix my informants as static objects, naively claim ideological innocence, or engage in the false positivist "me/them" binary, I foreground my "coauthorship," as it were, of the ethnographic texts produced in this volume, for I was as integral to the performance/text-making process as were my informants. Therefore, in each chapter I mark the ways I am implicated in the performance of blackness in the field, and, because I choose to foreground my role as ethnographer in the field, my effects and affects in relation to the ethnographic Other, I elaborate more fully this "dialogic" practice and the politics implicit in this particular kind of (auto)ethnographic account.

In his study of theater in Shaba, Zaire, Johannes Fabian urges a "performative" anthropology. He contends that ethnographies are "questionable representations" unless they are critical and forthcoming about their process. And he believes that approaching ethnography as performance is one way to engage an exegesis of the ethnographic process. "Performance . . . is not what they do and we observe," he explains, "we are both engaged in it."[25] What Fabian is calling for here is the recognition on behalf of researchers that their entrance into the "field" of the ethnographic Other necessarily implicates them in the performance being witnessed. Both researchers and the researched realize that they are performing for one another, engaged in creating what Clifford Geertz might call a "fragile fiction."[26] To construe ethnographic practice as, in general, a "fiction" and, more specifically, a practice that is "acted out" or performed, is to liberate it from the assumption that the informant is a fixed object and therefore inferior to the ethnographer. Instead, the informant is recognized as a thinking, theorizing, and culture-processing human being. Indeed, as Dwight Conquergood writes, "thinking about ethnographic practice as a disciplinary performance will help displace positivist claims of objectivity

by which knowledge of the Other is abstracted from its historical and dialogical conditions."[27]

As a result of my conscious effort to make my ethnographic practice more dialogic, each chapter in this book consists of my own personal experiences, thoughts, and impressions of the Other alongside my interpretation and analysis. In the process I expose my vulnerability as ethnographer as well as my active participation in the making of the ethnographic text—indeed, how I, too, produce, authorize, and even authenticate blackness.

My work here employs performance theory not only to interpret but also to name certain phenomena as "performance"—particularly verbal art/discourse. In the chapter "Nevah Had uh Cross Word," for example, I construe the telling of Mary Rhyne's oral history as performance. Here, I draw on the work of folklorists and black vernacular scholars who characterize verbal art—and by extension, oral histories—as an aesthetic mode of communication, a performance event, and as variable cross-culturally.[28] These theorists' conceptualization of performance directs our attention toward not only what is said but also how something is said—a focus on form and content—in order better to understand the semiotics of performance. This view of performance necessarily takes into account the physical setting in which performances occur, as well as the relationships between performer and audience and performer and self. What frames a performance as performance, then, has as much to do with context as it does with the aesthetics of the event itself. In each context the "rules," conventions, and expectations of the text, setting, performer, and audience vary, and in each context they contribute to our understanding of performance events.

In this volume I examine quotidian expressive forms and practices found in black American culture, and in so doing I examine closely what constitutes performance—specifically the performance of "blackness"—in black American culture. I do so not to suggest a fixed or stable meaning of "blackness." On the contrary, my purpose is to demonstrate its variability inside and outside black culture in order to engage a dialogue about the politics of appropriation and black authenticity. Such an understanding of performance is particularly useful here given the various ways in which "blackness" is signed

and embodied. In the chapter "Sounds of Blackness Down Under," for example, I focus on the performance of "blackness" in a context where there is no significant black American population.

In this study I also employ performance as a strategy for understanding literature. The performance of literature enjoys a long history in the academy, owing much of its centrality in literary study to scholars of oral interpretation.[29] By eventually shifting their focus from text-centered analyses to the text-making process itself, oral interpretation scholars provided the foundational work for what is now called "performance studies."[30] As noted above, performance studies has taken a number of theoretical and methodological turns: the study of literature through performance, has, nonetheless, remained a worthy and sustaining component of performance scholarship. In relation to this study, the performance of literature, specifically black American literature, provides yet another means to discuss the ways in which "blackness" is performed on the stage and through the body.

In my first chapter, "The Pot Is Brewing: Marlon Riggs's *Black Is . . . Black Ain't,* I examine the ways in which the film *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* destabilizes notions of authentic blackness. Riggs frames the film with the image of gumbo and a visual diary of his own declining T-cell count and fight with AIDS (he dies before the completion of the film), and in doing so he suggests that, in addition to demanding an appreciation of otherness by white Americans, black Americans must come to terms with their own differences within black culture. Indeed, Riggs's gumbo metaphor for black culture sutures the gap between those who view race as biological essence and those who view race as a discursive category. The film demonstrates the ways in which black Americans, in their attempt to define what it means to be black, delimit its possibilities, which, at times, may be counterproductive to the flavor of the roux that acts as the base of the gumbo that is "blackness." On the other hand, the film also exposes the social, political, economic, and psychological effects of racism, as well as the role that racism has played in defining blackness. The film takes great care to demonstrate how racism and constructions of blackness are interrelated both within and outside black American communities. I argue that Riggs's rhetorical strategy is first to highlight those signifiers of blackness that build community, such as language, music, food, and

religion, and then point out how these, too, are unstable categories on which to rest one's blackness. Ultimately, I think Riggs's film serves as an interventionist text, as a text that incorporates queerness as a legitimate signifier of blackness.

Chapter 2, "Manifest Faggotry: Queering Masculinity in African American Culture," expands on the notion of appropriation within black American culture. Specifically, there I investigate the ways in which five black American heterosexual males—Eldridge Cleaver, Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Eddie Murphy, Damon Wayans, and David Alan Grier—appropriate signifiers of queerness to stereotype, demean, and repudiate black gay men as well as attempt to delimit the parameters of authentic black masculinity. I then demonstrate how these men, in the act of repudiation, ironically and unwittingly queer heteronormative black masculinity, securing further the dialectic between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In the end, these black heterosexual performances of masculinity queer not only these performers but also black culture in general.

Chapter 3, "Mother Knows Best: Blackness and Transgressive Domestic Space," is the rejoinder to the previous chapter as it focuses on the ways in which black gay men also queer the black "homeplace/space" with transgressive performances of domesticity. Through a series of interviews with homosexual black men, in this chapter I analyze the vernacular of black gay culture and the instances where it appropriates tropes of black domesticity in order to challenge claims of black authenticity grounded in heteronormativity, to build community, and to parody rigid constructions of gender. The appropriation of heteronormative tropes of domesticity by black gay men, similar to the appropriation of homonormal tropes by black heterosexual men, establishes a link between two discursive terrains—heterosexuality and homosexuality—further calling attention to the dependence of one on the other.

Chapter 4, "'Nevah Had uh Cross Word': Mammy and the Trope of Black Womanhood," examines how my aged black grandmother (re)constructs her life history in/through performance by narrating her days as a live-in domestic in North Carolina in the 1960s, as she consciously and unconsciously represents her blackness through the trope of the "mammy." I elaborate on the ways in which she utilizes performance to intervene in her self-construction, calling attention to

how she invents or "makes herself up," recasting the past and her place in it so as to enhance her social status within both the narrated and narrative events.[31] In turn, her self-reinvention permits her to control how I as well as those who read her narrative perceive her, and thus she emerges as an authority figure. There are times, however, when my grandmother clearly disclaims authority in the narrated events and in her telling of them. I emphasize the dual-voiced nature of her discourse and the positioning of herself within it in order to highlight the ways her narrative both legitimates and contests sites, systems, and discourses of authority and control.

The chapter 5, "Sounds of Blackness Down Under: The Café of the Gate Of Salvation," moves beyond the U.S. border to consider how blackness is appropriated and performed in an international context. The Australian gospel choir the Café of the Gate of Salvation is unique because of its cultural composition and religious and nonreligious affiliations. On the basis of interviews with the choir's members and with singers who attended the gospel music workshops I conducted, attendance at rehearsals and performances, and my own participation with the choirs, I interrogate the ways in which blackness is performed vis-à-vis gospel music. Given the racial, cultural, and religious composition of the Café and other Australian choirs, this chapter also addresses the politics of appropriation. According to the choir members, the fact that gospel music arose from an oppressed people is what makes it so "empowering." Indeed, given their own history of colonization and the fact that many of them are the descendants of "convicts," many Australians sing gospel as an expression of empathy with the social conditions of black Americans. This romanticization of black American culture and history, used as a justification for singing gospel, exists uneasily beside the virtual obliteration of Australian Aboriginal culture. Yet it is too simple to dismiss these choirs as cases of cultural appropriation, and in this chapter I explore the complexities of cultural usurpation by focusing on these choirs' actual performance of gospel music and how my role as the "authentic" black singer affected their performances.

In the final chapter, "Performance and/as Pedagogy: Performing Blackness in the Classroom," the issues of the previous chapter are extended in order to address more fully the implications of performing a text's "blackness" and to further discuss the implications of "teach-

ing" blackness. For this chapter I draw on as case studies the classes I have taught in the performance of literature. My course "Performance of African American Literature," for example, has brought into clear focus for students, as well as for me, the politics of representation, identity, appropriation, and appreciation of the Other—the slippage between romanticism, solipsism, and genuine dialogic engagement. I raise the question of authenticity not only at the textual level but also at the level of embodiment—at the level of performance—when nonblack bodies perform "black" texts. The resonance of multiple discourses—including those of racist stereotype—all register in that moment of material embodiment. Further, I discuss the ways in which "teacherly" bodies authorize racialized, gendered, and classed readings of literature. Although fraught with political and social consequences, I contend that the performance of African American literature may offer a site of genuine and honest inter- and intracultural dialogue as we all struggle over the meaning of "blackness."

The chapters in this volume bear the mark of individuality, yet they speak to and across one another in subtle and nuanced ways. I make some of these connections explicitly, while others must be inferred by the reader. Furthermore, the chapters are not meant to account for the innumerable ways in which blackness is appropriated, performed, signed, and authenticated; rather, they are offered as a vehicle through which to engage the continuous dialogue on racial identity in the United States and beyond its borders. Indeed, no study of racial identity and politics can accommodate the protean processes of black signification. While the disparate locations in which blackness is cited here speak to this conundrum, they also mark, in a productive manner I hope, the ubiquitous nature of racial identification, performance, and politics. The variety of critical methodologies I deploy are also in keeping with the diverse sites of inquiry, applying or developing, as other scholars have, theories that facilitate a specific reading of blackness and identity politics. I am thinking here of Kimberly Crenshaw's notion of "intersectionality," Patricia Hill Collins's "standpoint" theory, Cathy Cohen's "coalitional" politics, Dwight McBride's "racial authority," and my own "quare" studies.[32] These scholars and I, each in our own way, have devised theoretical frames to expand narrow definitions of blackness that either exclude women (Crenshaw) or gays and lesbians (McBride), or sexual-identity-based political move-

ments and/or theoretical paradigms that exclude gays and lesbians of color (Cohen and Johnson). The deployment of these and other scholars' work continues through the purposeful diversity of the chapters that follow.

The first three chapters in this volume focus explicitly on black queer sexuality, privileging as a subject of inquiry my own subject position as a black queer scholar. Indeed, while my sexuality is explicitly present throughout these first three chapters, this is not the case in chapters 4 and 5, where sexuality—at least my own—is less the focus. And yet the specter of my queerness lurks in these pages as well; that is, although my sexuality is not privileged as an object of inquiry in Australia or in my grandmother's living room, race and sexuality are always already imbricated in those sites. This is nowhere more apparent than in chapter 4, where the "mammy" trope my grandmother deploys in the telling of her narrative revives the discussion in chapter 3 about the ways in which black gay men appropriate and refigure the term "mother." Moreover, the conspicuous silences about my sexuality in chapter 5 in the context of Australia speak less to an exorcism of (my) sexuality than to the fact that Australian culture is less obsessed than is U.S culture with issues of (homo)sexuality. For sure, the margins of my field notes are filled with my exploits of going "Down Under" but, alas, these tales remain tangential to gospel music performance in the land of Oz. I offer this caveat not as an apology, but rather as a way to frame the methods deployed here and to point out the ways in which blackness is imbricated in multiple identity markers.

This book is an explicit attempt to fully entwine theory and praxis. In so doing, its chapters embrace the myriad intersections of culture and politics by calling attention to the process of *doing* blackness. Performance provides a portal for this process, allowing both maladroit and skilled cultural workers to press blackness into service. Finally, however, the chapters demonstrate the fallibility of the question of authenticity. Blackness, ever residing at the site of indeterminacy, leaves the authenticator wanting, posing yet another question: "Blackness where are you?"

1

THE POT IS BREWING

Marlon Riggs's *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*

There has been a history of excluding other black folk from community to the detriment of our overall empowerment.—Marlon Riggs

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, black gay poet and filmmaker Marlon Riggs committed his life to chronicling black American life. His early works, *Ethnic Notions* (1986) and *Color Adjustment* (1991), for example, documented the history of the images of blacks in art, artifacts, television, theater, and film. His most controversial work, *Tongues Untied,* however, debuted on the PBS *Point of View* series in 1990, and it chronicles Riggs's personal struggles with coming to terms with his racial and sexual identities, and with homophobia in black communities and racism in white communities. In one of the more poignant moments of *Tongues Untied,* a collage of obituaries of black gay men who have died of AIDS flashes on the screen while the sound of a heartbeat thumps in the background. This series of pictures is preceded by Essex Hemphill performing his poem "Now We Think," which emblematizes the paranoia of contracting HIV/AIDS experienced by gay men: "Now we think / as we fuck / this nut / might kill us. / There might be / a pin-sized hole / in the condom. / A lethal leak."[1] Echoing the poem's angst-ridden tone, Riggs announces that "a time bomb is ticking in my blood." The newspaper clippings of those who have fallen victim to AIDS appear in succession, appearing

more rapidly as they proceed, over which Riggs narrates: "I listen for my own quiet implosion, but while I wait, older, stronger rhythms resonate within me, sustain my spirit, silencing the clock." The last image of this series of pictures is that of Riggs himself, as if foreshadowing his own death that would come four years later. The "older, stronger rhythms" that "resonate" within him and "sustain his spirit" are represented in the collage of images following the series of obituaries, the first picture being one of Harriet Tubman who, for Riggs, is an emblem of the struggle for black freedom and equality, and who Riggs invokes even more prominently in his film *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*.[2]

In some ways *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* is the sequel to *Tongues Untied* in that although it broadens its scope to examine black identity in all of its contradictions and contingencies, the focus of the film is Riggs's battle with AIDS, which he apparently knew he had contracted when he filmed *Tongues Untied*. Riggs thus stages the fight for his life against AIDS within the broader context of black identity politics. For Riggs, the processes by which we fight deadly diseases such as AIDS and those by which we fight over the embattled status of blackness circumscribe the process by which we come into our humanity. In other words, when we "fix" and confine our identity as monolithic, we inhibit our road both to recovery from the diseases that plague our communities and to discovering our humanity. Taking the "fact" of the diseased and "black" body as givens, Riggs, according to Martin Favor, "refuses to delineate the boundaries of blackness even as [the film's title] invokes the category as truly experienced and, indeed, necessary."[3] Resonating the queer theory critique of identity as ontological, the film also allows for the subject's agency and authority by visually privileging Riggs's AIDS experience narrative. Indeed, the film's documentation of Riggs's declining health, highlighted by the reiteration of his declining T-cell count coupled with his own narration, suggests an identity and a body in the process of "being" and "becoming," of identity as performance and performativity.

Insofar as identity is performed and experienced as real, it constitutes a legitimate way through which subjects maintain control over their lives and their image. But performance does not foreclose the discursive signifiers that undergird the terms of its production. Through my reading of the film, then, I will focus on the dialectic

created between performance and performativity, demonstrating why one critical trope necessarily depends on the other in the process of identity formation. *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* demonstrates just how over-determined black identity and authenticity are by elaborating on the ways in which skin color alone is simultaneously an inadequate yet sometimes a socially, culturally, and politically necessary signifier of blackness.

In the first half of this chapter I will elaborate the process by which the film engages performativity to underscore the problematic pursuit of authentic identity claims. Although theories of performativity focus primarily on the performativity of gender, I engage a discussion about the performativity of race. One of the ways in which the film engages this critique is by pointing out how, at the very least, gender, class, sexuality, and region all impact the construction of blackness. Indeed, the title of the film—*Black Is . . . Black Ain't*—itself embodies how race defines, as well as confines, black Americans. The running trope used by Riggs to illuminate the multiplicity of blackness is gumbo, a dish whose ingredients consist of whatever the cook wishes. It has, Riggs remarks, "everything you can imagine in it." This trope also underscores the multiplicity of blackness insofar as gumbo is a dish associated with New Orleans, a city confounded by its mixed raced progeny and the identity politics that mixing creates. The gumbo trope is apropos because, like "blackness," gumbo is a site of possibilities. The film argues that when black Americans attempt to define what it means to be black, they delimit the possibilities of what blackness can be. At times, this process of demarcating blackness may be counterproductive to the flavor of the roux that acts as the base of the gumbo that is "blackness."

But Riggs's film does more than just stir things up. In many ways it reduces the heat of the pot to a simmer, allowing everything in the gumbo to mix and mesh yet maintain a distinct flavor; for after all, chicken is distinct from andouille sausage, rice from peas, bay leaf from thyme, cayenne from paprika. Thus, Riggs's film suggests that black Americans cannot begin to ask the dominant culture to accept their difference as Others nor accept their humanity until black Americans accept the differences that exist among themselves. Riggs's film does the work that Dwight McBride calls for: "[To] create new and more inclusive ways of speaking about race that do not

cause even good, thorough thinkers . . . to compromise their/our own critical veracity by participating in the form of race discourse that has been hegemonic for so long."[4] Indeed, as I demonstrate below, Riggs's "critical veracity" is relenting in his critique of race-privileging antiracist discourse such that gender, sexuality, and class constitute subject positions from which one may "speak" about race oppression.

The second half of this chapter focuses on the black body as a site of performance. Here I provide a rejoinder to racial performativity in order to intervene in what I see as some scholars' eclipsing of corporeality and materiality. Specifically, I construe Marlon Riggs's black body in the film as a site of discursivity *and* corporeality that calls attention to the social consequences of "having" AIDS and also "being" black. Rather than succumb to the essentialist/antiessentialist binary, I suggest that the "presence" of Riggs's black diseased body forces viewers of the film to confront not only the social impact of AIDS on the black community but also the impact of inhabiting a black identity in a racist society.

Before moving on to the analysis of *Black Is . . . Black Ain't,* I would like to offer a caveat about the terms of the film's production and how those terms could undermine the reading I am about to perform. As a documentary commissioned and funded by PBS, *Black Is* becomes implicated in the ideological trappings of that venue. In other words, although PBS has aired controversial programs, its reliance on public and federal funding has crippled its ability to make completely autonomous decisions about its programming. Indeed, conservatives such as Jesse Helms were instrumental in cutting funding for the National Endowment of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as PBS because these institutions were funding what the conservatives considered "indecent" art. Riggs's own *Tongues Untied* was caught in the backlash of this conservative wave during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which led some local PBS affiliates to keep the film from being aired. Thus, the fact that PBS partially funded and broadcast *Black Is* seems at odds with the fiscal blackmail under which the station now operates.

One way of reading PBS's support for the documentary, then, might be the fact that it chronicles a black gay man dying of AIDS. Viewed from this angle the film becomes an elegy for Riggs's death. The fact that the film is framed by the beginning scene of the announcement

that Riggs dies before its completion and at the end by the "in memoriam" along with Riggs's narration of his desire that the film's portrayal of his battle with AIDS helps us all see our humanity, makes the documentary complicitous in constructing a "universal" death narrative as opposed to pointing to the specificity of dying from AIDS.[5] Given the lack of support from conservatives in Congress for AIDS research, especially during the Reagan and Bush (both father and son) administrations, such a representation would necessarily diminish the specificity and devastating effects of AIDS on the black community, which—in light of the recent surge in the number of black Americans infected with HIV/AIDS, especially black women—cripples further the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS activism and advocacy within and outside black communities.[6]

An even more sinister agenda for allowing the film to air on PBS would rely on the racist logic that those viewing the film would automatically associate AIDS with blackness.[7] The emphasis on Riggs's illness and the focus on blackness make the film vulnerable to such a reading. Although these conjectures about the terms of the film's production may appear paranoid and conspiratorial, because film lives in the realm of the representational and therefore the ideological its meaning and interpretation are contingent on its historical and cultural reception.

The possibility of such readings notwithstanding, I offer a counterreading of *Black Is* through what David Román refers to as "critical generosity." "Critical generosity," Román argues, "is a practice that sets out to intervene in the limited perspectives we currently employ to understand and discuss AIDS theatre and performance by looking beyond conventional forms of analysis."[8] Indeed, my analysis of *Black Is* seeks to push past canonical and conventional forms of analysis in order to locate the manner in which this AIDS filmic performance signifies in ways that disrupt any *singular* reading of AIDS, death, and blackness. In fact, the power of Riggs's film might be in its ability to reveal the various modes of racist/antiracist discourse that circulate within and outside black culture. My reading of the film is similar to that of Teresa de Lauretis's reading of the film *Born in Flames:* "The originality of this film's project is its representation of woman as social subject and a site of differences; differences which are not purely sexual or merely racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these

together and often in conflict with one another. What one takes away after seeing this film is the image of the heterogeneity in the female social subject."[9] As opposed to the female social subject, Riggs specifically represents the heterogeneity of the black gay subject and of blackness in general.

My interest in *Black Is* also stems from its particularity as a filmic performance, as a genre that provides for a historiography of AIDS performance not always possible with other genres of performance. Unlike the difficulty theater historians have in documenting AIDS artistic productions because, in Román's words, "many of the artistic collaborators, producers, theatre staff, and spectators who participated in these productions and performances are also dead and therefore may leave no record of the events,"[10] the celluloid medium provides material documentation of such performances to which performance critics and historians may return. As another kind of "intervention," then, my analysis of *Black Is* is an attempt to keep alive and ever in the forefront the political advocacy of and discourse on HIV/AIDS education and prevention.

An Oreo Is Not Just a Cookie: Blackness and the Middle Class

Class represents a significant axis and divisiveness within black communities. Despite Stuart Hall's assertion that " 'black' is not the exclusive property of any particular social or any single discourse" and that "it has no necessary class belonging,"[11] there are those who trudge forward carrying the class card they believe guarantees their membership in authentic blackness. As Martin Favor persuasively argues, "authentic" blackness is most often associated with the "folk" or the working-class black.[12] Moreover, art forms such as folklore and the blues that are associated with the black working class are also viewed as more genuinely black.[13] This association of the folk with black authenticity necessarily renders the black middle class as inauthentic and apolitical. Indeed, over the years various black scholars, writers, and activists have located authentic blackness within poor and working-class black communities, suggesting, according to Valerie Smith, that the black working class "is an autonomous space, free of