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Performing Blackness

What African Americans Can Teach Sociology About Race

Sarah Susannah Willie

Introduction

Despite the challenges that postmodernism has levied against uniform notions of identity (Calhoun 1995), many sociologists continue to talk about groups and individuals as if their racial identities are immutable, monolithic, and non-negotiable. This legacy persists for at least two reasons. The first has to do with the definition of race itself. Most people use “race” to refer to categories of human differences, each category being a combination of ancestry, phenotype, and cultural tradition.¹ But Howard Winant cautions against seeing race merely as human difference without understanding its history. Winant argues that race is neither apolitical nor commonsensical, having its genesis in the modern world.

Although some forms of racial awareness preceded the rise of Europe, it was the European conquest of the Americas, Africa, and Asia and the introduction of the imperial forms of rule associated with capitalism that ushered in the consolidation of racial divisions in society. [This] is the historical context in which racial concepts of difference have attained their present status as fundamental components of human identity and inequality. (Winant 1994)

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1. As philosopher Lucius Outlaw notes, well before the advent of racial categories, human beings noted each other's differences, answering the “general need to account for the unfamiliar [and] to organize the life world” (1990, 62).

Since the definition of race itself has a politically loaded history and has slightly different meanings depending on the nation, culture, and time period one is studying, its definition remains contested by scholars and laypeople alike. In short then, one reason for treating race as if it is monolithic and unchanging is because its diversity seems overwhelming and its mutability so difficult to capture conceptually.

A second reason that sociologists have tended to mistreat the concept has to do with the way the discipline looks at the world. The most popular units of analysis in sociology are groups and institutions, rather than interpersonal dynamics where challenges to uniform identity are most likely to appear.

In this chapter, I briefly explore sociology's take on race and describe the three paradigms through which the discipline in the United States has tended to conceptualize it. Then, drawing on interview data from my own study of college-educated African Americans,² I suggest the addition of another paradigm to capture more fully what race has meant and can mean. I allude to the work of scholars in sociology, women's studies, and gay and lesbian studies, engaging Davis (1991), Waters (1990), Hughes (1945), and Butler (1991) as my interlocutors.

Three Paradigms

Over the past century, mainstream sociology has provided three overarching paradigms beyond primordial biological distinctions between people (Montagu 1964; van de Berghe 1967; Osborne 1971) to talk about race: stratification, economics, and social constructionism.³

Stratification theorists assume the hierarchical arrangement of society by ascriptive and acquired characteristics such as sex, class, and age. For these theorists, race is usually understood as a signifier of status or group membership,

2. From 1989 to 1991, I have interviewed more than sixty African Americans who had been undergraduates at one predominately black university, Howard, and one predominately white university, Northwestern. Participants in the study were all alumni and had been enrolled for at least two years at one of the two colleges between 1968 and 1988. Interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two and one-half hours and took place face to face or over the phone. I reached participants referred to in this article by pseudonym through the method of snowball sampling.

3. The sociologists who have used race in these ways are too numerous to list.

which either advantages or disadvantages individuals (Lieberson 1961; Wilson 1973; Blau 1977).

Sociologists who explain race economically have tended to follow conflict theories. Race is understood as an invention of emergent capitalism—together with an appropriation of Darwinism applied to the social world—that justified the treatment of some people as commodities and others as owners of commodities for the generation of profit. Or race is understood as a social fact that emerges from class conflict, like its correlates racial antagonism and race consciousness. Edna Bonacich's (1972) theory of split labor markets is an example of the latter.

Just as the approaches to race in the first quarter of the twentieth century synthesized biologic paradigms with stratification and economic ones (DuBois 1965; Park 1924), in the last quarter of the century, there were those approaches that synthesized stratification and economic paradigms treating race relations, racial expectations, and racial consciousness as a function of caste (Willie 1989) or class status (Wilson 1978). The theory of domestic colonialism, articulated by Blauner (1969), is an example of such a synthesis.

The third overarching paradigm is social constructionism, which can include stratification and economic paradigms insofar as race is assumed to be differently understood and defined across space and time. The meaning of race, these social constructionists argue, changes depending on the social context (Frankenberg 1993; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gossett 1963). Symbolic interactionism is one example of social constructionism. Here interaction between individuals and groups is the focus. Much of the time, symbolic interactionists have shown, individuals treat the race of a person or a group as a proxy for a range of things from danger or kinship to low status or trustworthiness. Within this paradigm, the meaning people give to each other's behavior is always understood symbolically and influences their interactions with each other (Thio 1994).

Although more sociologists are combining these paradigms for understanding race (Ansell 1997; Omi and Winant 1986; Winant 1994; Gilroy 1993; Gallagher 1998), for most of this century race has been given much more careful sociological consideration as a determinant, discrete, and intractable characteristic that either helps or hurts one.⁴ This tendency to see race as a variable

4. The explicit, if limited, way race is treated by sociology is interesting since it contrasts so sharply with the tendency of most Americans to dismiss the concept formally, even as they are

with fixed meaning runs the risk of obscuring how individuals and groups are also proactive agents and how race can play a positive role in group and individual identity.⁵ As scholarship from that of James Scott (1985) to Charles Payne (1995) demonstrates, people are not only acted upon, they also act.

Theorizing the Experiences of Black Alumni

The black college alumni I interviewed who came of age in the twenty years immediately following the heyday of the American Civil Rights movement—1968 through 1988—offer multiple descriptions of race and racial identity. They recollect that what it meant to be black changed over time; they refer to their racial identity as bestowing upon them insider as well as outsider status; they relay stories of how class, gender, and social exposure shaped their sense of themselves racially; and finally they recall feeling at different times the sense of racial constraint, possibility, or malleability.

The words of my respondents go beyond the idea advanced by social constructionists that race is understood differently across cultures and time to suggest that simply having as one's primary reference group or being physically surrounded by persons of one's own racial group is not sufficient to guarantee a similar understanding of or way of talking about race.

Henry and Robert provide examples of African Americans who are not in agreement about what it means to be black. In discussing the idea of "blackness" by behavior, Henry redefines blackness for the interviewer so that she will not confuse his behavior with a repudiation of his African heritage, and he distances himself from those African Americans whom he perceives as materialistic.

distracted by and preoccupied with it informally. This paradoxical behavior is the result of the fact that, since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, race has been treated as a marker that can only be understood negatively in a democratic society attempting to achieve racial justice, where justice is equated with equal treatment. The national embrace of color-blindness, for example, is not only a backlash of the Right against gains made by people of color, it also expresses the desire of many Americans to heal the racial pain of the past with the misplaced belief that such healing can only happen by refusing to acknowledge the differences that once set people apart. Stuart Hall discusses a new and more positive understanding of ethnicity: "What is involved is the splitting of . . . ethnicity between . . . the dominant notion which connects it to nation and 'race' and . . . a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery" (1992, 258).

5. Each pseudonym is followed by the abbreviation HU for Howard University or NU for Northwestern University and the class in which the alum entered.

I'm not a bona fide buppie; I don't have no BMW. I drive a Volkswagen. . . . I don't need a BMW. All I want is to be happy and have peace of mind. And that's what I have and school gave me that. School gave me my lifestyle. Everyone has to do it their own way. . . . There's something for everybody. I know people who get lost in the school. And I guess they happy, but I don't think they are 'cause it's like they're puttin' on. They're not real to me. I have this thing about being real. That's why I work on my lawn. I have to touch the earth. Because it's real. It's some substance. And you go and take a good look at it and you think it's just dirt, but this is life. This is what life is really about, believe it or not. It's not about the *Wall Street Journal* and what the stock market is doing. Life is in the ground. This is dirt. This is the base, where everything comes from and where we all will return. And we miss that sometimes; we forget about it. I try and stay in touch with that. I come home sometimes and cut my grass and dig in the lawn to keep my roots and know who I am. It's just like being black is not just wearing your hair a certain way or changing your name or going on different marches or reading this or caring about what they did in South Africa. That is not the basis of being black. We have a culture and a way we talk at times, what's more important to me is where we're going. You now, I think my definition of the black race is a certain pride: I am a black man and I can achieve. I am doing my best and I'm still black. I'm still black. I was very radical in school—I mean sandals, dashikis, I didn't cut my hair for three years. I cut it during my junior year and I didn't cut it again until I was working. That was the way it was. I'm a corporate soldier now. I won't lie. I have the uniform. I mean, I will admit it if anybody asks me: I'm a corporate soldier. (Henry, NU 1977)

What counts in Henry's definition of racial identity is less who his parents were or where he grew up and more who he is in the present. Using lawn care metaphorically, he describes what it means to be black and human, importantly indistinguishable for Henry. His analogy provides him with the space to do three things: one, to define who he is now; two, to include race in that definition; and three, to avoid an explicit rejection of his past. His description suggests a desire to move away from historical, behavioral, or ideological definitions of race.

While some African Americans may move toward all-encompassing economic definitions of race, such definitions are indistinguishable from how middle-class whites would talk about themselves racially. Psychologist Signithia Fordham's work suggests that Henry may be "constructing an identity that, on

the one hand, enhancing [his] sense of 'Self,' while, on the other hand, enhancing [his] sense of fit within a given context" (1993, 12). Similar to other post-Civil Rights era African Americans, Henry wants to be seen as an individual.⁶ And although he is not yet willing to give up the concept of racial identity—"my definition of the black race is a certain price"—if "blackness" means owning property with a lawn and tending to that, here its meaning has been subsumed within the rubric of class.

In contrast, Northwestern graduate Robert defines racial identity by his past associations: parents, neighborhood, high school, and friends:

[M]y freshman year it was not the thing to go to University Theater productions. And there was a group of us who were really into music and theater. Freshman year I never went to a University theater production. I didn't go to [the annual variety show], didn't go to concerts or anything. But sophomore year I started saying, "well, wait a minute, I know I'm black. I went to a black high school, I lived in a black neighborhood all my life, I really can do this without risking my blackness." (Robert, NU 1980)

Robert separates his racial identity from his broader, extraracial interests. Confident that his ties to the black community are clear to self and others, he considers his past an arsenal to respond to any accusation of not being authentically black. Robert's background conforms to the expectations of others enough to allow him to participate in unexpected activities without threatening either blacks or whites.

Henry is similarly conscious, and he understands that his contemporary decisions to own a house in a predominately white suburb, live the life of a "corporate soldier," and spend his leisure time tending his lawn make him vulnerable to attacks by both blacks and whites that he just wants to be white, does not know his place, or has forgotten where he comes from. It is precisely his awareness of the potential for being ill-received that leads to the somewhat par-

6. Fordham's work shows how more and more young blacks who have come of age in the post-Civil Rights era believe "that American society is truly democratic and that the individual makes it or fails based solely on ability. In the school context [they are] committed to the meritocratic ideas promulgated there and [do] not want to have any information around [them] that might suggest that what [they have] learned, and perhaps [are] learning . . . is misleading or even untrue" (Fordham 1993, 17).

adoxical descriptions of his behavior as both beyond race and examples of racial pride.

As the quotations from Robert and Henry both show, the expectations of others play an important role in how we see ourselves and each other. As Everett C. Hughes argues, “[P]eople carry in their minds a set of expectations concerning the auxiliary traits properly associated with many of the specific positions available in our society” (1945, 144). Several alumni mentioned high school guidance counselors and teachers who expressed low expectations of them. Hannah, for example, remembers:

The [counselor] in my high school told me I should go to beauty school. . . . That was her advice . . . and my English teacher was the same way. She was like, “You’ll never make it through your freshman year in college. Your writing skills are terrible.” And they were. Freshman English was the hardest class in my life, but I mean it really wasn’t encouraging. . . . [The guidance counselors] kind of pushed along their few favorites, and the rest of the people [were on their own]. (Hannah, HU 1988)

With the help of their parents or their own willpower, students like Hannah had to fight others’ expectations that they would not succeed in college.

During the college years, expectations combined with exposure and socialization were crucial elements for alumni’s being able to see possibilities for themselves and, by extension, to expand their ideas of what it meant to be black:

I had an opportunity to do an internship with IBM . . . and it was just a tremendous experience because it introduced me to things I’d never seen. . . . It put me in touch with minorities that owned sailboats and had prestigious jobs and lived a suburban, traditional kind of lifestyle, earning great sums of money—certainly by my standards. . . . [I]t just gave me a different sense of what one could truly accomplish. (Adam, NU 1974)

While Adam notes the possibility of being black and wealthy, Jennifer notes the experience of being introduced to corporate culture:

I was an intern at [a Fortune 500] corporation downtown in their corporate affairs department. . . . I got to go to the annual meeting, and got to go out to

dinner several times, and I got to go on a boat ride—I had never been on a boat, sailing—. . . . And I got to see how you're supposed to act when you're standing around human resource people; how to make small talk with people you could care less about. So it was enlightening. (Jennifer, NU 1988)

The findings of Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (1991) confirm the experiences of my respondents. The people whom they interviewed for *Blacks in the White Establishment* gained similar knowledge: “[I]n addition to the formal education they had received, many had acquired at least two skills that became part of their culture and social capital: the ability to talk with anyone about anything, and the ability to benefit from the access to influential people they had gained as a result of attending elite schools” (107).

Not all of my respondents described success in economic terms. Especially for those individuals who had grown up in situations where they saw limited options for their lives, the chance to go to college provided them with ideas about pursuits and occupations they had never considered.

[At college,] I just realized . . . There's really no limit to what I can do. . . . I think I got a real good idea [at Howard] of what it is to be black in a lot of different parts of the country, you can aspire to be something. (Karl, HU 1989)

Lydia's testimony below complements Karl's above, showing the importance of social context to how one sees oneself.

[I]n the ghetto in New Jersey . . . you'll always hear “niggers can't do this and niggers can't do that,” and “Niggers ain't this and niggers ain't that.” [I was always] looking up there and [seeing] them standing around on the corner. And it was just so uplifting to go to a black institution that has been there for over one hundred years. And it's still standing and it's operating day to day and you're turning out the *crème de la crème* of black society. . . . [I]t's very positive and uplifting. . . . And it was good to be a part of that. . . . I was excited to be a part of history, because I felt connected to everybody that had been through there. (Lydia, HU 1997)

In her explanation of why she loves Howard University, Lydia shows us three conceptualizations of race: how race operates as a status, how blacks suffer the effects of domestic colonialism, and how race is symbolically interpreted.

Clearly, race operates at several levels. If one is a member of a subdominant racial group, in this case black in a culture dominated by whites, fluency in both the subculture and the dominant culture is a matter of survival. Howard alum Joseph advises: “if a black student has a black background, he should probably experience a white environment. And if a black student has a white background, [he should probably experience a black environment]” (Joseph, HU 1971). Sally had gone to a predominately white private school, and she confirms Joseph’s advice:

[T]here’s no question there’s a lot to be gained from a black cultural experience. . . . There are sort of black traditions in [the] closed system [of black culture] that are acceptable [and others] that are not acceptable. . . . [College] was probably the first time in my life that I really got to know all these black folks. And so it was learning a lot about the culture, but it was learning by doing. I had never really been in a system that was predominately black. . . . And so, for that reason, I would certainly try to advocate to send my children to Howard or to a Howard-like school. (Sally, HU 1974)

Like Sally, Matthew had grown up in a predominately white environment, and he was “absolutely petrified” of being exposed as not “black enough” at Howard. He made some discoveries his first year:

[Y]ou grow up around all white people and none of them are going to Howard. In high school, my biggest problems came from black people, because I was class president and the [black students] saw me as being too white. . . . And I’m like, Oh, my god, I’m gonna go to a black school and these people are gonna harass me and I’m gonna hate it. And then I got there—and Howard is in a lower income area—and I was petrified. I had never even seen a project before. . . . I guess I had very low expectations in terms of me getting along with people. I thought that everyone was going to, like, hate me, and that everyone was gonna tell me that I talk like I was white. . . . It was a lot easier than I thought it was gonna be, because, I’d say, probably about half the students came from similar backgrounds [to my own]. . . . I thought American Top 40 [mainstream popular music] was gonna be laughed out of the dormitory, and you know, I’d walk down the hall and hear [the rock group] AC/DC and I was like, Oh, maybe I’m not that weird after all. Or you

know [some] people would assume I was from California or something. And I was like, no, that's [just] how people talk in suburbia. You know, it's not just a "valley" kind of a thing. (Matthew, HU 1986)

Matthew's reminiscence suggests that he was successful in convincing other African Americans of his own authentic—if different—black experience. In this example, it's clear that race is socially constructed even at the level of individual interaction.

Lucy, however, is not as sanguine as Matthew. Although she remembers that the Howard experience allowed her to see the diversity of black identities, she was disappointed that those identities did not live up to her expectation:

[A]ll the black people [are] . . . not unified in any one course or under our skin color; we are not going in the same direction . . . there are as many viewpoints as there are people . . . that's how [Howard] was. But I thought that if we were "the talented tenth," we're suppose to know better than to buy into all that other social [hierarchy] stuff. (Lucy, HU 1985)

Invoking DuBois's idealistic characterization of black leadership, Lucy expected blacks at Howard to be less cliquish and more politically unified. Finally, however, Lucy explains the discontinuity between her expectations and the reality of what she found as a personal problem. When asked if she would like to return, she says: "I'd like to go back and change me, not change anything about Howard" (Lucy, HU 1985).

As the Black Freedom movement came to a close in the last of the 1960s and early 1970s, definitions of blackness were changing and contested. But, Joseph continues, racial expectations are not just influenced by the racial mix in which one grows up, but also by the era:

[U]p until very, very shortly before [I arrived at college], it was an insult to be called black. . . . I was on both sides. I remember when you couldn't call me black. You know, Negro was acceptable; nigger was okay. Negro was just a nicer way of saying it. But we went from that to black, and everybody had to accept black. And black was cool. (Joseph, HU 1971)

As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, not everyone could risk defining black identity for themselves with impunity, especially not Northwestern students

who had grown up in predominately white environments. When I asked, “As for . . . the [members of the] black community who never sat at the black tables?” Robert responded, “Everyone talked about them, everyone. They were snubbed” (Robert, NU 1980).

Katrina, Northwestern class of 1981, was one of those black students who was snubbed. Having grown up surrounded by white people, she entered college ignorant of the fact, she says, that from the start, her blackness was in question. Trying to make sense of her marginality, she recalls her disappointment at not having been invited to the pre-freshman summer program that Northwestern sponsored for many of its entering black students:

I wasn't ever invited. I didn't know anything about it, which I still get a crick in my neck about it because I don't know how they determine who goes to [it] exactly. So you get up here and the black people are already cliqued off. . . . And I had made these [white] friends and so I like ate with my friends. And I guess it took me a while before I realized what a big deal some of the rules were. (Katrina, NU 1985)

Katrina was expecting to find a niche more easily than she did in the black community at Northwestern. Her friendships with whites were negatively judged by some of her black classmates. It is only in retrospect, she says, that she is aware of the expectations that her black classmates had of her; and she now understands that without having spent a certain amount of time with them, she was ostracized. And, although she spent the majority of her time with white women friends, she was never pursued romantically by white men.

Beyond symbolic interaction, the concepts of performance and status help us to understand Katrina's position. Socialized in an affluent and highly educated family and surrounded by white people as a high school student, Katrina entered college to a confusing reception. As a high school student, her advanced academic placement and family's affluence allowed her an elevated status. As she entered adulthood at Northwestern, she discovered her status at home was not necessarily consistent with the status of being black at college, or at least not a good fit with the racially polarized campus she joined. She eventually found another “outsider” to date, a black student who pledged a white fraternity but soon deactivated.

To a certain extent, then, Katrina faced what Hughes describes as the

dilemma of the contradiction of status: “[T]he more [the] individual, acquires of those elements of American culture which bring to others the higher rewards of success, the greater is his dilemma” (1945, 221). Hughes offers the example of the woman (whom he implies is white) or the Negro (whom he implies is male) who becomes a physician: “[T]he question arises whether to treat her or him as physician or as woman or Negro. Likewise, on their part, there is the problem whether, in a given troublesome situation, to act completely as physician or in the other role. This is their dilemma” (1984, 223).

Hughes mentioned five ways—two dependent upon the actions of the marginal individual, three dependent upon the society—for the marginality of such people to be reduced. First, the individual may “give up the struggle” and live according to the status or role that the dominant society assiduously has assigned him or her. Secondly, the individual may attempt to “resign from” the lower status to which the society would assign them. In such a case, she defines herself only as physician, for example, and works hard to avoid playing the role of “woman.” This, Hughes admits, is a “tragic theme of human drama. The temptation to resign, and even to repudiate, is put heavily upon marginal people” (1984, 224).

The three ways in which the society might change include, first, that one of the statuses might simply “disappear,” ceasing to have social meaning; second, “[o]ne or both of the statuses might . . . be so broadened and redefined” that formerly marginal people no longer face a dilemma; or third, the society might designate additional and discrete categories for people who occupy such marginal statuses (1984, 223–24).

The limitation of Hughes’s analysis is that he did not carefully examine how people negotiate their statuses. Some people—even in 1949 when he authored this essay—no doubt negotiated with certain amounts of success such “contradictory class locations” (Wright 1985). A close analysis of their situations would have revealed the extent to which their statuses were malleable and performative. But Hughes does point us in the right direction:

[W]e might distinguish between that kind of protest which is merely a squirming within the harness, and that which is a questioning of the very terms and dimensions of the prevailing status definitions. . . . [T]here is still much work to be done . . . on the processes by which the human biological individual is integrated . . . into a status system. (Hughes 1984, 228)

Considering how Hughes uses the language of roles and status, it is striking that he did not bring us closer to a serious questioning of race and sex roles as well as discussion of their performative nature.⁷

It is further interesting that for Hughes, the only choices open to the so-called marginal man or woman are to embrace the degraded status, to reject the degraded status, or to wait for the society to change. There is no middle ground in Hughes's schema, no place where the individual may negotiate his status, temporarily turning it off, creating with his colleagues, family, or friends new definitions of reality.

Other sociologists, however, have taken the metaphors of performance and dramaturgy further (Mead 1934; Berger and Luckmann 1966). "Constructing an identity" and "playing" that identity out have been twin themes in the scholarship of many twentieth-century sociologists. Erving Goffman (1959), for example, uses performance as a central organizing theme around which he proposes a theory of human action.

Most people do not think of themselves as *acting* when they behave in ways that feel natural and normal, and for this reason, the analogy of human behavior to drama makes most of us uncomfortable. It forces us to face the inevitability of confronting the labels, status, or behaviors with which we identify as invented, fake, and insubstantial. One of Goffman's most radical claims and helpful observations is that we are all performing all of the time. For him, performance has a broader meaning than simply living out a role or attempting to deceive others; performance need not convey insincerity or deception. He argues that we are always living for an audience simply because we cannot escape the presence of the social world; it is always with us, even if only in our minds.

Those scholars who have taken the fluidity of race seriously have often done so under the rubric of ethnicity. In *Ethnic Options* (1990), Mary Waters offers an excellent analysis of ethnicity's shifting boundaries with her study of U.S. census and other survey data. While confining her observations to white ethnics, she argues that, "[E]thnic identification is . . . a dynamic and complex social phenomenon" (Waters 1990, 16). Her findings reveal that European Americans treat ethnic affiliation as provisional and assumable. Her observation that white Americans conflate race with ethnicity is one of her most important

7. At the same time, Hughes's assumption appears to have been that the status system itself was beyond question. His focus, therefore, was how individuals are integrated in and respond to such systems rather than questioning the validity of the systems themselves.

contributions. One implication of this conflation is that white Americans “put on” and “take off” their ethnicity while remaining angry with people who claim ethnic oppression but cannot similarly “disrobe.” Implicit in Waters’ statement, however, is its complement that for African Americans, ethnic identification involves only constraint. Although the constraints are still much greater for any American dweller who appears to have African ancestry, I argue that constraint alone does not adequately describe the racial or ethnic identities of black Americans.

Most scholars have used the concepts of race and ethnicity in the same breath and yet alternately attribute distinctive meanings to them. Davis (1991) suggests that a racial group refers to people who share obvious *physical* characteristics while an ethnic group refers to people who share a sense of *cultural* identity (1991, 18). Although he admits that many people who identify as black have more European than African ancestry (1991, 13), in the final analysis, Davis’s own reason for noting that “most blacks are physically distinguishable from whites” rests on a socially specific, and often biologically inconsistent, agreement of what constitutes “physically distinguishable” or “black.” He argues further that people can belong to an ethnic group without belonging to the same racial group and vice versa. Then, despite the increasing economic, religious, and socioeconomic diversity among Americans of African ancestry, Davis proclaims that all black Americans belong to both the same racial and ethnic group (1991, 18). Davis is not alone when he decides to assert who is black and what that means. Another example of other-aspiration is the United States’s “one drop rule” and the very different implications it has for blacks than it does for whites.

Likewise, pushing against the constraints that narrow biological definitions have offered for more complicated definitions of social life, women’s studies and gay/lesbian scholars argue that masculinity, femininity, and androgyny are each a set of social expectations that are distinct from the biological sexes (Anderson, Connell, Stoltenberg, Kimmel, Caplan). The concept of gender, for example, has been successful in helping many people differentiate between role and biology.

Judith Butler (1991) provides us with a model for understanding that racial identity, too, is continuously reinstated and reinvented by emphasizing the ways in which sexual identity is also continuously reinstated and reinvented. Implicit in Butler’s argument are two tenets: first, that changes in anyone’s routine depend on the audience, and second, that an uncertainty exists in the mind

of the actor that betrays the instability of the identity, racial or sexual, at which the actor is “playing.”

By referring to sexual orientation, Butler makes these ideas concrete. She discusses heterosexuality as a role and an institution that is compulsively played out, rather than always or only as biologically determined. In the very need or decision to repeat the performance for others, she argues that the actor betrays the nature of the characteristic in question as at most unreal and at least incoherent and unstable. The characteristic in question might be straightness, masculinity, or whiteness; it might also be gayness, femininity, or blackness. Butler’s point here is that the people with dominant characteristics—which also enjoy higher status—are compelled to remind others of them again and again in order to prove themselves to be more real, in other words, more worthy of that high status.

Clearly, to embrace the understanding that identity is always changing, in fact, must be repeated in order to (re)affirm itself, is one of the primary dilemmas for the postmodern black. Every person who has so recently learned to embrace a previously degraded identity now finds her- or himself in a world where racial identity is regularly contested and clearly not fixed.

Several Northwestern alumni remember taking advantage of this historical moment where identity was regularly contested and clearly not fixed. They admitted playing with or against the expectations that white people had of black behavior. Deborah explains, “[Y]ou know, when you had a ‘fro out to here [she stretches her hands six inches away from her head] and your hat on and sunglasses, I mean nobody was messin’ with you!” (Debbie, NU 1975).

Another Northwestern alum remembers mimicking white expectations. This was one way to undermine their construction of blackness:

[O]ne of my [sorority sisters] had a [white] roommate: she was extremely rich. Her name was Sally, and Pat [my soro] was her roommate. . . . Sally was flexible [and she realized that the whole time while she was growing up] her parents told her that blacks were this and black were that. The whole stereotypical [thing]. So when she came, it was like [she was] smart, you know. [She realized] “You’re just like me.” She had a car, [and] you weren’t supposed to have a car freshman year, but she knew somebody [in the administration] at Northwestern so she was able to have a car. Her mom and her sister and them came up, so what we did is we gave them the stereotypical black. And Sally pretended like she was assimilated so well [to her black roommate]

that now she was like us. . . . Her parents ran out. [And then] she said, “Oh my gosh!” So we had to [run after them,] grab ‘em, and bring ‘em back. And then finally we became very good friends with her mom and dad. And we laugh about it to this day. (NU female alum)

The ability to “play” with stereotypes or assume them for a specific purpose tells us about the malleability of race and racial stereotypes. Unlike “passing,” this is less about pretending to be something one is not and more about pretending to be something one is thought to be.

Below, John characterizes living in a predominately white world as “a game” or performance, albeit a very serious one, that does not necessarily demand twenty-four-hour attention:

[T]here’s a game that gets played from 9 to 5. And if you realize it’s a game, then you win the game. Because then you play from 9 to 5 and after 5 o’clock you don’t play it anymore. And unless you realize that, and that teaching, I think, comes from being around white people and realizing that there’s a certain time when you can click this shit off. ‘Cause they don’t want to be at your parties either, okay? (John, NU 1980)

What characterizes both of the two examples immediately above, even more than the examples of Henry and Robert that opened this chapter, is the explicit awareness of manipulating one’s audience.

Conclusion

A closer examination of the experiences of African Americans reveals that a 1950s paradigm performance is useful for sociologists who attempt to capture more completely what we mean when talking about the social construction of race. If we combine Erving Goffman’s idea of dramaturgy with DuBois’s awareness of the double consciousness, and incorporate work on sexuality and gender roles from women’s studies and gay/lesbian studies, performance is a logical addition to sociology’s understanding of race. Furthermore, using performance to understand race reminds us that agency has always been present in many of the sociological musings on race, but rarely taken further. Listening carefully to how African Americans talk about their own racial identity reveals that they do not see race as only something that *happens to* people, but as a dy-

namic that is negotiated, resisted, embraced, and performed with each interaction. This more fluid understanding of race is important to acknowledge, not just so we are reminded that people in subordinate positions have agency, but so that we are reminded that persons in subordinate positions have racial agency as well as racial responsibility.