"ACTING WHITE," 'BLACKNESS,' AND EDUCATION

Warren E. Christian

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the School of Education.

Chapel Hill 2009

Approved by Advisor: Lynda Stone Reader: Rita O'Sullivan Reader: James Trier

ABSTRACT

WARREN E. CHRISTIAN: "Acting White," 'Blackness,' and Education (Under the direction of Lynda Stone)

Black students' fear of being accused of "acting white" has been offered as one reason for the achievement gap between black and white students (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). This thesis places the debate over Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" hypothesis into the context of racial 'authenticities' as a way to explain the contradictory conclusions of the research. Racial 'authenticity' is then problematized using Paul Gilroy's (2000) denunciation of race presented in *Against Race*. The claims to 'blackness' Gilroy finds in black popular culture along with representations of "acting white" are illustrated in Disney's *High School Musical* (2006). Lastly, the call to give up race is situated within the context of educational research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Before receiving the Democratic presidential nomination, some pundits and political figures frequently asked one question about Barack Obama: "Is he black enough?" In Obama's unsuccessful campaign for the US House of Representatives in 2000 and his successful campaign for the US Senate in 2004, his opponents publicly doubted Obama's 'blackness' (Clayton, 2007; Staples, 2007). During the presidential primaries, questions of Obama's 'blackness' emerged at the fore of the national stage.

Author, blogger, and writer Debra Dickerson opened the floodgates in the presidential primaries when she disbelieved Obama's black 'authenticity' in the online magazine *Salon.com* (www.salon.com). For Dickerson (2007), Obama's inability to claim a link to slave ancestry due to his white mother and Kenyan father made him "black' but not black." She wrote, "Not descended from West African slaves brought to America, he steps into the benefits of black progress (like Harvard Law School) without having borne any of the burden." While Dickerson's main concern was Obama's ancestry, she claimed his phenotypic racial signifiers also betrayed his claim to 'blackness.' Dickerson noted, "[W]hen the handsome Obama doesn't look eastern (versus western) African, he looks like his white mother."

After Dickerson broached the subject on the liberal website, analysts from various points on the political spectrum weighed in and offered additional reasons to question Obama's 'blackness.' Although he came from a modest background, his financial gains were cited. His education at a private secondary school and the Ivy League institutions Columbia and Harvard Law also raised the question of what in this thesis is named black 'authenticity.' Obama not only attended these elite institutions, which are not considered part of the 'black experience,' but excelled academically, which accounted for his admission in the first place. Obama himself, aware of the doubt surrounding his 'blackness,' said, "There are elements within the Black community who might suggest 'Well, he's from Hyde Park' or 'He went to Harvard' or 'He was born in Hawaii, so he might not be Black enough'" (Fletcher, 2007, p. 2).

Despite prior questions about Obama's 'blackness,' there is no doubt that a black family currently resides in the White House. Obama's election marked a new moment in America's history. It demonstrated how far race relations in America have come. However, the questions of Obama's 'blackness' also revealed how race continues to be seen as a limiting force in America. Racial 'authenticities' determine what behavior and attitudes are seen as legitimate for racialized individuals. The apparent incompatibility between 'blackness' and academic success demonstrated through the suspicion of Obama's black 'authenticity' is especially troubling in the field of education.

Indeed, attitudes towards schooling affect academic success. If students perceive academic achievement as outside of their racialized identity, then they are

more likely to perform poorly in school. For that matter, if teachers view academic achievement as outside a student's racialized identity, then the student will suffer. The persistence of an achievement gap between black and white students provokes the question of whether ideas of black 'authenticity' contribute to black students' performance. The gap is most often observed in standardized test scores, but high school graduation rates, course selection, and enrollment in post-secondary education also elucidate the gap. Poor academic performance can have lifetime negative effects on employment opportunities and salary. The picture is complex: since the 1960s, data suggests that the black-white achievement gap has steadily narrowed. However, in the late 1980s the trend reversed again and the gap began to widen (Lee, 2002). Aware of this complexity, a host of educational research continues to seek to explain the achievement gap in hopes that understanding the root causes will, ultimately, lead to the closure of the gap. Early on, anthropologists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) popularized the idea that one reason black students perform poorly in school is for fear of being accused of "acting white." Subsequently, newer educational research has engaged Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" hypothesis.

The theory, which captured the attention of scholars and the broader public alike, established a baseline for consideration of the achievement gap for several decades. Now over twenty years old, "acting white" 1 continues to elicit debate and confusion. In this thesis, placing "acting white" within the context of the broader and

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¹ As per the literature, unless otherwise noted, "acting white" will be used as shorthand for Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) hypothesis that one reason black students perform poorly in school is the fear of being accused of "acting white."

more pervasive issue of racial 'authenticity' provides for a possible reconciliation of contending theories surrounding "acting white." Incorporating "acting white" within racial 'authenticity' also suggests a different course of action to close the achievement gap than the literature that argues for and against the hypothesis. As with "acting white," ideas of racial 'authenticity' are too complex to be willfully changed. The remedy posed in this thesis will be to give up 'race.' An overview of the thesis follows.

Educational researchers provide evidence highlighting and discounting the existence and consequences of the "acting white" phenomenon based on a variety of qualitative and quantitative data. Also, researchers dispute the circumstances surrounding the production of "acting white" as a concept. The first section of this thesis will be a summary of this research.

As a way to account for the disparate research findings, the "acting white" hypothesis will be situated in the wider concept of black 'authenticity' in the second section. Emphasis will be placed on the fluid and contentious nature of 'authenticity.' The role commercial media plays in constructing and challenging racial 'authenticities' and claims to 'authenticity' will be confronted.

In the third section, "acting white" will be cast as a symptom of the larger problem of racial 'authenticity' instead of merely a harmful aspect of the otherwise benign racial 'authenticity'. Using the works of Paul Gilroy (1991, 1993, 2000), the danger and potential harm of racial 'authenticities' and ethnic absolutisms will be examined. Special attention will be paid to his call for the elimination of raciology, defined as race-based thought and action, imparted in his text (2000), *Against Race*:

Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line. A distinction will be drawn between past denunciations of race and Gilroy's call for a "planetary humanism," which includes a call for action. He sets out to detail the past and potential harm caused by raciology. While commending the racial solidarity movements of the past for their gains, Gilroy sees their present incarnations as ineffective and potentially dangerous, even fascistic. For him, new scientific ways of viewing the body that pay no heed to skin color and the blurring of racial lines signal that the time to cast off 'race' has arrived.

In the last substantive section, an analysis of Disney's *High School Musical* (2006) will interrogate whether the aspects of black popular culture that Gilroy finds so troubling, specifically hip-hop, are also found in a white/non-racialized, tween, Disney production. If Gilroy's notion of the hybridity of culture holds true, articulations between hip-hop culture and Disney should be found. Additionally, *High School Musical* will function as an example of the interplay between 'authentic blackness' and "acting white." Finally the thesis ends with the question of whether educational research can or should quit 'race.'

As part of this introduction, the use of certain phrases will be addressed.

Black and white 'authenticity' will be used more or less interchangeably with 'whiteness' and 'blackness.' Single quotation marks signify the author's non-belief that there is one or even multiple ways of thinking or acting in a racially 'authentic' manner. Genuine ways of being black, white, or otherwise racialized do not exist. 'Race' will be viewed as an ever-changing social construct with a fictitious base in biology. Racial categories are not inevitable, but they have profound consequences.

This paper, overall, questions whether 'race' can be given up to put an end to the negative consequences.

CHAPTER 2

"ACTING WHITE"

While attending to race in other ways, education literature lacks a debate over the role of racial 'authenticities' in education. For twenty years there has been a sustained discussion of "acting white," which relates directly to 'authenticity.' This section will address the origin of "acting white." Next, a few ensuing studies that dispute the existence of "acting white" will be given as examples of the contentious nature of the debate. Initially, the focus will remain on studies that employed qualitative methods followed by quantitative studies. The discussion of the presence of "acting white" will end on two studies that observed the same schools during the same time period and reached differing conclusions. Finally, several conceptual challenges to "acting white" will be explored.

Although Fordham and Ogbu (1986) receive much of the credit for introducing the idea of "acting white," Clare McArdle and Nancy Young's (1970) "Classroom Discussion of Racial Identity or How Can We Make It without 'Acting White'?" may contain the earliest mention of the idea. In their qualitative study, McArdle and Young, a social worker and school psychologist respectively, described meetings of black and white students designed to help them transition to a new high school. To the surprise of white students, black students sought to gain equal rights and

opportunities without full assimilation to 'white culture.' The black students explained, "To become more inhibited, more formal, or to lack 'soul'" was to "act white" (McArdle & Young, 1970, p. 137).

It appears that the idea of "acting white" lay relatively dormant until Fordham and Ogbu's work in 1986, which sparked a discussion that continues to this day. In their qualitative, ethnographic study of the almost exclusively black, urban "Capital High" in Washington, D.C., students gave more precise definitions of "acting white" than a lack of "soul." They specified activities such as hiking, camping, mountain climbing, having cocktail parties, listening to "white" music, doing volunteer work, being on time, and going to the opera or ballet. Most importantly for Fordham and Ogbu, "acting white" also entailed spending too much time in the library, studying excessively, and achieving academically.

For Ogbu, the notion of "acting white" represented a new direction in his previous studies of black students. His earlier explanations for the achievement gap between black and white students concentrated on a cultural-ecological perspective (1978, 1981). From this viewpoint, black Americans' substandard schooling, limited job prospects after completing school, and the response of blacks to the aforementioned barriers explained the achievement gap between black and white students. While this perspective marked an improvement over previous models that emphasized genetic differences and cultural deficiencies, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) recognized the failure of his earlier model to account for black students who perform well in school.

In order to be able to explain black students' academic successes, Fordham and Ogbu added the two concepts of an "oppositional collective . . . identity and an oppositional cultural frame of reference" to Ogbu's earlier work (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183). Out of their research, they argued that black Americans develop an oppositional collective identity due to enduring and systemic oppression. Blacks realize that they will never be treated the same as whites, thereby creating a shared sense of collective identity. The oppositional cultural frame, developed alongside collective identity, serves to protect and maintain boundaries between black and white Americans. In developing the frame, black Americans reject certain activities, manners, and signs for their perceived proximity to 'whiteness.' Simultaneously, they define behaviors not associated with white Americans as more legitimate. Fordham and Ogbu's description of a black oppositional cultural frame coincides with the idea of black 'authenticity' that will be discussed shortly.

Fordham and Ogbu articulated oppositional collective identity with the anthropological idea of fictive kinship that describes reciprocal kin-like relationships between people not related by blood or marriage. In addition to its more academic sense, Fordham and Ogbu use fictive kinship more generally to denote the sisterand brotherhood of black Americans, and this is evidenced in the kinship terms often ascribed by black Americans to others. This represents a "cultural symbol of collective identity" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 184). Importantly, fictive kinship allows for one to be black in color but not regarded as a member of the black community. One can choose not to seek membership into the black fictive kin structure, or one can be denied membership, partially or wholly, based on accord

with the established oppositional cultural frame. Accusing members of "acting white" acts as a sanction and is incompatible with "acting black" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

In this seminal study, Fordham and Ogbu first presented the stories of four underachieving black students who, through high scores on standardized tests, had shown academic promise but failed to perform well in classes. The students admitted not performing to their potential academically for fear of being labeled a "brainiac" or accused of "acting white." Fordham and Ogbu also told the stories of four students who achieved high scores on standardized tests and performed well academically. These students described their strategies for downplaying their academic achievements and resisting being called a "brainiac" or accusations of "acting white" by playing sports, being a clown, or making friends with bullies. Fordham and Ogbu concluded that "acting white" was one reason why black students performed poorly in school.

Fordham and Ogbu's work garnered much attention from both outside and inside the academy. Since its publication, at least 158 articles in the popular media have referred to Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" hypothesis (O'Connor, Horvat, & Lewis, 2006). For example, journalist Ron Suskind (1994a, 1994b) won the Pulitzer Prize for his stories chronicling high-achieving black students in an impoverished high school in Washington, D.C. About eight years later in the same area, he reported similar findings to Fordham and Ogbu's.

In a critical incident, Suskind (1998) described a series of assemblies where students with straight A's on their report cards received acknowledgement and a \$100 check. Relating the scene, he wrote, "The jeering started. It was thunderous.

'Nerd!' 'Geek!' 'Egghead!' And the harshest, 'Whitey!' . . . The honor students were hazed for months afterward. With each assembly, fewer show up" (1998, p. 3). Most of the attention towards "acting white" in the popular media sought to corroborate Fordham and Ogbu's conclusion.

In the academy, researchers assessed Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" hypothesis in a variety of locations as indicated through both qualitative and quantitative methods with varied results. A review of qualitative research reveals the inconsistency of conclusions as to whether "acting white" exists and to its impact. In his own follow-up study, Oqbu (1999) obtained results, again through ethnographic research, to support his "acting white" hypothesis in Oakland, California. In additions, sociologist Karolyn Tyson working with economist William Darity and Research Scientist Domini Castellino (2005) studied two middle schools and six high schools in various urban/suburban/rural settings in North Carolina. Through interviews, they found evidence supporting the "acting white" hypothesis in only one high school. In all others, they found that high-achieving students faced peer ridicule regardless of race, as stated in their title, "It's Not 'a Black Thing." On the other hand, sociologists Roslyn Mickelson and Anne Velasco's (2006) study of black students in advanced placement (AP) classes in Charlotte, North Carolina, revealed that some academically able black students chose not to take advanced courses for fear of accusations of "acting white." It was concluded that this accounted partially for the under-representation of blacks in AP. In still another locale, educational psychologist David Bergin and sociologist of education Helen Cooks (2002), working in a "midsized mid-western city," found, through interviews, that some academically

successful black students face accusations of "acting white," but they concluded that a fear of "acting white" could not be linked to poor performance among black students (p. 132). Lastly, in interviews with students in nine high schools throughout the country, psychologist Laurence Steinberg, sociologist Sanford Dornbusch, and educational psychologist Bradford Brown (1992) concluded that black students are more likely to face a choice between academic success and popularity.

Quantitative studies have reached equally varied conclusions regarding "acting white." Two studies looked at "acting white" using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS; Cook and Ludwig, 1998; Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998). Both compared self-reported popularity with academic achievement. Sociologists James W. Ainsworth-Darnell and Douglas B. Downey observed that blacks expressed more pro-school attitudes than whites. Economists Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig (1998) found that higher-achieving blacks and whites were more popular, and the correlation between academic success and popularity was, if at all different, stronger for black students. Both of these studies failed to find evidence to support the "acting white" hypothesis.

In a third study, economists Roland G. Fryer, Jr. and Paul Torelli (2006) used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health database to search for evidence of "acting white" in schools. They described "acting white" narrowly as academic achievement as measured by GPA and compared this with popularity based on friendship networks. They computed students' popularity by observing how many people listed them as friends and how many of their friends were listed by others. Fryer and Torelli argued that their measure of popularity was superior to the

self-reporting method used in the NELS based studies. They confirmed their network approach to popularity by finding that those involved in sports, cheerleading, and student government were shown to be more popular than those involved in a math or book club. Indeed, Fryer and Torelli found "large racial differences in the relationship between popularity and grades" (p. 27). Moreover, while white students' popularity increased with increased GPA, black students' popularity increased less with GPA, and there was a sharp decrease in popularity when black students' GPAs rose above 3.5. Fryer and Torelli supported Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "acting white" hypothesis by proving that black students with very high grades were less popular than white students with very high grades. However, the absence of "acting white" at predominately black schools led Fryer and Torelli (2006) to reject Fordham and Ogbu's "oppositional cultural frame" theory. They concluded that the effects of "acting white" should be just as prominent in predominately black schools in order to support the oppositional cultural frame hypothesis especially since Fordham and Ogbu developed the theory in a nearly all-black school.

All of the abovementioned discrepancies in the existence and effects of "acting white" could be explained by differences in time and place. However, Ogbu (2003) and economist Ronald Ferguson (2001) both conducted research in Shaker Heights, an affluent suburb of Cleveland, around the same time (1997 and 1999 respectively) and obtained significantly different results. Through his ethnographic research in Shaker Heights' middle and high school, Ogbu observed that white students often studied together and encouraged academic achievement; black students did not study together and sometimes encouraged each other to do poorly

in school. Some black high school students related making good grades with "acting white;" more often, behaviors conducive to doing well in school constituted "acting white," such as taking AP and honors courses, speaking Standard American English, and participating in classes.

Ferguson's (2001) data came from the Cornell Assessment of Secondary School Student Culture completed by almost all seventh through eleventh graders in the Shaker Heights schools. Blacks and whites described similar levels of peer pressure against academic achievement. Blacks reported spending more time on homework than whites but completing less homework. Ferguson concluded that black students "have fewer skills and get less help at home" (p. 34). He found that black students were less likely to enroll in AP courses or participate in class. However, when nonracial family background factors of income and level of parental education were controlled for, black males appeared more interested in school than white males, and there was no difference between black and white females. Also, black students scored significantly lower than whites in the sixth grade proficiency test accounting for differences in AP enrollment. Lastly, Ferguson explained the gap in enrollment in honors and AP courses between blacks and whites this way:

Socially, keeping up with other black students can involve watching television for two to three hours nightly to participate in daily lunch-table discussions, staying current with new music releases, playing sports, and staying on pace with changing fads in clothing and hair styles (hair is a major focus among black girls). (p. 35)

Ferguson concluded, "the present study finds no clear evidence that black students in Shaker Heights are any more opposed to achievement, any less satisfied with school, or any less interested in their studies than their white counterparts—

especially those who have similar family backgrounds" (p. 35). For Ferguson, differences in academic skill level and academic technique accounted for the gap in achievement in Shaker Heights.

Perhaps, the variability of findings on the existence and impact of "acting" white" can be traced to largely methodological differences. Both how the research defines "acting white" and the research tools employed affect the results. "Acting white" does not exist only in the context of schools, but applies to many aspects of life (Fordham, 2006; Ogbu, 2004). Therefore, the absence of "acting white" in schools does not disprove the notion of "acting white" in other contexts. Additionally, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) presented "acting white" as an additional hindrance to black students' academic achievement not the cause of poor academic achievement. In response to critics, Ogbu (2004) stated that "societal, school and other community forces that discourage academic engagement" contribute to poor performance among black students more than "acting white" (p. 30). Fordham and Ogbu never intended for "acting white" to be the major explanatory factor in black students' academic performance, so research that finds other factors to be more significant does not necessarily disprove its hypothesis. Furthermore, the links Fordham and Ogbu made between the anthropological ideas of oppositional cultural frame and fictive kinship to arrive at "acting white" suited their methodological choice of ethnography as their means of inquiry. Conversely, quantitative methods seem less capable of capturing the nuance of "acting white." Lastly, given that the "acting white" hypothesis originated over 20 years ago, its validity today must be questioned. Studies affirming and refuting the hypothesis do not appear to show any temporal

pattern. The results do not seem to be trending in either direction even as the attention paid to "acting white" has remained steady. Meanwhile, since the original study the achievement gap has grown (Lee, 2002). In the next section, racial 'authenticity' will be introduced in an attempt to further explain the conflicting findings.

While the debate over the existence and impact of "acting white" continues, others have disputed the conceptual origins of the idea itself. Some of Fordham and Ogbu's most outspoken critics Margaret Spencer, William Cross, Vinay Harpalani, and Tyhesha Goss (2003) took issue with several aspects of Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" theory. Spencer et al. accused Fordham and Ogbu of ignoring the importance that black Americans have placed on education since slavery. They detailed the pains blacks have taken to secure an education throughout American history. They argued that the model ignores structural barriers to black academic achievement and, instead, focuses on cultural deficiency. Lastly, they claimed Fordham and Ogbu overlooked developmental aspects of racial identity that may better explain black students' academic achievement or lack thereof.

Spencer et al. (2003) turned, alternatively, to psychologist William Cross's Nigresence model (1971; Cross et al., 1991), as a better explanatory theory.

According to the model, blacks progress through four stages of racial identity formation: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization.

During the pre-encounter stage, black youth display a Eurocentric worldview until they reach the encounter stage when an experience leads them to realize they will never be fully accepted into white society. This realization leads to the immersion-emersion stage, which is characterized by an increased awareness of racism, strong

identifications of a black identity and anti-white feelings. Lastly, individuals who have reached the internalization stage possess a secure black identity and do not hold anti-white feelings (Spencer et al., 2003). Spencer et al. cited research that reports black students in the first three stages of racial identity perform poorly in school while black students who have reached the internalization stage perform better in school.

Spencer et al.'s criticism of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) does not seem wholly warranted. In a 2004 article, Ogbu detailed how "acting white" relates to different actions throughout history to answer the charge of ignoring historical implications. Ogbu also reiterated that "acting white" constituted just one aspect of explaining blacks' academic achievement. In the introduction to *Beyond Acting White:*Reframing the Debate on Black Student Achievement, Carla O'Connor et al. (2003) explained that much of the criticism of Fordham and Ogbu results from taking their "acting white" hypothesis out of its context. They stated that critics ignore the steps Fordham and Ogbu took to get to their "acting white" hypothesis.

Indeed, Spencer et al. (2003) may be guilty of this charge. Fordham and Ogbu did not ignore the structural barriers to education that blacks faced, as Spencer et al. accused them; rather, Fordham and Ogbu saw "acting white" as both a response to those barriers as well as an additional difficulty. Spencer et al. considered the "acting white" theory a culturally deficient model; for Fordham and Ogbu, it was a response to culturally deficient models. Spencer et al.'s criticism assumes that the oppositional cultural frame that Fordham and Ogbu described was deficient. However, Fordham and Ogbu saw negative attitudes towards schooling as

a reasonable response to the minimal job prospects afforded by academic success and the lower quality of educational opportunities when compared with white students.

To insist that black students do not perform as well as white students in school simply because they exert peer pressure on each other to perform poorly should be viewed carefully. This position too easily exonerates the societal factors that contribute to black students' low achievement while blaming the students.

Although their critics charged them of promoting the aforementioned position,

Fordham and Ogbu explained that "acting white" comes about as a response to systemic racism that gives black students worse learning environments and fewer rewards for doing well in school. Later a similar claim of 'blaming the victim' leveled against Gilroy's (2000) *Against Race* will be examined, but first, placing the "acting white" theory in the wider notion of racial 'authenticity' will serve as an attempt to resolve some of the divergent conclusions about "acting white." This is the focus of the next section.

CHAPTER 3

'AUTHENTICITY'

American society values 'authenticity.' Consumers seek authentic art, cuisine and travel experiences. 'Authenticity' extends beyond commercial claims to also describe a way of being. On the surface, 'authenticity' appears to be a positive notion. However, its reverse, the 'inauthentic,' renders 'authenticity' problematic. Folklorist Regina Bendix (1997) writes, "Identifying some cultural expressions or artifacts as authentic, genuine, trustworthy, or legitimate simultaneously implies that other manifestations are fake, spurious, and even illegitimate" (p. 9). Additionally, 'authenticity' implies the existence of a pure, uncontaminated, genuine standard that does not exist.

When 'authenticity' is applied to race, it serves to limit and exclude. Some actions are viewed as illegitimate; if they are engaged in, the actor is 'inauthentic.' In this section, racial 'authenticity' will be problematized. First, the contentious and fluid nature of 'authenticity' will be revealed. Next, "acting white" will be viewed as an expression of the 'inauthentic,' which serves to reinforce notions of black 'authenticity.' Then, 'authenticity' will be viewed as a performance. The performative nature of black 'authenticity' will be used as a means to reconcile several of the aforementioned views of "acting white." The performance of 'blackness' will also

serve to demonstrate the important role popular culture plays in constructing, confronting, and reifying black 'authenticity.'

The notion of black 'authenticity' is ever-changing; so much so, that it is difficult to pin down. In *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, performance scholar/artist E. Patrick Johnson (2003) writes, "Blackness . . . 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" (p. 2). Throughout American history, different and contesting notions of black 'authenticity' have emerged; oppositional notions of 'authenticity' are present simultaneously. The earliest contestation of 'blackness' could be viewed as the dichotomy between "house slaves" and "field slaves" (Johnson, 2003, p. 8). Johnson enumerates the differing views of black 'authenticity' that have coexisted and clashed. He lists:

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 "antiblack" 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 Lois Farrakhan's "Nation of Islam." (p. 4)

The exclusionary nature of 'blackness' helps to explain its elusiveness. Those excluded create and promote their own notion of 'blackness' to compete with more established ideas. In sum, the very nature of 'authenticity' means that it is constantly in flux.

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) oppositional cultural frame actually illustrates black 'authenticity' or 'blackness.' They explain:

[Black Americans] regard certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as *not appropriate* for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans. At the same time they emphasize other forms of behavior and other events, symbols, and meanings as more appropriate for them because they are *not* a part of white Americans' way of life. (p. 181)

The behaviors etc. deemed appropriate by race are racially 'authentic.' Fordham and Ogbu's oppositional cultural frame states that black 'authenticity' is simply the inverse of 'whiteness,' which will be contested shortly. Because blacks choose activities and signs to avoid 'whiteness,' "acting white" designates behaviors that are 'inauthentic' thereby reinforcing a black 'authenticity.' There must be a 'normalized blackness' from which to stray so "acting white" is a product of the black 'authenticity' Fordham and Ogbu describe. Later *High School Musical* will be used as an example of the oppositional nature of 'blackness' and "acting white" that this thesis will contest.

The phrase "acting white" also promotes a view of racial 'authenticity' as performance. If black students *perform* certain behaviors, they are "acting white." Implicit in "acting white," but not discussed by Fordham and Ogbu, is another set of legitimate behaviors that constitute 'acting black.' In this sense, performance encompasses more than what might occur on a stage; it is ubiquitous. For example, assuming a speaker has ability in multiple Englishes, the conscious or unconscious choice to speak American Standard English or African American Vernacular English involves a performance. In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, after a

synthesis of several definitions of performance, Joseph Roach (1996) concludes that performance "stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace. Hence flourish the abiding yet vexed affinities between performance and memory, out of which blossom the most florid nostalgias for authenticity and origin" (p. 3-4). Performance and performing 'authenticity' entails a constant attempt to act out a true identity that cannot be realized. The 'authentic' is constructed from multiple sources. Personal experience, shared experiences, images, representations, and more construct an 'authentic' identity. Academic performance relies on memory to point to some 'authentic' ways of acting in relation to schooling.

While performance constitutes 'blackness,' it does so only partially. Johnson (2003) cautions against the view that 'blackness' is only performed. He writes, "It is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people" (p. 8). This further complicates 'blackness' as it is both a subjective experience and a performance. Importantly, while the subjective experience of 'blackness' applies only to blacks, the performative aspect of 'blackness' allows all races to create and contest notions of 'blackness.'

In addition to adding to the complexity of 'blackness' by intermixing with a subjective experience of race, the performativity of 'blackness' allows for people of all races to delineate black 'authenticity.' Referring back to Fordham and Ogbu (1986) it is now recognized that "black behaviors" are not simply the inverse of "white behaviors" and vice versa. Instead, these behaviors overlap, interact, and are co-opted. Black 'authenticity' is created discursively by members of all races. Not

only do blacks who do not fit in with popular notions of 'blackness' produce their own black 'authenticity,' but members of all races make claims about 'blackness.' In Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness," sociologist Herman Gray (1995) describes how commercial media defined 'blackness' in the 1980s.

Gray states, "[T]hese multiple claims on blackness came from white liberal democrats, white Reagan conservatives, black nationalists, critical black progressives, and black neoconservatives" (p. 6). Media representations make up just one pressure in characterizing the racially 'authentic,' but the representations come from widely varied sources and push for the inclusion of different characteristics. The discursive relationship that continually strives to, but fails to completely, define black 'authenticity' can work to reconcile the contending notions of "acting white."

The conflicting stances on "acting white" actually amount to different voices that contribute to a black 'authenticity.' Racial 'authenticities' are broad enough to encompass opposing ideas. Conflicting notions of black 'authenticity' can be present in one community or even in one individual. Referring to oppositions in research described above Spencer et al.'s (2003) insistence that blacks have historically valued education can coexist with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) assertion that as a response to barriers to education, blacks view academic success as 'inauthentic.' The oft-cited idea that students of all races face a degree of animosity for academic success indicates the influence of non-blacks in ideas of black 'authenticity' and the intersection of 'racial authenticities.' 'Blackness' and 'whiteness' intersect and contain common elements without necessarily diminishing the 'authenticity' of the

shared elements. Ferguson's (2001) emphasis on parental education and income from above becomes a background factor that is certainly capable of contributing to ideas of 'authenticity.' The subjective experience of racial identity formation, which Spencer et al. (2003) insist must be taken into account, aligns with the role of the lived experience of 'blackness,' as described by Johnson (2003). The subjective experience of being black plays a role in determining 'authentic' ways of behaving in school. Finally, the unstable nature of racial 'authenticity' allows for the "acting white" hypothesis to be found in some times and locations and not others without predictability. In essence, racial 'authenticity' does not require or facilitate a conclusion as to the existence of "acting white," but the fact that at least some students sometimes reveal that performing well in classes is seen as "acting white" makes it a problem worthy of attention.

When 'blackness' is separated, at least in some regards, from the subjective experience of being black, images become a prime spot for contesting black 'authenticity.' Of the many agents who contribute to black 'authenticity,' commercial media carries an ever-growing voice. As contact with images eclipses human contact, commercial media and specifically television's role in the designation of the 'authentic' strengthens. Expressing concern over the "proliferation of images," Stuart Hall (1997) says, "We're not bothered because we are barraged by something which means nothing to us. We are bothered precisely by the fact that we are caught. We do have an investment, in the meaning which is being taken from [the image]" (p. 17). Images are not devoid of meaning; they, in fact, carry multiple meanings which the viewer deciphers. Returning to Gray (1995), in the 1980s "[claims of blackness] and

the discourses that structured them and made their meanings readable and representable were staged primarily through mass media, especially television" (p. 6). The commercial media's role in defining 'blackness' takes control away from the public. 'Authenticity' is increasingly mediated through images instead of through personal contact. Even supposedly non-racialized images like *High School Musical* contribute to notions of racial 'authenticity' as will be looked into below.

In his seminal overview from above, Johnson (2003) acknowledges that there are risks involved in the production of 'authenticities.' He states, "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" (p. 3). Seeing worth in "authenticity" despite the threats, he writes, "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" (p. 3). Where Johnson sees ambiguity in racial 'authenticities,' Paul Gilroy, taken up in the next section, believes the time for racial 'authenticities' has passed.

In summation, this section addressed the inherent mutability of racial 'authenticity.' "Acting white" was viewed as an articulation of 'inauthenticity,' by which notions of black 'authenticity' are reinforced. The performativity of black 'authenticity' was offered as a means of reconciling multiple views of "acting white" addressed in Chapter 2. Finally, the performance of 'blackness' was also presented in order to demonstrate the importance of popular culture in the construction and reification of black 'authenticity.'

CHAPTER 4

AGAINST RACE

Like Johnson, Gilroy (2000) gives credit to the "authenticating discourses" that "still occasionally flicker into spectacular life, urging desperate people to stand up for their rights and giving them a potent political and moral language with which to do it" (p. 14). However, he no longer sees any value in racial solidarity movements. Instead, at best they are an ironic hindrance to the anti-racist movement or, at worst, a retreat to fascism. After a brief introduction to Gilroy's work, his critique of raciology and racial 'authenticity' present in *Against Race* will be examined. Next two of the main criticisms of *Against Race* will be confronted. Lastly, Gilroy's argument will be applied to "acting white."

Gilroy was born in London to Guyanese and English parents. He studied at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which is often considered the birthplace of cultural studies, with Stuart Hall. David Palumbo-Liu (2001) sees a progression in Gilroy's work from *There Aint' No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) through *The Black Atlantic* (1993) to *Against Race* (2000). In *Union Jack*, Gilroy (1987) equates British nationalism with British racism. He also foreshadows ideas in *Against Race*, the central text herein. He states, "By defining 'race' and ethnicity as cultural absolutes, blacks themselves and parts of the anti-racist movement risk

endorsing the explanatory frameworks and political definitions of the new right" (p. 13). Describing the diaspora that is the focus of the important text *Black Atlantic*, Gilroy (1987) writes, "An intricate web of cultural and political connections binds blacks here to blacks elsewhere" (p. 156). This view of hybridity between all blacks of the diaspora stands in contrast to the prior ideas of the field that viewed Africa as the common focal point.

In The Black Atlantic, Gilroy (1993) examines the diaspora of Africans created largely by the slave trade. His unique view of diaspora is credited with changing the course of diaspora studies. In the work, Gilroy tracks the voyages of people, ideas, and music across the Atlantic Ocean. He uses international travels, both physically and mentally, of black intellectuals W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Martin Delany, and Frederick Douglas to show the interconnectedness of blacks across the Atlantic Ocean rather than separated by continents. The network of ideas he describes challenges traditional notions of culture, black nationalism, and nationalism in general. In this study, he employs the metaphor of a ship. Gilroy in an interview explains, "Culture doesn't just sort of go on hold when you get on a slave ship and then resume when you get to the other side. There's something underlying that problem, which is really about the liquidity of culture" (Shelby, 2006). He warns that the interconnectedness of blacks across the Atlantic should not be viewed as reason to create a black trans-nationalism. He says, "Where people take the trope of diaspora as the license to create a kind of non-national nation, I'm most troubled by that" (Shelby, 2006). This point becomes clear in *Against Race*.

It is significant to note that Gilroy's stance against racial solidarities was foreshadowed by W. E. B. Du Bois despite Du Bois' strident support for the creation and maintenance of black solidarities. In his essay "Conservation of Race," Du Bois (2003 [1897]²) says, "We believe it the duty of the Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity *until* this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility." (p. 48, emphasis added). Gilroy, in the present moment, considers that "the ideal of human brotherhood" is now possible but that ideas of racial identity hold back its possibility. From this standpoint, he proceeds to outline the process of "destroying raciology and transcending race" (2000, p.12).

Gilroy recognizes the irony of writing a book about race while trying to deny race. Palumbo-Liu (2001) observes that "black" is noticeably absent from the title *Against Race*. Similarly, Gilroy's preference for "raciology" over "race" suggests a conscious attempt to avoid reifying race. At the same time, his project is impossible without talking about race. A first task is to prove why raciology should be given up. The important point is that not only those who benefit from the existing racial hierarchy resist criticisms of raciology, but traditionally racialized, subjugated groups are also invested in raciology as a means of defense. Gilroy (2000) states:

When ideas of racial particularity are inverted in this defensive manner so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation, they become difficult to relinquish. For many racialized populations, "race" and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up. (p. 12)

² Brackets [] will be used for original dates of publications.

Gilroy believes now is the time to give up race. In three moves, which will be discussed subsequently, he shows the advantages of his stance. First, Gilroy argues that the only way to end racism is to reject race and he points to the present as the time for doing so. Second, he links racial 'authenticities' and ethnic absolutisms to fascism. Lastly, he poses the idea of "planetary humanism" and why now is the time for it to be realized.

In the first step, Gilroy promotes abstaining from the dichotomous struggle between racists and antiracists. He challenges both on the grounds that they are founded upon an irrational division of human beings and calls on antiracists to resist reifying race and, instead, rebuff raciology. The assertion is that presently the conditions are right to give up race. New medical technologies such as genome mapping, MRI, and PET scans provide ways of viewing the body and prove the trivial nature of skin color as a means of separating humans and the absence of any differences lurking beneath the skin.

Gilroy points to popular culture; racial lines have blurred providing this time for erasure. Now, the black body in popular culture can symbolize both "infrahumanity" and the superhuman, but less often the human. For him roles for the black body often include the sports hero or the lowly janitor but less often the dynamic human character. Additionally, corporate multiculturalism promotes the beauty of racialized bodies. These images do nothing to change the hierarchy of race, but they do trouble raciology. Gilroy (2000) writes, "It is as though these images of nonwhite beauty, grace, and style somehow make the matter of 'race' secondary, particularly when they are lit, filtered, textured, and toned in ways that challenge the increasingly

baffled observer's sense of where the racial boundaries might fall" (p. 22). Lastly, claims to 'authenticity' no longer hold true. The 'authentic blackness' hip-hop supposedly represents contrasts with not only the many white consumers of hip-hop but, also, the creators who take inspiration from acts of various styles, places, and races. The sampling of artists from around the world and of differing color undermine hip-hop's claim to black 'authenticity' in Gilroy's eyes. Missy 'misdemeanor' Elliott's GAP ad doesn't help. Building on Gilroy, more recent examples of this intermixture include Lupe Fiasco rapping about the joys of skateboarding and The Roots gig as the house band for the talk show *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. The focused contestation of raciology brings about a dangerous effort to re-stabilize racial boundaries. Many identities are so bound up in racial 'authenticity' that challenges to raciology are contested as a means of identity preservation.

The second move, and perhaps the most widely criticized aspect of *Against Race* (Bhasin, 2000), is Gilroy's assertion that those traditionally marginalized due to their race are not immune to using raciology in fascist ways. Gilroy (2000) gives a generic characterization of fascism as ultranationalist and populist movements that offer renewal after periods of corruption or depression. He notes how fascist movements themselves employ masculinity and race in the service of solidarity. Fascism relies on a notion of pure sameness based on a racialized corporeality. In this sense, identity is no longer formed at the level of the individual but is a predetermined "code somehow written into the bodies of its carriers" (Gilroy, 2000, p. 103-104). Gilroy documents its exemplification in the Nazi propaganda films of Leni Riefenstahl that capitalize on the ability of the image to promote solidarity by using

the body as the focus of sameness. Sport becomes a site for displaying the masculinity of the Aryan race.

Still connected to the second point, Gilroy finds a disturbingly similar focus on the body in black popular culture: the body undermines the mind. Interestingly, this shift towards the body coincides with a shift from music and the aural as the main site of black popular culture to the primacy of the image instead. The success of the most popular music is entwined with its visual representation through the music video. Gilroy laments, "The body, in motion on the ball court, striving against machinery in the gym, at the wheel of the sports utility vehicle, between the sheets, and finally decked out in branded finery on the mortuary slab, is now all there is" (p. 198). Especially in hip-hop, the body is the source of identifying sameness. In America, for instance, this plays out through the conflation of the masculinity of hip-hop and the masculinity of basketball. The fascists' uniforms become the hip-hop gear made by 'authentic' brand names.

The common interests of disparate race-based groups further prove the dangers of lurking fascism. Gilroy states, "[W]hite supremacists and black nationalists, Klansmen, Nazis, neo-Nazis, and ethnic absolutists, Zionists and antisemites have been able to encounter each other as potential allies rather than sworn foes" (p. 219). In *Against Race* Gilroy's evidence is secret meetings between Marcus Garvey and the Ku Klux Klan and more recently between the Nation of Islam and the Klan. On the surface, the groups appear adversarial, but their intense preoccupation with raciology unites them. The relationship of some rappers to the Nation of Islam furthers his argument that black popular culture contains fascist elements.

In the final step, Gilroy explains a move towards "planetary humanism." He writes, "Corrective or compensatory inclusion in modernity should no longer be the dominant theme" (p. 335). In his stance, Gilroy does not advocate ignoring the past; rather, he believes certain histories must be left and others championed. Histories that explain the future are out; instead, histories that leave open the possibility of a world beyond race must be remembered. Gilroy looks to Frantz Fanon (1967 [1952]) for inspiration quoting him: "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. . . . I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined. . . . The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions" (p. 231).

In planetary humanism, the histories that resisted raciology and promoted cosmopolitanism should be championed. In black popular culture, Gilroy finds this history in music created before the image eclipsed the aural. The music created "between the demise of Black Power and the rise of a popular Pan-Africanism" in the 1970's typifies this ideal (p. 342). For Gilroy, George Clinton's interplanetary funk music exemplifies the dropping of raciology towards a panhuman future.

Comparison to intergalactic beings reinforces the sameness of all people on earth. It is not surprising to Gilroy that the first televised interracial kiss occurred on one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s favorite programs, *Star Trek*. Again the idea is that histories leaving the past to focus on the future must be remembered. Gilroy writes, "Our challenge now should be to bring even more powerful visions of planetary humanity from the future into the present and to reconnect them with democratic and cosmopolitan traditions that have been all but expunged from today's black political

imaginary" (p. 356). Instead of clinging to identities rooted in ethnic absolutisms, Gilroy offers diaspora, as described in *The Black Atlantic*, as a new way to form identities. His hope is that all people, regardless of race, will latch on to ideas of hybridity and intermixture. Raciology harms not only because of the racism it allows and supports but, furthermore, because the very idea of separate races of humans is harmful in and of itself.

Gilroy's work has not been received uncritically. In an interview with him,

Tommie Shelby (2006) gets to the heart of one of the main criticisms of *Against Race* asking whether in Gilroy's ideal future people need to give up their racial identities. In response, Gilroy unpacks the notion of identity into three distinct parts: subjectivity, solidarity, and sameness. He states that while a racial subjectivity could/should be maintained, racial solidarity and sameness should be eliminated. As indicated previously, Gilroy promotes adopting the sameness implied in new scientific ways of imaging the body rather than continuing to cling to notions of sameness based on science from the 18th century. In sum, he hopes people may find more meaningful and productive forms of solidarity; the point is that "they might find it more important . . . to act in solidarity in line with their economic interests or ideological commitments" (Shelby, 2006).

Another criticism leveled at *Against Race* is that it unfairly focuses on problems among black intellectuals, black solidarity movements, and black popular culture while ignoring similar problems that lie outside of the black community. Neeta Bhasin (2000) declares, "[T]he way he presents his argument, it appears that it is now the black man's burden and responsibility to free the world of ethnocentrism

and race-thinking, a reversal that is ironic to say the least" (p. 1150-1151). This echoes the charge Fordham and Ogbu faced for 'blaming the victim' or, at least, placing the onus for change on the 'victim.' Gilroy's point, however, is that 'race' must be given up so that 'race' can no longer be used to determine the victim. Gilroy does not deny that blacks still face societal barriers to success. However, he states that the only way to remove the barriers is to reject 'race.'

In sum, Gilroy (2000) suggests that racism will continue as long as race carries so much significance. Racism, however, is not the only ill effect of raciology. Racial 'authenticity' also harms. Not only does it enact a false separation between humans, but, as is seen in the "acting white" literature, racial 'authenticity' limits what is seen as legitimate behavior. Fortunately, notions of 'authenticity' are never steadfast, but, due to their fluid nature, they are impossible to mold. Attempting to direct racial 'authenticities' into desirable channels cannot be a legitimate solution to the achievement gap. The discourse surrounding racial 'authenticity' is too complex for the discourse to be controlled. Instead, the discourse must be abandoned.

As mentioned earlier, the discourse includes not only black popular culture but popular culture in general. Given the liquidity of culture, many of the same troubling statements about black 'autheniticity' made in black popular culture are found elsewhere. *High School Musical* promotes a notion of a corporeal black 'authenticity' similar to what Gilroy sees in hip-hop. *High School Musical* also supports and reinforces the idea of "acting white" in that academic success is portrayed as incompatible with 'blackness.' The next section will focus on this relationship.

CHAPTER 5

HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL

High School Musical has been seen by more than 255 million viewers worldwide (Disney, 2009). The soundtrack was 2006's number one selling record. In addition to albums, Disney's production has spawned three sequels (so far), video games, books, a reality show, a concert tour, stage productions and even an ice tour. High School Musical 2 (2007) holds the number one spot all time for a cable telecast (Disney, 2009). Although Disney Channel's target audience is children six to fourteen, High School Musical reaches older students through the numerous productions performed at high schools. Freddie Gerson, the chairman of Music Theater International, which is the leading company in granting licensure rights to high school productions, claims, "[High School Musical has] actually done triple the business of any show in any one year that we've ever had. The success is unbelievable" (Diamond, 2007). Musicals have a longstanding tradition in high schools and serve as uniting events bringing together parents, teachers, students, and members of the community. The pervasiveness of High School Musical warrants the interrogation of its themes. High School Musical represents an idealized version of high school but with more singing. After a brief introduction to the film, this section will examine how *High School Musical* reinforces the themes of

black 'authenticity' Gilroy locates and opposes in black popular culture while also supporting Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" hypothesis by maintaining the 'inauthenticity' of an academically successful black students.

High School Musical's predominant, overt theme is that the clubs or groups students belong to do not define them. After it comes out that Troy Bolton (Zac Efron), the white star basketball player, auditioned for East High's musical, numerous hybrid identities emerge. Another black basketball player reveals his love for baking, a white bookworm delights in hip-hop dancing, and a skater dude plays the cello. After Troy and Gabriella Montez (Vanessa Hudgens), a white Latina, win the basketball championship, the academic decathlon, and land the leading roles in the musical, the closing number clearly states the message: "We're all in this together" (Borden, Rosenbush, Schain, & Ortega, 2006). Gabriella and Troy's triumphant acts of transgression inspire the entire school to set aside their group-based identity differences embracing a school-wide humanism.

Aside from the uplifting message, *High School Musical* garners praise for its multicultural cast. Gabriella and Troy's best friends are black and Gabriella is Latina. Steven Smith, who plays Troy's best friend Chad in the ice tour, says "It's important to me, because I can't believe after all these years that there's an actual black character that I can portray, and it's from a Disney film" (Matsumoto, 2009). After six years of touring with Disney's ice productions, Smith can finally play a black character. Now, Disney can boast of black characters that are not crows, hyenas, or any other animal. In *High School Musical*, Disney's black characters are raised to the level of human.

Before getting too carried away with the prospects of *High School Musical* ushering in a planetary humanism, the elements of the movie that articulate with Gilroy's fascistic black popular culture and Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" must be detailed. Given Disney's past racial indiscretions (Giroux, 1999; Byrne & McQuillan, 1999), it is less than surprising to find some ethnic absolutisms at work in their latest blockbuster franchise. At first, the two primary black characters' differences suggest that *High School Musical* presents a wealth of options for black characters. Conversely, however, it is the black characters', Chad (Corbin Bleu) and Taylor's (Monique Coleman), absolute difference that maintains tired old essentialisms.

Chad, with basketball in hand no matter the situation, supports the corporeality Gilroy attaches to the racialized body in sports. He actively seeks to keep Troy from the unsanctioned space of the high school's musical, so he will not be distracted from the upcoming championship game. Invoking the familiar themes of music and sports, he asks, "Do you ever think Lebron James or Shaquille O'Neil auditioned for their school musical?" (Borden et al., 2006). He also informs Troy that the music "is not even hip-hop or rock or anything like that" (Borden et al., 2006). Additionally in the stereotype, Chad's academic ability and/or motivation is called into question when he claims to have been behind in homework since pre-school.

While Chad personifies Gilroy's (2000) racialized body, Taylor is the epitome of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "acting white." While all the other students sport backpacks, Taylor rolls a suitcase presumably because she carries so many books. As the president of the Chemistry Club and the captain of the Academic Decathlon

team, Taylor heads the academic clique, which is less popular than the jocks. Like Chad, Taylor is charged with keeping her friend Gabriella out of the musical so she can focus her attention on the upcoming Academic Decathlon meet. Taylor confirms Chad's low academic ability when she quips, "he probably can't count that high [to 15]" (Borden et al., 2006). The most compelling examples of her "acting white" come from her disdain for the cheerleaders and basketball team, which apart from one black male in the scholastic crew contains all of the other black students at East High. She draws attention to her Standard American English when she engages a group of cheerleaders and speaks "cheerleader," or 'valley,' with them (see *Clueless*, 1995). To be fair, everyone in the movie, besides the cheerleaders, speak Standard American English. Passing Chad and his teammates in the hallway, Taylor exclaims, "Ugh, behold the zoo animals heralding the new year. How tribal" (Borden et al., 2006). In this instance, Taylor emphasizes the racialized teams' infrahumanity and assumes her position above them.

Taylor and Chad must occupy and defend their space in the basketball and academic cliques; the white Troy and the invisible minority Gabriella are granted passage between two identities. While Gabriella passes through the seemingly white or non-racialized worlds of academics and musicals, Troy exists in the 'black world' of basketball and the 'white world' of the musical. He is the star of the basketball team, which is mixed equally between white and black players, even though the school is predominately white. The most risqué scene in the movie features a shirtless Troy in the locker room displaying his masculinity. None of the other players are presented in this light. Troy appropriates hip-hop dance moves in the musical

number with the basketball team. He is able to move successfully from the basketball court to the stage.

The overall message of transcending strict identity borders and the possible establishment of a panhumanism dampens when one takes into account that it is really only the white Troy and the white-Latina, played by a non-Latina actress, Gabriella who successfully cross boundaries. Racialized characters do stake a claim to one identity and defend its boundaries; the very acts of crossing the boundaries serve to reinforce their existence in the first place. When the black, baking, basketball player shares his secret, it highlights the incompatibility of baking with basketball and 'blackness.' Chad's black 'authenticity' and masculinity are painted as antithetical to the studious Taylor. In *High School Musical* "acting white" is alive and well. 'Authentic blackness' is not compatible with academic success giving credence to Gilroy's plea to give up race and racial 'authenticities.'

It would be remiss not to mention that in the inspirational last number where almost all of the cast are paired into hetero-normative romantic couples Chad and Taylor end up together. Clearly, this is meant to allay any fears of inter-racial dating. Although the white leader of the drama club does end up with the basketball playing, black, baker, this is easily explained away by the fact that she rejects him until she tastes his cookies. Perhaps her need for his baking is suggestive of something more, but sometimes cookies are just cookies. It seems as far as the racialized encampment of Taylor and Chad is concerned the damage may already be done; however, there may be a sliver of hope that their romantic reconciliation trivializes their seemingly polar opposition. Love conquers all?

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In the context of education, "acting white" is condemned at all levels.

Regrettably, if a student is perceived to be "acting white," the behavior is criticized.

Supporters of the "acting white" hypothesis wish academically successful black students did not face accusations of "acting white." Likewise, critics of the hypothesis condemn the theory for its weak explanatory power, its historical inaccuracy, or its denunciation of black culture. Despite all the disapproval of "acting white," little is said about the racial 'authenticities' it serves to legitimate. Couching "acting white" within racial 'authenticity' allows for different conclusions and opinions regarding "acting white." The move to place "acting white" within racial 'authenticity' also allows for the insertion of Gilroy's critique of raciology and 'authenticity' into educational research.

In this aspect of his work, Gilroy takes up the very difficult task of appealing for the end of race-based thought and action as the only way to combat racism. The task includes convincing the reader not only that race should be dismissed but that race *can* be dismissed. Beyond describing the harm caused by raciology and extolling the virtues "planetary humanism," it appears very little can be done to stop raciology. First off, it is difficult to imagine a future where certain actions will not be

labeled as 'acting black' or "acting white." Given that raciology seems to have such deep roots, the important question becomes how to go about giving up raciology. If Gilroy convinced educational researchers that raciology should be given up, then how could this be accomplished?

One way is to follow Gilroy's lead and explicate the deleterious messages about race and education found in commercial media. Even seemingly trivial and innocuous popular cultural products support a racial 'authenticity' that legitimates academic pursuits by skin color. Texts like *High School Musical*, which are not grounded in an 'authentic' representation of education, contain potentially harmful messages about race. The likelihood of an entire school breaking into song at the drop of a hat can be dismissed easily, but this allows for the elements of raciology to pass unchecked. In working towards quitting race, illustrating injurious raciological representations serves to detail the harm that raciology continues to inflict.

A second way for educational researchers to work towards ending race is to interrogate how raciology in research reifies race. Gilroy (2000) asks those who use race in their research to do so in a different way. He writes:

This must step away from the pious ritual in which we always agree that 'race' is invented but are then required to defer to its embeddedness in the world and to accept that the demand for justice requires us nevertheless innocently to enter the political arenas it helps to mark out. (p. 52)

The danger is that educational researchers may too easily dismiss this notion.

Researchers need 'race' as an analytic category to assess whether the achievement gap is growing or shrinking. An easy way to erase the achievement gap would be to stop collecting data by race. However, denying that there is a problem will not make

it go away. As evidenced in his work, Gilroy does not call for race to be ignored but that race should not be enacted lightly. The reification inherent in using race as a category and the effects of legitimizing race should be weighed.

Despite the conflicting claims of the abovementioned "acting white" literature, all of it works to affirm race. In many regards this is unavoidable. If ideas of racial 'authenticity' are present in schools, they should not be ignored. If students say, "I am failing in school because I am afraid my peers will accuse me of 'acting white,'" then it is irresponsible not to contend with the matter. However, inferring these notions from students' words, or worse, inferring this based purely on GPAs and popularity ratings is irresponsible. Implying the existence of racial 'authenticities' where none may exist is a dangerous game. Racial identities are not as clear-cut as they are in *High School Musical*. Taylor is a caricature, not a real person. Real students' identities are more nuanced; trying to arrange them into popular and damaging notions of racial 'authenticity' serves to ignore the complexity of students' identities.

Gilroy's call to end race-based thought has the most promise of fulfillment in the suggestions educational researchers give to close the achievement gap.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) conclude with recommendations. First, barriers to job opportunities for high achieving black students must be removed. Second, the schools serving black students must be improved to the level of white schools. Lastly, they recommend implementing programs designed to remove the stigma attached to achieving academically. They state, "The schools should also reinforce black identity in a manner compatible with academic pursuit" (p. 203).

Returning one last time to their critics, Spencer et al. (2003) do not offer any such recommendations for improving the academic achievement of black students. However, their emphasis on developmental racial identity points towards the necessity of programs that will facilitate the progression towards the internalization stage marked by proactive Afrocentrism. For them the progression, evident of a stage theory which have been widely criticized, is more or less inevitable and the first three stages correlate with poor academic achievement, so they imply that all black students will do poorly at some point. By their logic, all that can be done is to try and rush students to the promised land of the internalization stage. Fordham and Ogbu's solution of removing the stigma attached to schooling is equally unsatisfying. Given that racial 'authenticities' are created discursively from multiple sources, and they cannot easily, if at all, be willfully altered or policed, Fordham and Ogbu's solution also seems impractical.

The possibility of moving away from racial 'authenticities' may be equally as impractical as trying to regulate ideas of 'blackness.' A first step, however, is to challenge programs that focus on the formation of racial identity. Gilroy finds hope for the end of raciology with new ways of imaging the body that lend no credence to race. The election of Barack Obama signals that with the right effort deontologizing race may be realizable. Whether Obama was, indeed, 'black enough' or whether he was, in fact, 'white enough' is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it suffices to say, "Obama was *enough*." Obama is America's first black president. The potential implications of this should not be underestimated. This exerts a new pressure on those that would argue for a black 'authenticity' that excludes the academic success

that was necessary for Obama to reach the highest office in the nation. Perhaps more importantly, a new generation of students will develop with the constant image of a black man as the leader of the nation.

In his keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama spoke to "acting white," saying, "Children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white." Correspondingly, the "acting white" literature, when placed in the context of racial 'authenticity,' suggests that notions of black 'authenticity' may contribute to the achievement gap. Unfortunately, Obama did not offer a plan on how to get rid of the "slander." However, the plan cannot simply be to challenge the notion of black 'authenticity' that distances 'blackness' from academic achievement. The plan must attack "the slander" at the more basic level of raciology and promote a planetary humanism in place of racial 'authenticities.' When human sameness is favored over racial sameness, racial 'authenticities' and all the legitimate and illegitimate behaviors they entail will seem quaint.

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