

The Complex Racial Politics of *Smart People*

ISIAH MATTHEW WOODEN



ABSTRACT: *Working from the premise that theatre and performance can yield valuable insights about the operations of race, this article explores the dramaturgical strategies Lydia R. Diamond deploys in her 2014 comedy, Smart People, to interrogate the complexities of racial politics in the twenty-first century. I trace how, through the intertwined narratives it weaves for its four protagonists, Smart People engages important debates about the rebiologization of race, the psychic costs of stereotyping, and the vexed representational politics of US theatre, thereby bringing into sharp relief the ways in which narratives of racial progress obscure the material ramifications of race in contemporary life. Even as it trades in the signs of progress the United States has made on race matters, Smart People illustrates for its audiences why a proper reckoning with racial formations, ideologies, attitudes, practices, and beliefs remains as urgently needed as ever. In so doing, the play participates in and extends a long tradition within black expressive culture of using theatre and performance to provoke social action and change.*

KEYWORDS: *Lydia R. Diamond, Barack Obama, post-racialism, racial habits, race and biology, stereotyping, urban circuit theatre, casting*

Lydia R. Diamond's *Smart People* opens with a series of projected images that vitalize the debates about contemporary racial politics the play stages and interrogates. A photograph of a white toddler perched in a high chair precedes one of a Pakistani woman dressed in a business suit. Additional photographs – of a jungle gym-climbing black youth, a tattooed Japanese teenager, a bespectacled black man in a tweed blazer, and a white equestrienne, among others – follow. These images form the backdrop for a series of overlapping, fragmented vignettes that feature the play's four protagonists negotiating their investments in and ambivalences about the concept of race. At stake in their negotiations and in the play more broadly are the meanings we continue to extract from and apply to perceived differences in physical, social, and cultural characteristics.

Diamond began *Smart People* in 2007 amid the enthusiasm created by Barack Obama's first run for the presidency. The play reverberates with the passionate and often difficult conversations about race relations and racial politics that the former junior senator from Illinois engendered with his campaign and subsequent victory. *Smart People* draws particular attention to the fact that the presidential candidacy of the first African American was seen by many as symbolically significant and heralded by some as a conclusion to the narrative of racial progress and, indeed, to the conundrum of race. Obama's Republican opponent in 2008, Arizona Senator John McCain, even suggested in his concession speech that his loss signalled an important turning point for race in America.¹ For supporters and detractors alike, Obama's historic win was viewed as a momentous development in the centuries-long effort to form a more perfect union. Of course, accompanying the rhetoric of hope and change that buoyed Obama to victory was a sense of excitement and expectation about the ways a black presidency would compel the renegotiation of the meanings and importance of race within US society.

Obama helped enflame that sense of excitement and expectation, once in office, by championing an idea that *Smart People* confronts directly: namely, that intelligent conversation across differences might mend some of the nation's racial ills. For example, he used the wrongful arrest of his friend Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (the renowned scholar of African-American literature, history, and culture at Harvard), apprehended in his home on 16 July 2009, as an opportunity to model for the broader public how open dialogue among smart and reasonable people might help the nation jettison race as "one of the fault lines in American culture and American politics," as he put it in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine (qtd. in Wenner).² When asked if race perhaps played a role in Gates's arrest, Obama responded,

I think it's fair to say, number one, any of us would be pretty angry; number two, that the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home; and, number three, what I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there's a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. (qtd. in Dyson 191)

These carefully chosen comments prompted considerable backlash, with some going so far as to accuse the then-president of being anti-police, an accusation that would recur throughout his time in office. To curb some of the discord caused by his remarks, Obama invited both Gates and the arresting officer, James Crowley, to the White House on 30 July 2009. Christened the "beer summit" by many in the media, the gathering sought to create space for both

men to resolve any disagreements. It also sought to demonstrate Obama's unwavering belief in the salvific potential of engaging in difficult discussions about what Eddie Glaude terms "racial habits" – that is, the "biases, stereotypes, and the history of racism in [the United States] that incline us to treat certain people in certain ways" (55).

Working from the premise that theatre and performance often yield valuable insights into the operations of race, I explore how *Smart People* confronts the complexities of racial politics in the twenty-first century by redeploying the idea that thoughtful discourse might bring about racial reconciliation.³ Through the intertwined narratives it weaves for its four protagonists, the play activates debate about, among other things, the rebiologization of race, the psychic costs of stereotyping, and the vexed representational politics of US theatre. In so doing, it reveals the ways that, as Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Michele Elam put it, "'race' as we know it [is] both a lie and a truth" (186), while also throwing into relief how narratives of racial progress often obscure the material ramifications of race in contemporary life. *Smart People* reserves some of its harshest critiques for the gospel of post-racialism, challenging the motivations of this gospel's most ardent disciples, including those who would position a "black presidency" as the apotheosis of racial progress. Even as it trades in examples of such progress, the play illustrates why a reckoning with past and present racial formations, ideologies, attitudes, practices, and beliefs remains as urgently needed as ever. In so doing, it extends a long tradition within black expressive culture of using theatre and performance to provoke social action and change.

THE FORMATIONS OF *SMART PEOPLE*

It was a yearning to inspire racial reckoning that compelled Diamond to write *Smart People*. As she explained in an interview,

I was trying to write a play about race, in real time – at a time when that topic was shifting more than I'd witnessed in my lifetime. Seismic shifts. I began writing the play in 2007, and then the presidential election happened. Watching Obama run and watching the way the climate shifted around him changed the play. I am a person who spent much of her artistic career exploring the social nuances of race. In interviews, people started asking, "What do you believe now that we are post-racial?" So . . . the national landscape around race shifted every five minutes, making the writing of the play a delicious challenge. (qtd. in Haugland)

In the seven years that it took to bring *Smart People* to the stage, a number of new plays thematizing matters of race opened on Broadway, intensifying Diamond's determination to approach the subject with greater boldness and sophistication. "[T]here were a lot of plays by white men coming out that were

kind of musing about race. Race is what I do: race and gender, sexuality and class. [. . .] I decided I'm going to write about [race] boldly and without fear yet just as funny and quirky and with characters just as flawed as they always are," she explained (qtd. in Stevens). While, for example, David Mamet's *Race* (which opened on Broadway in December 2009) and Bruce Norris's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Clybourne Park* (which started its Broadway run in April 2012) both promised searing explorations of racial (and racist) attitudes and practices, neither offered more than a shallow understanding of the topic. The refusal of both playwrights to decentre or deprivilege whiteness in their dramaturgy – a likely selling point for Broadway producers – no doubt hampered their abilities to confront the conundrum of race fully in their respective works.

Norris is on the record as saying he wrote *Clybourne Park* with white audiences in mind. "It's definitely a play for white people. It's a play about white people," he remarked (qtd. in Rugg 100). He explained elsewhere that he had long felt a connection to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* – the script from which he appropriates one of his central characters and plotlines – but felt he could relate only to its sole white character: "That play has resonated all through my life because I realized that the only character I could identify with was Karl – I was a whitey in an all-white neighbourhood in Houston, Texas" (qtd. in Basso and Rubin 4). While Norris's attempts to give the Lindner character "more to do" (qtd. in Rubin 41) by creating a new play might reflect the enduring richness of the earlier work, it also speaks to the perennial difficulties that white audiences seem to experience when asked to empathize with black characters and performers. Not surprisingly, the play leaves underexamined several of the white supremacist logics it dramatizes, including its engagements with what we might call, following George Lipsitz, a "white spatial imaginary" that understands the desires of non-whites to pursue upward mobility and intergenerational progress "as a kind of criminal incursion on white privilege" (25). If Norris is superficial, Mamet is outright dismissive: "Most contemporary debate on race is nothing but sanctimony – efforts at exploitation and efforts at restitution seeking, equally, to enlarge and prolong dissent and rancor," he has asserted. Diamond notably explores the topic of race with courage and curiosity in her dramaturgy. Acknowledging that "[r]ace is always murky" (qtd. in Seligson), *Smart People* provocatively stages the contradictions that continue to structure racial politics in the United States and, surely, our engagements with them.

Smart People centres on four characters who, like Gates, have a connection to Harvard and pose vexing questions about race. Set in various locations in Cambridge between September 2007 and Obama's inauguration on 20 January 2009, the play focuses its dramatic action on the interpersonal and professional relationships of the quartet. A recent graduate of the MFA acting

program at Harvard's ART Institute, Valerie Johnston is a twenty-something African-American performer and Obama campaign volunteer trying to navigate the pitfalls of a career in the arts. Jackson Moore, also a twenty-something African American, is a surgical intern at Harvard Medical School who spends his free time at the neighbourhood clinic he runs with friends. A professor of psychology at Harvard of mixed Chinese and Japanese heritage, Ginny Yang has landed tenure (in her early thirties) for her ground-breaking studies on race and identity among Asian-American women. Ginny's junior colleague, Brian White, is a white, untenured professor in neuropsychiatry who conducts controversial research on racial identity and perception. While Diamond has the quartet meet through happenstance and sometimes contrived serendipity, each becomes integral to the others' lives. What draws the foursome together is their mutual interest in calling into question the racial and racist assumptions, beliefs, stereotypes, and practices of their highly credentialed peers. They also take pleasure in participating in other modes of intellectual, psychological, and romantic sparring.

To trace the characters' various connections and interactions, Diamond notably abandons the well-made play structure she put to effective use in her earlier play *Stick Fly* (2008), choosing a less tidy, more capacious form instead. *Smart People* shuttles between characters, plotlines, locations, and temporalities to spin a mostly chronological narrative. Diamond uses ellipses both within and between the play's scenes, thereby exceeding the conventions of theatrical realism to achieve something more cinematic. The action jumps, cuts, dissolves, and converges correspondingly. Remarking on her deployment of a looser form, Diamond explained that, since the whole conversation about race is fragmented and disorganized, "it makes sense that a play about something that's so slippery wouldn't be in a well-made play structure" (qtd. in Myers). There is unquestionably a powerful synthesis of form and content in *Smart People*. Thus, in addition to supplying its audiences with rich cultural insights, the play also further expands possibilities for what Harry Elam and Douglas A. Jones, Jr. call "the black dramaturgical imagination" (xxv).

Theatre critics have been keen to praise the freshness of *Smart People's* form and its thematic ambition since its earliest public performances. For example, in his review of the 2014 premiere production by the Huntington Theatre Company, directed by Peter DuBois, Don Aucoin exclaimed, "Writing with wit, verve, a shrewd eye for portraiture and an equally shrewd ear for the tells and giveaways of invidious racial assumptions, Diamond has created a quartet of complex, flawed, intriguing, and, yes, smart people who register as much more than delivery systems for polemical freight." Nelson Pressley echoed Aucoin in his review of the Arena Stage production in Washington, D.C., directed by Seema Sueko, writing, "Diamond's dialogue is as clever as

the title promises, and her characters press through initial assumption-laden encounters to – well, whole new levels of assumption-laden encounters.” Although critics were mostly lukewarm about the off-Broadway production at Second Stage Theater – directed by Kenny Leon and starring noted film and television actors Tessa Thompson (Valerie), Mahershala Ali (Jackson), Anne Son (Ginny), and Joshua Jackson (Brian) – David Rooney observed that “[s]eldom do contemporary American plays tap so directly into the cultural conversation as it’s happening.” Rooney’s comments capture a sentiment reflected in all the critical responses to the play: notably that, in its best moments, *Smart People* astutely contemplates and contributes to ongoing discussions about race and its continued significance in everyday life. A question compellingly resonates throughout the play’s dramaturgy: In what ways does race still matter in the twenty-first century?

THE DRAMA OF REBIOLOGIZING RACE

One way *Smart People* takes up this question is by dramatizing recent efforts to rebiologize race. If the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a surge in racial pseudoscience – eugenics and phrenology, among others – that endeavoured to justify white supremacy, racial discrimination, and social inequalities, robust critique emerged in the decades that followed. This critique rendered axiomatic the idea that race is a social construct and not a biological fact. But despite a general consensus that race is, indeed, a political category perennially misrecognized as a biological one, there has been a resurgence of interest in scientific explanations that “prove that human racial differences are real and significant,” as Dorothy Roberts writes (xi). Michael Omi and Howard Winant credit the reinvigoration of such beliefs to the development of the Human Genome Project, to the increasing popularity of DNA genetic testing (promoted by Gates in PBS specials such as *African American Lives* and *Finding Your Roots*), and to the growth of pharmacogenomics, which strives to tailor medicines based on an individual’s genome. Cognitive psychology and adjacent fields, they contend, have further helped redeem the view that race is innate (115–20). The trouble with these rebiologizing projects, of course, is that – while sometimes driven by a motivation to effect positive change – they tend to reinforce the idea that biology (and genetics, in particular), as opposed to discriminatory policies and practices or asymmetries in power relations, “has near-full explanatory force for social arrangements and inequities, past and present” (Elam and Elam 187). Correspondingly, these projects risk naturalizing racial hierarchies and disparities much as their nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors did.

The *New York Times* offered a striking illustration of some of the challenges presented by these rebiologizing projects when, in March 2018, it ran an opinion

column entitled “How Genetics Is Changing Our Understanding of ‘Race,’” by Harvard geneticist David Reich. Reich makes the case that, while race is a social construct, there are also genetic differences “among people grouped according to today’s racial terms.” Continuing to ignore these differences, he claims, will have serious consequences for science and, more importantly, for humanity. “I am worried that well-meaning people who deny the possibility of substantial biological differences among human populations are digging themselves into an indefensible position, one that will not survive the onslaught of science,” he writes, adding,

I am also worried that whatever discoveries are made – and we truly have no idea yet what they will be – will be cited as “scientific proof” that racist prejudices and agendas have been correct all along, and that those well-meaning people will not understand the science well enough to push back against these claims.

Strikingly, even as Reich expresses awareness that scientific research has been co-opted and perverted to nefarious ends, he cannot avoid reifying categories that have proven historically, geographically, culturally, and socially contingent: African American, European, East Asian, male, female, and so on. Indeed, to support his argument for the importance of acknowledging genetic racial differences, he cites the putative acceptance of the idea that there are biological differences between males and females, recapitulating essentialist notions about the superior physical strength of men and, in the process, dismissing the millions of people for whom conventional binary sex categories do not apply. As might be expected, the piece elicited a strong adverse response, with many, including prominent scientists and researchers, raising concerns about the implications of entangling science and race.⁴

Smart People explores the ethical questions posed by this resurgent biological discourse about race most notably through the character of Brian, a Reich-like figure who functions as a kind of tragic hero in the play, though not an especially likable one. Innovative and well-funded, Brian takes pleasure in being “persecuted for voicing that which is not palatable” (8). As a result, he too writes op-eds that start “whole race firestorm[s]” (13) and denigrates his undergraduate students for failing to recognize their own racial biases and racist assumptions. He tells them:

Please disabuse yourselves of this notion that I am obligated to teach you. Neither do I have an obligation to bestow upon you my, and I cite *Harvard Review*, 2002, “. . . effortless charisma and probingly insightful tutelage.” (*Beat.*) I am obligated only to show up and talk for two hours twice a week. Note my frustration. I am not frustrated because I see in you some sort of great, collective, untapped potential. I am frustrated because I will never have these two hours back. (4)

Along with subjecting him to reprimands from his dean (whom he also calls a racist), these and similar belittling actions threaten to derail Brian's bid for tenure, which would ostensibly afford him even greater freedom to pursue his provocative research agenda.

Further endangering Brian's employment is his dogged pursuit of scientific evidence that white people are inherently racist. This interest, he tells Ginny, stems from a desire for data about what he thinks is as obvious as the "foul . . . putrid" smell caused by an animal that "has died in the fucking wall" (49): that a "predisposition to hate" is "in our [i.e., white people's] heads, in our cells, in our fucking blood" (57). "We are programmed to distrust and fear those with more melanin. We aren't defective, we just must understand our brains, accept our physiology, and acknowledge the social reality that we so virulently deny" (57), he remarks before an audience that includes two of his superiors. Suffused with the self-satisfied swagger that compelled him to conduct the provocative research to begin with and intended as a kind of swan song, his lecture ultimately serves to diminish his prospects at the institution. It also becomes a source of tremendous strain among his social group, who find his research questions, methods, and findings both unconvincing and unsettling.

Through Brian's single-minded determination to substantiate his hypothesis that white people are biologically predisposed to racism, *Smart People* reveals how putatively outmoded views about race return to favour recursively, thereby troubling the progressive narratives that continue to engulf conversations on the subject. Brian's zeal, spurred by hubris and arrogance, prevents him from connecting his study to earlier efforts at scientifically fixing racial differences, but the parallels are not lost on his friends. Jackson points them out explicitly, remarking, "You know who was into the mixing of race, biology, and legislation? The Nazis" (62). After identifying holes in the design of Brian's study – including the fact that it ignores the potential prejudices of other groups and looks only at "the White Americans who shop at Whole Foods, worry about their ecological footprints, and teach their babies sign language" (63) – Jackson questions its relevance, asking his friend, "Isn't what makes us human supposed to be our ability to subvert our impulses, our genetically driven impulses?" (64). Valerie lets Brian know that his mixing of race and science scares her, a revelation that sparks another heated exchange:

VALERIE: I read your study.

BRIAN: You too?

VALERIE: It scared me . . . can I tell you why?

BRIAN: Yeah, sure, I'm happy for you to have an opinion about that which you know nothing. It's great that you feel empowered to weigh in on this

work I've been doing for decades because your skin is brown. I get it all the time. Do you know Blacks at the med school coalesced with Blacks in Af-Am and Anthropology to petition me to stop my work?

VALERIE: Why?

BRIAN: Because "the mingling of science and race could prove damaging." You're here now because when my department got pushback, I lost my funding and they pulled my research assistants. They're shaming me into leaving.

VALERIE: You think it's hard studying Black? Try being Black.

BRIAN: Of course I get that. I'm just tired of having to say "I get that" all the time. (70–71)

Despite Brian's dismissal of her experience and his privileging of his own, Valerie reminds her friend that, when it comes to the concept of race, "[i]t's more complicated" than he allows for in his research (71).

Casting a spotlight on the messiness of the conversations unfolding at the intersection of race and biology, these exchanges also emphasize how easily projects of racial rebiologization can be exploited to advance racist agendas and to rationalize inequality and oppression.⁵ *Smart People* shrewdly flips the usual script of such projects, which tend to reproduce the idea that whites are always already culturally and morally superior, by having Brian advocate for white people's acceptance of their biological (and scientifically proven) proneness to racism. In so doing, the play highlights the absurdity of asking non-whites to accept as unquestionably true that science which is deployed to perpetuate beliefs about their biological, social, cultural, and moral deficiencies or inferiority.

Brian's descent in the play into a dishevelled loner who uses Obama's inauguration as an opportunity to conduct experiments on himself – thus evoking the "mad scientist" trope – further underscores the perils of entangling race and science myopically. His obsession with his thesis – in the play's final moments, he monitors his own brain activity with an EEG machine as he watches Obama's inaugural address – raises questions about the influence of confirmation bias on recent efforts to rebiologize race, while simultaneously offering a meta-commentary on the kinds of characters that have access to the category of the "tragic hero."

THE PSYCHIC COSTS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING

Brian's spectacular downward spiral is one way the play dramatizes how certain problematic ideas and beliefs about race continue to endure, but the casual and at times unconscious negative stereotyping in which all four protagonists engage – and, indeed, to which they become subject in the play – also offers insights into how those ideas and beliefs are reproduced and reinforced

through quotidian acts and practices. Brian, Valerie, Jackson, and Ginny each offhandedly invokes and perpetuates pernicious generalizations about race (and gender) in their everyday interactions. For example, when Valerie visits the emergency room after she sustains a facial injury while rehearsing *Julius Caesar*, both a nurse and Jackson assume that, because she's a woman of colour, she must be the victim of intimate partner violence. (Jackson assumes the same about Ginny when he first meets her at the clinic he helps run.) Valerie responds in kind by asking the surgical resident, "Will I get to see a doctor?" (18). Underscoring how unexceptional negative stereotyping is, Diamond threads similar microaggressions throughout the play. The repetitions of this dramaturgical strategy demonstrate how negative racial and gender stereotypes almost always misrecognize and misrepresent their targets.

Valerie and Jackson's attempts at romance best illustrate this point. As a way to test how "down" Valerie is on their first date, Jackson opts not to offer her hot sauce or vinegar for the fried fish and greens he cooks for them. When she asks him about it, he remarks, "You're a little saddity. I wouldn't have presumed to know your relationship to hot sauce, or vinegar" (45). He later expresses astonishment when she reveals that she sees a therapist, something he assumes black people don't do (much like attending a "weird medieval fair" [19]). In addition to capturing some of the general pitfalls of dating, these misperceptions dramatize how the targets of negative stereotyping sometimes internalize the inaccurate generalizations projected onto them and, in turn, project them onto others. By having each of the four protagonists both embody and expose the chasms between preconceived ideas and reality, *Smart People* powerfully subverts the negative racial and gender stereotypes in which the play's characters routinely traffic.

Concomitantly, the play opens up space to consider the psychic costs that stereotyping tends to exact from its targets. The topic is the primary focus of Ginny's research, in fact. Based on both the studies she conducts on third-generation Asian-American women and the work she does with therapy clients from similar backgrounds, Ginny argues that there is "a direct correlation of racist stereotyping to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety" (9) among the demographic group – a claim, she notes, that counters western assumptions about anxiety and depression in this population. To undermine stereotypes about Asian docility, she encourages her clients to express their opinions assertively, as she does in a scene that overlaps with another featuring Brian arguing with his dean on the telephone for "sweating" him:

GINNY: We ended your last session with a goal. Right, Akiko? You were to practice clearly stating your opinions to authority figures. And how did that go? In English please, Akiko.

BRIAN: I didn't kick out the students of color. I excused the ones who actually got it. Hold on . . . let me look it up . . .

(Brian begins rifling through his papers.)

GINNY: You're too hard on yourself. You've definitely made progress. But, is what I think really important? (22–23)

The juxtaposition of the two interactions, in addition to demonstrating the efficacy of Diamond's form, illustrates how, as Ginny contends, our judgments about "appropriate" behaviour are ultimately determined by our perceptions of race and gender. Ginny herself attempts to subvert gendered and racialized expectations by practising what she preaches, hounding the various sales clerks that she encounters while satisfying her shopping addiction, for example. But paradoxically, even as she counsels others on how to build strategies for navigating problematic assumptions, she also struggles with anxieties about proving herself, despite the fact that she earned tenure early and received, among other accolades, a "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation. Thus, she works non-stop, rewarding herself for her diligence and discipline with compulsive shopping. It is the fear of not conforming to Asian-American "model minority" stereotypes that underlies Ginny's unease and penchant for overachieving. Her investment in the idea that "hardship must precede success" – common among disciples of the "model minority" myth, as Ju Yon Kim notes (175) – ramifies in various ways, including neglect of her social and romantic life.

In Jackson's case, it is a fear of conforming to stereotypes about African-American men that motivates his desire to become Harvard's best surgical resident. This fear, however, creates an extra pressure that leaves him at times questioning his determination to continue with his specialty-track internship. His self-confidence takes a particular blow when, after providing a patient with what he believes is the best course of treatment, his superiors second-guess his decision-making, accuse him of being a "hothead" (8), and punish him with a three-month stint on night rotations. As Claude Steele and others have pointed out, trepidation about validating bad stereotypes can have a significant impact on a person's performance. Steele terms this phenomenon "stereotype threat" and notes that, unless properly deflected, it can become a contingency of identity in situations where people feel that "one false move could cause them to be reduced to [a bad] stereotype, to be seen and treated in terms of it" (7). While Jackson works to deflect and subvert the low expectations he believes his senior colleagues have of him – performing double shifts and never asking for a day off, for example – his efforts not only go unrewarded but also often trigger additional admonishments. Ultimately, the stress of trying to avoid confirming his colleagues'

damaging preconceptions proves too harrowing. He quits his residency, delivering a passionate speech:

I've never asked for a . . . I've never been late . . . never missed a day . . . I just needed to pick my brother up from the . . . All you had to do was say yes or no. But you're reprimanding me? For asking, I don't know what this is?

(And then, in a long beat, Jackson sees it all very clearly.)

You want to break me. You want me to lose my mind trying to rationalize why you might want me broken. You are pathologically committed to seeing me fail. But not just fail . . . you want my soul dead. *(Beat.)* You want to kill my soul. But I get it now. I can't heal people when my soul is broken. My soul must be intact for me to do my work. *(Beat.)* Please feel free to tell yourself and your colleagues that you have won, if that's what you need to do. Because I'm out . . . (83–84)

His farewell remarks encapsulate one of the more insidious consequences of microaggressions: that is, to compel those targeted to “expend significant cognitive energy trying to determine the intention behind the microaggression (e.g., whether a person was simply naive or intended to be racist), how to appropriately respond, and the potential cost of such a response, all while trying to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes” (Watkins et al. 43). In depicting both Ginny's and Jackson's struggles at work, *Smart People* bears witness to the psychic and emotional burdens that the targets of negative stereotyping are often forced to negotiate. In doing so, the play calls further attention to the pernicious effects of what Paul C. Taylor calls “race-thinking.”

Simultaneously, the play uses Jackson's fiery resignation as a springboard to intervene in discourses of white victimhood and to bolster the critiques of post-racialism present throughout the play. Amidst a “pity party” Ginny throws for Brian in the wake of his dispute with the university, Brian charges Jackson with spuriously blaming his problems on racism. Rejecting his friend's assessment that he was “treated like a nigga,” Brian rejoins, “You didn't get treated like a . . .”; he trails off twice before adding, “You got treated like the hotheaded Black man with a chip on his shoulder that you are” (96). The stinging retort captures a strategy crucial to ideas of white victimhood: to deny the relevance of race in discrimination. What motivates this strategy is a belief that the targets of bigotry are merely too sensitive and, thus, too quick to accuse whites of racism and other forms of bias. Brian exemplifies another key strategy of discourses of white victimhood when he follows up his initial remarks by exclaiming, “I got treated like a nigger” (96). Positioning himself as the real victim of discrimination, he reflects a view that achieved particular popularity in the wake of Obama's campaign, election, and presidency.

That view was on spectacular display in August 2017, when white supremacists, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, and other far-right supporters converged on Virginia's Emancipation Park in Charlottesville to rally against the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. Carrying tiki torches, the horde of mostly white men chanted slogans – such as “You Will Not Replace Us!” – that disclosed their fears and grievances about the loss of white privilege. Brian reveals some of his own fears and grievances when he confesses that he presumed that his colleagues would support his research because, as he puts it, he's “the White guy” (94). As his admission reflects, it is often fear of losing white privilege that motivates the idea of white victimhood; for some, like Brian, this fear can take a psychic toll and derange one's worldview. His admission also demonstrates how committed many (including the purportedly progressive) remain to the logics of white supremacy. Those commitments, *Smart People* reveals, render post-racialism nothing more than a fantasy and demonstrate the significant hold that race still has on the cultural psyche of the United States. The play's engagements with what Aucoin calls “the tells and giveaways of invidious racial assumptions” (and to be sure, the tells and giveaways of invidious gendered assumptions) bring to light how such assumptions achieve their force through what we might call, following Kim, the “racial mundane.”

THE REPRESENTATIONAL POLITICS OF US THEATRE

Like George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1986) and Robert O'Hara's *Bootycandy* (2011), *Smart People* saves some of its most incisive commentary for the theatre itself, using its explorations of the vexed representational politics of the enterprise to further its critiques of post-racial discourses and to shed additional light on the messiness of contemporary racial politics. *Smart People* uses Valerie's determination to jump-start her professional acting career to explore some of the ways that the theatre remains challenged by race, drawing attention to the “structural biases that [. . .] continue to relegate non-Eurocentric works (and cultural workers) to marginal status,” as Brandi Wilkins Catanese puts it (33). Valerie herself privileges Eurocentric works, valuing above all roles written by canonical white playwrights such as Shakespeare and Ibsen. “I'm in a show. Shakespeare,” she somewhat pretentiously declares to Jackson during their first encounter (19). In response, the doctor explains that he too goes to the theatre:

JACKSON: I do see theater. I saw “Lord Help the Child That's Got His Mama” at the Atrium last fall. And um, “The Brotha's Got a Song to Sang” . . .

VALERIE: Oh . . . well . . .

JACKSON: Yeah. See, this brother was a gang banger and his mama kept prayin' to set him straight, and he accidentally shot his sister, and when he was in prison he got saved and then he found out that it was really the neighborhood drug dealer that killed his sister . . . and they all sang a song, went to church, and lived happily ever after.

VALERIE: Which play was that?

JACKSON: Both . . . (21)

Through Jackson's attendance at urban theatre circuit shows (replete with hyperbolic titles and plotlines that traffic in tropes of black pathology) and through Valerie's response, *Smart People* no doubt extends Wolfe's and O'Hara's demands, in their respective plays, for a more robust reinvigoration of the black dramaturgical imagination. At the same time, the play also calls into question how the kind of work that Jackson frequents tends to be precluded from the sphere of "legitimate" theatre.

As Monica White Ndounou reminds us, not only does the urban theatre circuit have a rich history, but it has also contributed significantly to the cultural life of black communities. "The urban circuit can be traced back to the chitlin' circuit of the 1920s," she writes, which "reaches a heretofore-untapped market of predominantly black theatre patrons" (83). And while the "lucrative urban theatre circuit remains marginal to the mainstream framework that prioritizes white institutions on Broadway and in Chicago above black professional theatres," it has, nevertheless, afforded its audiences vital experiences of community and sociality (83). Gates spoke to this point when he rebuffed claims made by August Wilson in his contentious 1996 "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech, noting that "however crude the script and the production," "chitlin' circuit" performances have the capacity to generate "the kind of audience communion of which most playwrights can only dream" (Gates 141). Both Ndounou and Gates highlight the fact that the urban theatre circuit attracts audiences not because they don't "know that there is any other kind of theater," as Wilson once suggested (qtd. in Shannon and Williams 194), but because of the openness and togetherness that it promises as well as the distinctive representations it stages.

By having Jackson, a decidedly sophisticated and upwardly mobile "buppie," extol the virtues of the urban theatre circuit, *Smart People* challenges perceptions about the spectators these performances typically attract. In so doing, the play pushes back against an ongoing tendency in US theatre, a putative bastion of progressive thinking, to view popular black theatre and the audiences that enjoy it as uncultured and inconsequential. This critique is especially penetrating given the play's production history in theatres that predominantly cater to moneyed white patrons. "And your deft portrayal of Portia empowers our people how?" Jackson questions Valerie (48), in an effort

to grasp how she reconciles her life choices with her many judgements of other people's decision-making. The query disabuses her, and by extension the play's audiences, of any notion that performing in works by dead white men, works that no doubt also traffic in tropes of pathology, is somehow nobler or more worthy, an idea that – as the extraordinary number of Shakespeare plays produced annually in the United States perhaps corroborates – remains prevalent throughout the theatre world.

The play's forays into the racial politics of casting provide yet another means to confront some of the paradoxes and structural biases that pervade US theatre. Invested in the idea of what Brian Eugenio Herrera terms "meritocratic achievement" in regards to casting – that is, the belief that the best performer for a role always lands it – Valerie is especially thrilled to be playing Portia, arriving at rehearsal having developed a thick backstory for the character and eager to discover ways, as she puts it, to "deepen her" (4). She is thus taken aback when a reporter asks, in a telephone interview, how she came to play the part:

Well, I did undergrad at Tish [*sic*], M.F.A. at . . . oh, OK, you have my bio . . . well, there was a posting on the hotline . . . the equity hotline, and I scheduled an audition and, I auditioned . . . with a monologue from Lady Macbeth . . . you know "screw your courage to . . ." Oh . . . I hadn't thought of the casting choices as brave. (*Beat.*) I guess, I mean, I'm young but I'm told that I have a certain gravitas . . . and I know Portia speaks of having been Brutus's wife for some time, of being older, but this is relative . . . she may have been married at twelve . . . (*Pause.*) Oh that . . . OK, well, it's not really color-blind casting, I'm his wife . . . (38–39)

The reporter's suggestion that the casting is "brave" compounds Valerie's sense of confusion, compelling her to wonder initially if it is the difference in age between her and the character that might account for such a reading and, ultimately, to reject the reporter's unvoiced invocation of race (38).

In addition to demonstrating again the pervasiveness of microaggressive behaviour, the exchange evokes some of the controversy that surrounds what Angela Pao describes as "the rich array of casting practices – designated as multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, color-blind, diverse, innovative, experimental, or nontraditional – that have burgeoned in the United States since the 1960s" (2). While many have heralded these practices as serving a larger social mission of diversity and inclusion, others have regarded them as an affront to "theatrical tradition and historical 'authenticity'" (2). In calling the choice to cast an African-American performer as Portia "brave," the reporter expresses eloquently the white supremacist logics that often structure expectations about casting and, more broadly, about who belongs in the theatre. Those logics come into greater focus after an agent sends Valerie on

an audition for a character who is a social worker and she is asked instead to read for another role – a character named Shalonda who speaks with “ghetto passion” – because she “seemed a better fit” for the part (54). Not even the rigorous and expensive training Valerie boasts about can protect her from negative stereotyping.

Through Valerie’s casting woes and professional hurdles, *Smart People* recalls the central role of theatre and performance in shaping understandings, perceptions, and constructions of race – and blackness in particular. As Harry Elam writes, “From the arrival of the first African slaves on American soil, the discourse on race, the definitions and meanings of blackness, have been intricately linked to issues of theater and performance” (4). Valerie’s decision to swap her short dreadlocks for “the long, well-maintained – not cheap – weave requisite for all TV ingénues” (103) in order to advance her career – besides underscoring the fact that black women’s hair is, to echo Audre Lorde, still political – underlines just how vexed the representational politics of the US theatre and broader entertainment industries remain. It also further exemplifies her earlier suggestion to Brian that, when it comes to matters of race, things remain complicated.



While *Smart People* is, in many ways, a product of the context out of which it was created – namely, the putative “Age of Obama” – it has no doubt taken on greater urgency in the era of “post-truth” rhetoric and politics. Despite the insistence that Obama’s presidency marked a major turning point for race in America – one that stamped out long-established “racial habits” – there is abundant evidence that the United States fundamentally remains a “nation of cowards” on race matters, as Eric Holder once put it. The strength of the resistance and the reactions that have greeted the various movements that have emerged in recent years to protest and bring an end to state-sanctioned and vigilante violence against black people and other people of colour certainly corroborate this claim. By engaging in complex conversations about the rebiologization of race, the psychic costs of negative stereotyping, and the fraught representational politics of the theatre, *Smart People* exemplifies what an honest reckoning with race might look like: untidy, contradictory, vexed, and full of ellipses. The play beckons its audiences to consider what it would take, and indeed what it might mean, to reimagine the world not as post-race but as post-racism. If the play’s dramaturgy is animated, as I have suggested, by a question about the ways race continues to matter in the twenty-first century, it leaves lingering a revision to this question: In what ways *should* race still matter in the twenty-first century?

NOTES

1. “America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of [a century ago]. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African American to the presidency of the United States,” McCain remarked.
2. The row between Gates and members of the Cambridge, Massachusetts Police Department, which drew significant media attention internationally, ghosts *Smart People’s* dramaturgy and is worth recounting here. A neighbour, seeing Gates (and a cab driver he enlisted to help) attempt to open his jammed front door, called the police to report a burglary in progress. Gates was already in his home when the responding officers arrived on the scene. Minutes later, the eminent professor was in handcuffs, arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. While the charges were dropped, Gates remained indignant about the humiliating event, insisting that he was the victim of racial profiling. For a fuller examination of the incident, see Ogletree.
3. For an explication of this premise, see Elam.
4. For instance, an open letter penned by scientists and researchers rejected Reich’s claim:

As a group of 67 scholars from disciplines ranging across the natural sciences, medical and population health sciences, social sciences, law, and humanities, we would like to make it clear that Reich’s understanding of “race” – most recently in a Times column warning that “it is simply no longer possible to ignore average genetic differences among ‘races’” – is seriously flawed. (Kahn et al.)

5. For examples of the ways the positive aims of these projects can become distorted to rationalize disparities, inequalities, and oppressions, see Wade; Chua and Rubenfeld.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ISIAH MATTHEW WOODEN is Assistant Professor of Theater Arts at Brandeis University. A scholar of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American drama and black expressive culture, Wooden has published articles, essays, and reviews in *Callaloo*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *PAJ*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Topics*, and *Theater*, among others.