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## Vanishing Acts: Civil Rights Reform and Dramatic Inversion in Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*

GerShun Avilez

*University of Maryland, College Park*

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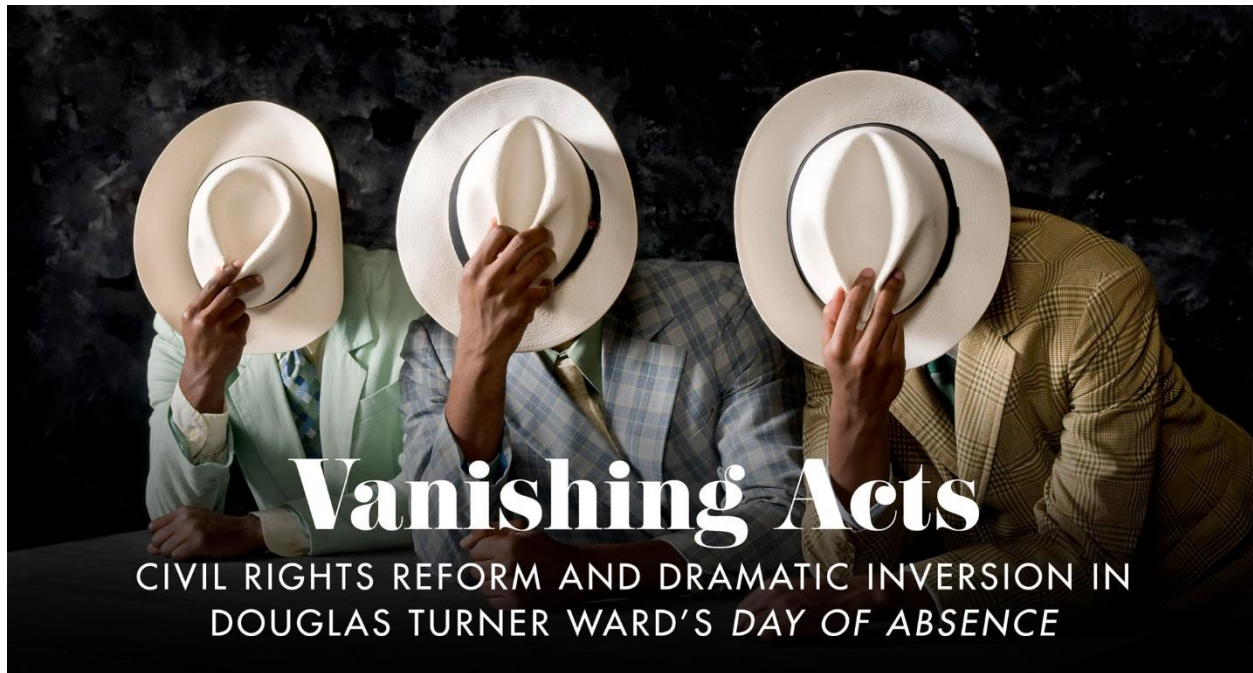
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BY GERSHUN AVILEZ

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In his speech at the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King Jr. insisted “the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”<sup>1</sup> In this speech given on the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, King describes an ongoing social isolation of Black Americans that creates a situation of internal exile and a constrained existence. He identifies how African Americans occupy a precarious social position vis-à-vis laws, economy, and public opinion. From King’s perspective, these circumstances establish a clear need for an effective civil rights act. What King speaks to and what civil rights legislation continually attempts to secure is the full integration of the Black American subject into the US social realm. The Civil

Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law less than one year later in July. However, three years afterward, in his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, King finds fault with the lack of change: “Overwhelmingly America is still struggling with irresolution and contradiction. It has been sincere and even ardent in welcoming some change. But too quickly apathy and disinterest rise to the surface when the next logical steps are to be taken. Laws are passed in a crisis mood after a Birmingham or Selma, but no substantial fervor survives the formal signing of legislation. *The recording of the law itself is treated as the reality of reform*”.<sup>2</sup> This discrepancy between legislation and lived experience means that civil rights represents an unfinished project in the development of US democracy.

King’s assessment of the incomplete nature of civil rights, even in the midst of historic legislative change, resonates with experiments in African American literary and performance culture of the 1960s. Dramatist Douglas Turner Ward develops his innovative play *Day of Absence* around the precise ideas at the base of King’s critiques.<sup>3</sup> The play first premiered in November 1965 in New York City and has seen a recent national revival, having been staged by theatre companies such as the Black Repertory Group Theater in Berkeley, California (2010), Theater 80 St. Marks in New York (2016), the Anacostia Playhouse in Washington, DC (2019), Theatre Arts Guild Omaha (Neb.) (2019), and Congo Square Theatre Company in Chicago (2020), and even at the Maitisong Festival in Gaborone, Botswana (2018). It stands as a creative response to the African American civil rights situation *after* the 1964 act. The central plot of the play involves all of the Black people from a southern town disappearing for one day. Figured as an inexplicable collective disappearance, these absences are simultaneously claims to unrestricted mobility *and* symbolic refusals of the social geography that Jim Crow and the legacies of enslavement had created. The disappearances function as imaginative inversions of the integration the legal documents attempted to effect. Although they might instantiate feelings of disaffection on the part of Blacks, these vanishing acts express white American desires for the Black laboring body, which the dramatist posits as vital not only to the functioning of society, but also to the white characters’ sense of themselves. In other words, Ward creates a work concerned with figuring the value of Black labor through absencing the Black body. My argument shows how Ward explores questions of Black labor and mobility and, in doing so, creates opportunities to invert the dynamics that have historically characterized US society. In the first section of this essay, I attend to the historical context of Ward’s play and consider how it responds to civil rights legislation about labor and mobility. The second section illuminates how the motif of “jokes” grounds the exploration of civil rights concerns and provides the basis for dramatic inversions that critique social inequities. I demonstrate how Ward’s experimental play functions as an extended meditation on the precarity of Black citizenship. I conclude by drawing a connection between the ideas in this play and our current social moment. The central concerns in Ward’s play mirror those of contemporary activists for racial justice and suggest that Black Americans are still seeking full recognition as citizens. King’s assertions from more than fifty years ago still ring true.

## 2 ENACTING LABOR AND MOBILITY

First staged in 1965, *Day of Absence* translates into art the legislation and conceptual frameworks of the 1960s that sought to further incorporate African Americans and other minority groups into the body politic. The recently passed civil rights legislation attempted to provide “injunctive relief against [ongoing social] discrimination.”<sup>4</sup> The acts collectively represent legislative attempts to remedy social discrimination that are analogous to Reconstruction-era laws. I direct attention to two predominant elements of the 1964 act in this consideration: voting and mobility. They represent two areas that needed legal remedying during the time period. Voting emerges as the constitutive component in the 1957 Civil Rights Act, in the 1960 act, in Title I of the 1964 act, and—as the name makes clear—in the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Each seeks to ensure the right to vote by insisting that all voters must be held to the same standard and by invalidating impediments to voting, such as literacy tests. Only about 20 to 25 percent of African Americans were registered to vote in the years leading up to the passage of the 1957 piece of legislation—in several states this number was often lower, particularly in the southern states.<sup>5</sup> Under-registration would remain a continuing problem in the years preceding and following the 1964 act. Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton explain that in Lowndes County in Alabama 1965, there were no Black individuals who were registered to vote although the county was 81 percent Black.<sup>6</sup> This extreme situation reflected to the authors the problem Black citizens still faced nationwide because of ongoing moves by whites to prevent or make burdensome the act of voting for Black citizens. In fact, each of the civil rights acts documents were met with more hindrances, as this statement from an article on the 1964 act from the *Chicago Defender* makes clear:

The wholesale jailing of civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, highlights a major weakness in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It is evident that the act does not provide the necessary safeguards against manufacturing impediments to vote. [. . .] No doubt the framers of the new Civil Rights Act had given some thought to the handicaps that might be erected against potential Negro voters in the Southern states. There is always the notion that too strong a wording of the voting section of the act might sharpen hostility and gain converts on the side of the opposition. [. . .] It is obvious now, in the light of events in Alabama that the voting section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act is not adequate to remove the roadblocks thrown across its path.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of the inadequacy of the act looms large here. The machinery of the document did not necessarily produce the hoped-for effect of augmenting the voting public by enfranchising Black people, as King indicates in his analysis. The impediments to voting can be thought of as refusals to *account* for this component of the citizenry. Voting can be understood as a means to social visibility; therefore, moves made by whites to circumvent Black voting in local and

national elections function as attempts to maintain Black invisibility in relation to the political sphere.<sup>8</sup>



Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, July 2, 1964, East Room, White House, Washington, DC (LBJ Library photo by Cecil Stoughton [276-10-WH64])

I highlight the 1964 act not only because of the emphasis on voting, but also because it introduces other important concerns, especially questions of spatial and socioeconomic mobility. Titles II and III deal with discrimination in public accommodations and facilities (the freedom to move freely through public space), and Title IV and VII challenge discrimination in educational and employment spaces (economic movement). In this sense, mobility in several registers is central to the legislative logic of the document. Legislators chose to rely upon the Commerce Clause in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution in order to ban discrimination in public places: “The Congress shall have power . . . to regulate commerce with foreign nations, and *among the several states*, and with Indian Tribes; [And] to make all laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into execution the foregoing powers.”<sup>9</sup> Interstate commerce and citizen mobility were the ostensible reasons for arguing for federal intervention in racial discrimination. In an August 1963 statement to the Senate, Attorney General Robert Kennedy explains,

Arbitrary and unjust discrimination in places of public accommodation insults and inconveniences the individuals affected, inhibits the mobility of our citizens, and artificially burdens the free flow of commerce. [. . .] The effects of discrimination in public establishments are not limited to the embarrassment and frustration suffered by the individuals who are its most immediate victims. Our whole economy suffers. When large retail stores or places of amusement, whose goods have been obtained through interstate commerce, artificially restrict the market to which these goods are offered, the Nation's business is impaired. [. . .] Discrimination in public accommodations not only contradicts our basic concepts of liberty and equality, but such discrimination interferes with interstate commerce and the development of unobstructed national market.<sup>10</sup>

Discrimination here is not about individual frustrations or the dilemmas of one particular group in the nation; rather, it threatens the exact nature and stability of the US social world. Kennedy and his colleagues aim to situate racial discrimination as a challenge to an ostensibly healthy capitalist economy. The legal reasoning makes the freedom of movement of people (and goods) crucial to the structure of civil rights discourse. The act has woven into its structure a valuation of unrestrained mobility within and throughout, which gets connected to national vigor and the precise definition of full citizenship.

The desire for equal access to public spaces that Kennedy describes lies at the heart of civil rights activists' strategizing. One of the most recognizable visual images of the civil rights movement is the "sit-in." During the spring of 1960, sit-ins and their analogues happening around the country increased: "stand-ins at theatres refusing to sell tickets to blacks; wade-ins at municipal pools and segregated beaches; pray-ins at Jim Crow churches."<sup>11</sup> The critique that these activities materialize has to do with the freedom of movement through the public realm. The expressed need for more opportunities in the realm of employment accompanies this desire to move freely. In other words, a concern with economic mobility runs alongside and is connected to the concern with spatial mobility. A survey conducted by the National Industrial Conference Board (a not-for-profit and nonpartisan business membership and research group now known as the Conference Board, Inc.) in 1965, in the wake of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, indicated that there was a considerable gap between company policies regarding hiring and the actual employment of racial minorities and that Black employees were mostly hired for "low-paying, low-status positions."<sup>12</sup> The survey provides metrics for the general feeling that there was little chance of advancing up the socioeconomic ladder for many people because of ongoing roadblocks in hiring that parallels obstacles to voting and social access.



Sit-in at Woolworth's store, Greensboro, N.C., February 1960 (Jack Moebes, photographer, Greensboro [North Carolina] *News and Record*)

My contention here is that the vanishing acts that Ward imagines in his play can be read with and through this discrimination legislation and the social rhetoric that emerges out of it, particularly the conceptual emphasis on Black mobility. *Day of Absence* is a one-act play made up of a series of thirteen quickly shifting micro-scenes.<sup>13</sup> Ward relies upon blackouts to signal movement between scenes. This structure makes manifest the increasing social disorder or disintegration that erupts from the absence of the Black population. Ward's work stages a fantastic disappearance that results in social chaos and anxiety. As the play opens, the white characters wake one morning to find that there are no Black locals walking on the street or showing up to work. A local inhabitant named Clem anxiously questions his friend, "Where is the Nigras, where is they, Luke. . . ? ALL THE NIGRAS! . . . I don't see no Nigras. . . ?!" (35). No one saw anyone leave. The Black residents have simply disappeared. The situation is purposefully implausible and inexplicable.

It is especially significant that the absence of this Black population is noted by the lack of any Black people walking by on the street to head to work. Clem maintains, “[E]very morning mosta people walkin’ ’long this street is colored. They’s strollin by going to work, they’s waiting for the buses, they’s sweeping sidewalks, cleaning stores, starting to shine shoes and wettin mops” (36). Ward’s decision to foreground the street in making visible the Black absence is crucial for two reasons: the street functions as a symbol of mobility and commerce, and it is described as the route to labor. Clem’s awareness of the Black absence through his observation of the street situates commerce prominently into the play and subtly recalls the emphasis on the commerce clause of the Constitution in the crafting of the 1964 bill. In addition, the realization about the lack of Black bodies moving along the street places in the foreground a concern with Black labor.

Black absence is figured in terms of missing labor consistently throughout the play. Sidewalks remain littered, stores dirty, shoes dull, and mops dry. It is a particular *laboring* body that has vanished in Ward’s allegorical drama. In one of the many flash vignettes that constitute the drama, a husband and wife wake to the sound of a screaming child and realize that their Black housekeeper and childcare provider, Lula, has not shown up for work. Lula’s absence is the first to be noticed, and through her, Black women’s historic domestic labor is especially emphasized so that the play does not limit its attention to factory or store laborers. Trudier Harris insists that the domestic worker is an especially important figure in African American history and US literature.<sup>14</sup> Through Lula’s absence, Ward puts domestic labor in the foreground and prevents his play about Black labor from limiting itself to more socially visible forms of work. From the perspective of the audience, her absence from work reveals the collective absence. Lula’s nonappearance creates bedlam in the household and threatens to dissolve the marriage. The situation becomes so tense that the wife, Mary, suggests smothering the child, who is hungry and suffering in a soiled diaper, because Mary has neither an idea of how to care for her child nor the desire to do so. John complains about Mary’s lack of maternal character and her failings as a homemaker in comparison to Lula, and Mary responds by yelling, “You shulda married Lula!” John rejoins, “I might’ve if it wasn’t ’gainst the segregation laws! . . . But for the sake of my home, my child and my sanity, I will even take a chance on sacrificing my slippery grip on the status pole and drive by her shanty to find out whether she or someone like her kin come over here and prevent some ultimate disaster” (38). The “ultimate disaster” that he alludes to is the destruction of the white family unit itself. Lula—like the other Black characters who are missing in the play—turns out to be elemental to the stability and coherence of white kinship and identity structures.





The Congo Square Theatre Company performing *Day of Absence*, directed by Anthony Irons, at the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, February 2020 (Photos by Jazmyne Fountain)

In addition to pointing out how integral Black labor is, the play calls attention to the typical nature of Black labor. Black employees in this social world of *Day of Absence* are trapped doing menial tasks. These positions are not without social value, but these low paying, labor-intensive jobs are the only ones that are available to Black people. In fact, Marvin McAllister argues that the play concerns primarily the economic realities that pinion African American citizens.<sup>15</sup> Historian Michael Honey offers a context for this reality in his discussion of what he calls “occupational segregation.” He explains how the southern “caste relationship ensured that blacks obtained the worst jobs, whatever higher-paying or more highly skilled jobs existed within a factory automatically went to whites. Occupational segregation thus made it possible for whites in the factories to move up and do marginally better than blacks.”<sup>16</sup> He makes clear how spatial segregation was replicated in the world of employment by discriminatory practices. It is this kind of employment problem that Title III of the Civil Rights Act attempted to ameliorate. Ward’s play demonstrates how occupational segregation continues in the post–Civil Rights Act era. The first setting note of the play is “The time is now.” His concern is with his present and the present of the reader. The implied expectation is that change will be slow if it is to come at all.

The linkage that Ward forges between Black absence and labor anxieties makes clear the connection between his play and William Melvin Kelley’s earlier novel *A Different Drummer* (1962). Kelley’s novel also tracks the effect of Black absence on the southern social landscape. In *A Different Drummer*, Kelley presents a collective leaving.<sup>17</sup> The Black people in Willson City—the capital of an imaginary southern state that is described as being “*bounded on the north by Tennessee; east by Alabama; south by the Gulf of Mexico; west by Mississippi*” (3)—have all made decisions to leave their homes and do so at roughly the same time. The white characters in the novel become witnesses to these deliberate departures. One of the narrators of the novel refers to this movement *en masse* as a “strategic withdrawal” (60). It is a tactic devised in response to unchanging conditions of discrimination. In Kelley’s novel, the sit-in, which became a popular civil rights tactic around the US in the late 1950s—Baltimore in 1955, Durham in 1957, Wichita in 1958, Greensboro in 1960—is replaced by a walk-out or leaving. Rather than using physical presences to disturb social dynamics and make visible discriminatory practices, the novelist employs absence to accomplish the same goal. The novel can be read as an imagined response to seemingly unchanging conditions of social and economic frustrations. In *Drummer*, there is an initial feeling of excitement about the departure of the Black characters because there would ostensibly be more jobs and resources: “[T]here’ll be plenty of work, plenty land—all the work and all the land them niggers was taking up” (189). However, this excitement immediately turns into apprehension: “[T]here might be too much work and too much land. [. . .] We might not have enough folks to do it all. That’s some economics I learned upstate. That means we won’t have enough food” (189). There is a recognition that the Black citizens were a vital, if underappreciated, component of the labor economy. As in Ward’s play, in the white citizen’s imaginary, there is no Marxian reserve labor

force to ensure uninterrupted production.<sup>18</sup> Without the Black citizens, social relations and economic structures crumble. In addition, there is a realization that whites would have to take the kinds of jobs for which they had been able to use Blacks in the past, such as janitorial and domestic work. A parallel anxiety emerges in Ward's play, but much more prominently. The "Industrialist" character complains, "Seventy-five percent of all production is paralyzed. With the Nigra absent, men are waiting for machines to be cleaned, floors to be swept, crates lifted, equipment delivered and bathrooms to be deodorized. [...] [T]he absence of handymen, porters, sweepers, stockmovers, deliverers, and miscellaneous dirty-work doers is disrupting the smooth harmony of marketing!" (41).

Although questions about labor and production appear prominently in the aestheticization of absence, Ward's portrayal intervenes in the discourse around civil rights in a different way. Erica Edwards explains how the question of civil rights leadership emerges in Kelley's novel.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Howard Faulkner turns to the question of leadership (or lack thereof) in his reading of the play.<sup>20</sup> In addition to functioning as a conduit for a discussion of leadership, the vanishing act is presented as a kind of incredible joke on the white characters. Rather than being presented as an orchestrated strategy of social critique akin to a sit-in, the vanishing act is cast as a phenomenal and manipulative prank. The Black characters return at the end of the play; they have not left for good. When the Black character Rastus—the only Black character that is featured in the play—appears in the last few moments of the drama, he bookends his explanation of his inexplicable absence with a devious grin, "a flicker of a smile playing across his lips" (57). This flicker functions as a wink to the audience, alerting us to the fantastical joke itself. The Black citizens have not shown up for work for one day and have purposefully manipulated those left behind. This idea of the return in *Day of Absence* is significant because it suggests that the Black citizens see themselves as permanent elements of the society who can come and go as they so choose and have knowledge and power that the white characters do not. They return to claim that which is theirs: a right to the social space. There is a demand for freedom of mobility in both works, and this declared access to physical mobility functions as an indication of the limitations placed on social mobility and a reflection on the extent to which such limitations were still felt amidst the changing legislative terrain. One of the basic elements of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is the ability to move freely through public space and facilities. In this sense, this play claims for the Black characters this right that the legislation sought to enact and enforce.

### 3 JOKING MATTERS AND STRATEGIC INVERSIONS

Envisioning Black labor through absence creates the opportunity for Ward to stage dramatic inversions and strategic absurdities, which lie at the base of the joke motif. The technique of casting the disappearance as a joke is significant because it represents a variation on an

important thread of African American cultural humor: incongruous humor. Glenda Carpio explains that the incongruity theory of humor rests upon disturbing one's expectations in order to elicit laughter. It entails the "playing of 'what if' games that suspend normativity. [They allow] us to see the world inverted, to consider transpositions of time and place and to get us . . . to question the habits of mind that we may fall into as we critique race" (6). The rhetorical "what if" game imagined in Ward's play develops out of the following question: what if all of the oppressed and disenfranchised Black citizens were not present one day? What would happen?<sup>21</sup> The play presents and the audience is allowed to inhabit this hypothetical time-space. The absence effects an imagined, almost mythical time lapse in which the events of the play occur. By situating the disappearance as a joke, Ward locates his work in a tradition of Black humorists and satirists such as George Schuyler, as Marvin McAllister demonstrates.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the idea of a joke itself indicates a knowledge imbalance. To achieve its effect, a joke depends upon someone knowing and someone not knowing. The white population in the play is placed in the position of not knowing, while the audience (through the wink) and Rastus are in on the joke. The knowledge imbalance reflects an inversion of the social hierarchies that precede and exist outside of the lapsus. Although Rastus's return does mark a return to the normal spatiotemporal coordinates, it does suggest that time is not constant, nor is it uninterrupted. Therefore, one can infer that change is possible in the social world.





In addition to unveiling humor's potential to expose power dynamics, the idea that the disappearance is a joke can also be read as a reformulation of W. E. B. Du Bois's conceptualization of the Black subject at the end of the nineteenth century in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). He explains, "In order to paint the South as a martyr to inescapable fate, to make the North the magnanimous emancipator, and to ridicule the Negro as *the impossible joke* in the whole development, we have in fifty years, by libel, innuendo and silence, so completely misstated and obliterated the history of the Negro in America and his relation to its work and government that today it is almost unknown."<sup>23</sup> Here and throughout the text, Du Bois is concerned with how the Reconstruction period following the US Civil War has been documented and represented in historical texts. Specifically, he explores what can be understood as the historiographic erasure of Black agency during this period. Black citizens are powerless and, ultimately, political obstacles in the postbellum process of rebuilding the nation in the minds of white historians, journalists, and social commentators. The notion that the Black subject becomes an "impossible joke" in historical assessments of the period is a reflection not only of the idea that they are the butt of a joke, but also that they are not taken seriously. The failure to account for Black agency renders the exact notion of their citizenship, in its improbability and purposeful distortion, the impossible joke of US history. In other words, the paradigmatic frame of the joke functions as a historiographical metaphor for African American civic standing.

Ward uses this understanding about the historical elision or effacement of Black contributions and social presence that Du Bois describes as the basis for his play. Purposefully employing strategies of inversion and irony, Ward has the Black population disappear in order to make them present. More important, he makes the white characters the object of ridicule and humiliation. The white employers and townspeople find themselves helpless to manipulation and ultimately powerless in their social world. In making the white citizens the collective butt of an impossible joke, Ward essentially recasts and reformulates the historiographical construction of US racial identity. In doing so, the playwright reminds the reader/audience that racial identity is always a construct that can be re-written or re-imagined. In addition, thinking about Ward's play in the context of Du Bois's scholarship suggests a conceptual link between the understanding of the post-Reconstruction era and the post-civil rights moment. In fact, historian Manning Marable refers to the latter period as the "Second Reconstruction." He explains, "During two brief moments in history, the United States experienced major social movements which, at their core, expressed a powerful vision of multicultural democracy and human equality" (3). The first is the period after the Civil War, and the second emerges around 1960s civil rights activism and the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Marable links them because both periods witness the widening or securing of citizenship rights alongside the creation of legal architecture to protect those rights. Unfortunately, in both instances, these advancements are undermined by political retrenchments and social conservatism—in fact, Marable describes each as "brief." He recognizes a similarity between or a common pattern

connecting these two distinct historical moments. The historical assessment of similarity through this lens reveals the transhistorical vulnerability of Black subjects to the caprices of social forces and shifts in national political maneuverings.

Again, casting the vanishing acts as a joke insists on agency and social power. Even as the play comments on the limits of civil rights legislation and the seemingly unchanging social location of Black subjectivity, it refuses to concede the possibility of Black agency even in worsening social contexts. It is not simply that the collective disappearance appears as a joke; it is a fantastic and marvelous phenomenon. The trick transcends an inexplicable disappearance. The Black characters that were ill in the hospital are still there, but they are in a mysterious coma. The Black characters that were in prison remain, but the prison doors will not open, and the prisoners cannot be seen clearly. The function of this implausible and absurdist scenario is to create a situation in which there are no Black individuals who are present, accessible, *and* able bodied. The problem is not just that they are gone, but that the white characters do not have full access to them. More important, in choosing the absurd as a framework, Ward is asserting the point that the idea of US southern cities (and by extension the United States as a whole) being devoid of Black people or able to function without Black participation is itself ridiculous and unrealistic, so the absurd becomes the most appropriate artistic mode for imagining this event for him.







Ward's presentation of the disappearances provides an important link to the dramatic paradigm of the absurd. Martin Esslin's work on the absurd is useful in illuminating the subtle complexity of *Day of Absence*.<sup>24</sup> Esslin develops the concept of the "theater of the absurd" to describe dramas of absurdist fiction of primarily European origin during the mid-twentieth century. Exemplary playwrights in his analysis include Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugene Ionesco. As a whole, the texts by these authors explore how humans react to a world that has ceased to have meaning. Esslin explains how the works of these artists "confront their public with a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention. [. . .] The laws of probability as well as those of physics are suspended [. . .] As a result, it is often unclear whether the action is meant to represent a dream world of nightmares or real happenings" (3). My turn to Esslin's theorizing does not represent a move to assert that Ward's play is a prime example of theater of the absurd. Rather, Ward's strategic employment of absurdist elements resonates with the thinking in the essay. The laws of probability and physics have indeed been suspended as the situations in the hospital and prison suggest. The white characters (and the audience) are forced to confront a "bewildering" and "irrational" world that increasingly loses meaning to the point of anarchy.

In Esslin's mind, the characteristic meaninglessness of the absurd derives from the impossibility of human communication as well as the ultimate futility of human effort (5). The anxiety and chaos created by absences result in a state of emergency for the town. The mayor decides that the best solution would be to make a direct address to the missing Black population on the radio. He believes that although he and the other white citizens put up obstacles to Black enfranchisement (52), the Black citizens still hold him in high esteem and will respond to his entreaty. The mayor character delivers an uninterrupted monologue that desperately requests, "Just call us up! Just give us a sign! . . . Come on, give us a sign" (54). Most of the play's dialogue is full of interruptions, broken thoughts, and scene shifts, so the performative space given to the long, imploring monologue grants it an increased dramatic significance. That which the mayor requests is communication, and this request goes unanswered; there is only silence and a blackout. In the speech, the mayor appeals to the listeners by reminding them of all the labor that they have done and, consequently, of the social inequality that they have experienced. These memories, he is certain, will bring back the missing. His plea pivots around an appeal for a return to the familiar, to social stasis. Although he finally insists that he will concede to any demand, he threatens them with intimations of familiar violence and intimidations: "If you persist in this disobedience, you know all too well the consequences!" (55). The attempt at communication fails, and his promises for change fall on deaf ears. To answer would mean agreeing to historical laboring conditions and an established social hierarchy. It would be irrational (or absurd) to return to a world that promises change while recommitting itself to inequity. Ward's point is that the actual absurdity has to do with the inefficacious nature of civil rights reform. The play expresses the fear that the legislative promise of social change will be

just a bunch of talk. The real joke is that the mayor and the town, which he both represents and embodies, would ever fully commit to and follow through on social reform.

One of the most curious elements of the play is that it is done in whiteface. This feature of the play has garnered most of the critical attention, and it is definitely the feature that the audience notices first when seeing the play performed. I understand this importance and will consider it carefully. However, I have purposefully resisted discussing this dramatic element of the play until now. The overwhelming critical focus on whiteface in this play obscures other elements, particularly the engagement with questions of labor and mobility that I see as dominant and elemental to the joking motif. My goal is to read the whiteface performance as an extension and elaboration of the scrutinizing of these civil rights concerns as opposed to the defining element of the play from which all other meaning must flow.

In the production notes, Ward insists that the play “is conceived for performance by a Negro cast, a reverse minstrel show done in white-face” (29). To some extent, this decision represents an attempt to respond to Jean Genet’s *The Blacks: A Clown Show* (1958), which premiered in America in New York City in 1961 at St. Mark’s Playhouse.<sup>25</sup> That being said, Ward’s use of this technique is not only an illustration of dramatic influence or revision. Part of his stated logic behind the decision of having a Black cast perform in whiteface is that Black actors need the work.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the design of the play reflects a deep consciousness about employment issues in the acting world. I read this theatrical decision and justification as, in part, a commentary on employment discrimination and the dearth of work opportunities for African American citizens even in the realm of acting. These are the concerns that the Civil Rights Act sought to address. Having an all-Black cast in a play full of white characters functions as a critique of limited employment opportunities and biased hiring practices. That being said, what is the value or the social significance of a “reverse minstrel show”? As many critics have noted, one can read the whiteface performance that Ward employs as a clear allusion to historical blackface performance. Saidiya Hartman argues that blackface performance at its core reveals the social realities of racial subjection and the fiction of the integrity of white identity.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, a reverse minstrel show might be read as an attempt to expose (and perhaps invert) implicit racial hierarchies. Extending this kind of reading, Faedra Chatard Carpenter asserts that the purpose of whiteface performance is to present whites as dependent and subservient and to present whiteness as alien and thus nonnormative.<sup>28</sup> It is a visual upsetting of established social hierarchies.



I agree that Ward's use of whiteface is about deconstructing whiteness and the social structures that it sets in place, but Ward's use of this dramatic device gestures at other levels of meaning. It also becomes a comment on the failure of democracy. Ward emphasizes that the white makeup is supposed to be clownish. In her analysis, Carpenter explains that the tradition in staging the play has been to stylize the whitefaced characters in doll-like and garish ways (50). Most of the productions limit the makeup to the actor's faces leaving their necks, arms, and sometimes their actual dark, curly hair exposed. For no moment can the audience think they are seeing actual white people.<sup>29</sup> The audience is witness to the presentation of anxiety-ridden characters who clumsily wear whiteness. Attention is called to the wearing itself. The makeup and dress constantly remind us that we are seeing a performance, one that comes across as comedic, artificial, and ultimately unstable. The adornment is an extension of the notion of absurdity that I locate in the play. This styling of whiteface emphasizes the idea of racialized performance in the context of the disintegration of society and the loss of rule and order. Because one can never see the characters as white, on some level the play is not merely about whiteness but also racial embodiment. The audience is witness to bodies vividly marked by race in multiple ways, and these bodies are anxious about citizenship and the security of the body politic. The whiteface becomes the conduit for these concerns about the social world. This portrayal conveys the instability of citizenship, particularly for racial minorities—those who are poorly hidden behind the white makeup of minstrel faces. The characters in the play stand as representations of whiteness, but their racially marked bodies might also be thought to signify the construction of Blackness in the social world. It is important to note that Ward describes the play as a “red-white-and-blue play” (29), meaning that the entire production should be designed around this three-color palette. The white facial makeup and clothing often are highlighted with reds and blues. It is not simply a play done in whiteface; instead, it is a play done in “red-white-and-blue” face. Ward drapes the colors of the US flag over the bodies of the actors and of the performance metonymically. However, the Black actors are incompletely covered by these colors, this symbolic costuming. The makeup fails to cover their skin just as revised civil rights laws symbolically cover them incompletely. The racial performance of whiteface is not just about whiteness; it is about the vulnerability of the Black body and the civic anxiety of the Black subject. The incompleteness of US democracy is enacted on Ward's stage through his clownish characters.

In *Day of Absence*, Ward attempts to address the question of how one can stage the vagaries of democracy and democratic citizenship. In attending to this issue, he invokes motifs of absence and presence in regard to labor, manipulates strategies of presenting racial performance, blurs the boundaries between reality and absurdity, revises historical means for documenting Black identity, reimagines civil rights strategies, and attends to the legislative concerns that define attempts at reform. He uses these techniques to stage civil rights dilemmas and to make visual the uncertainty of reform. In fact, the play ends with Clem's exclaimed question: “Is it . . . Luke . . . !” Clem is responding to Luke's insistence that Rastus's return means that everything has

returned to normal and that things are already “back jist like they useta be . . . Everything’s same as always . . .” (57). Clem’s near-desperate inquiry can be read as a signal that change is on the horizon. However, I read it as what it is: a question. It is not clear whether or not there will be any change. The ending is less hopeful than it is purposefully ambiguous. Social change is not impossible, but it is not guaranteed, as Martin Luther King Jr. suggests in *Where Do We Go from Here?* Before it fades to black, Ward’s ending dramatizes the question that frames King’s book. At one point, King maintains that most Americans are suspended between two poles when it comes to social change: “They are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it” (11). To achieve full democracy would require a commitment that many are not yet ready to make even as they condemn inequality. This reality that King describes finds expression through the device of absurdity in Ward’s work. Only the satirical and irrational can effectively communicate the paradoxical terrain of social reform that King examines. The uncertainty with which the play closes expresses the idea of suspension as well as the open possibilities. There is no sense of a nightmarish future, nor is there an inevitable utopian one. Neither option is predetermined, and neither has vanished as a possibility. The audience is left in the dark presence of an unanswered question. The dilemma that concludes the play and that stimulates King’s writing is not about how to formulate a workable civil rights policy. The dilemma is an ethical one: will individuals choose to take up the work of equality toward which legislation points? Clem’s final question is not about whether their southern town has changed; it is about whether or not Luke—and other individuals like him—has changed.

Ward’s 1965 play resonates with our contemporary moment, especially the ongoing protests for racial justice. Across the nation, there has been much activism about the 2020 murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery. For many, these deaths reflect the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism in state institutions and local communities as well as the expendable nature of Black life in the United States. Of course, these unjust deaths recall the cases of Sandra Bland (2015), Trayvon Martin (2012), Amadou Diallo (1999), alongside far too many others. Even though *Day of Absence* is not explicitly about fatal violence against Black bodies, the primary concerns of the play are similar to those social activists and cultural commentators address in regard to ongoing racial injustices. The white characters in the play presume the Black characters are expendable and replaceable, and they only show real concern when they realize they would not be able to get the disappeared citizens back or replace them with other Blacks. Relatedly, the idea of the fungibility of Black people undergirds the anti-Black violence that we regularly see on television and on streets. In the social imaginary, such violence does not matter because Blacks are not seen as unique humans and contributing citizens. Even in their presence, they are imagined as an absence. It is for this reason that the slogan “Black Lives Matter” has gained such traction: it seeks to push against the social absenting of Black lives and the denial of the value of those lives—just as Ward did artistically decades before. More important, the question about change that Ward uses to close his play is



the dominant question driving Black activists right now. There is a desperate desire for things not to be what Luke describes as “same as always.” The play makes the audience consider if the white characters have learned from this experience and if they have changed, and it is this consideration that is fundamental. Ultimately, Ward and the activists who follow him ask the same question: Are white citizens on the stage or on the street ready to commit themselves to equality and change? In facing this question, we can make Black lives matter and Black people fully present in the body politic.



**GerShun Avilez** is associate professor of English and director of graduate studies at the University of Maryland–College Park. He specializes in contemporary African American and Black Diasporic literatures and visual cultures, and he teaches courses on the Black Arts Movement, Black sexuality, art and political activism, civil rights, race and medical humanities, and twentieth-century American culture. His work explores the relationship between political and legal discourses and artistic culture. His first book, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, was published by the University of Illinois Press as a part of The New Black Studies series and won the 2017 William Sanders Scarborough Prize from the Modern Language Association (MLA). His forthcoming second book, *Black Queer Freedom*, is an interdisciplinary

work that explores Black queer artists and questions of space. *Black Queer Freedom* will be published in October 2020.

## NOTES

The lead photograph in this essay by Michael Bailey © 2008.

One of the hopes of this essay is to help shed light on how the pernicious ideology of white supremacy weaponizes language. At times, the author and editors felt it necessary to quote words that would be inappropriate in a spoken context in order to analyze how language functions in that instance. This is in no way an endorsement of the use of such slurs in a non-academic context.



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<sup>1</sup> "I Have a Dream," National Archives, US National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>, accessed February 1, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 5 (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> Ward cofounded the Negro Ensemble Company in 1967 with Robert Hooks and Gerald Krone using money from a Ford Foundation Grant. Faedra Chatard Carpenter discusses this history in *Coloring Whiteness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> "Transcript of Civil Rights Act (1964)," US National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=97&page=transcript>, accessed July 31, 2020. The opening paragraph uses this language to make the case for legislative change.

<sup>5</sup> See Walton Hayes, *The African American Electorate* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE/CQ P, 2012) and United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Report of the US Committee of Civil Rights, 1959*, <http://www.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr11959.pdf>, accessed February 12, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, rev. ed. (1967; repr., New York: Vintage, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> "Voting Rights," *Chicago Defender*, February 20, 1965.

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<sup>8</sup> “Voting Rights,” *Chicago Defender*, February 20, 1965.

<sup>9</sup> US Const. art. I, sect. 8. (Emphasis added.) Clay Risen explains how legislators chose to use the Commerce Clause instead of the Equal Protections Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because the latter had been used as the foundation for Reconstruction-era civil rights legislation. Because the Reconstruction-era laws were dismantled, there was a fear that this route possibly opened up the possibility of such undercutting happening again. See Risen, *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> See *Miscellaneous Proposals Regarding the Civil Rights of Persons within the Jurisdiction of the United States*, vol. 2, subcommittee no. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary 1374, 76/88th Congress, 1st Session, 1963.

<sup>11</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945–2006*, rev. ed. (1984; repr., 2007), 62.

<sup>12</sup> “Job Opportunity?” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 22, 1966: 15.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Turner Ward, *Happy Ending and Day of Absence: Two Plays* (Dramatists Play Service, 1966). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>14</sup> Trudier Harris, *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1982). Tera Hunter offers a valuable assessment of Black women’s labor after the Civil War and into the twentieth century that provides a crucial history for thinking about Black women domestics, especially in the South. See Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>17</sup> William Melvin Kelley, *A Different Drummer* (1962; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 2019). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. I discuss the connection between Ward’s play and Kelley’s novel about Black absence. However, there exists a parallel to an earlier piece of fiction. Raymond Chandler’s 1950 novelistic short story collection *Martian Chronicles* contains a story “Way in the Middle of the Air,” in which Black characters decide to leave the planet to white characters’ chagrin. The story is not always reprinted with the entire collection.

<sup>18</sup> See Marx’s discussions of the significance of a reserve labor force to capitalism in *Das Kapital* (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (1976; repr. New York: Penguin, 1990) in the twenty-fifth chapter of volume one.

<sup>19</sup> See Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> See Howard Faulkner, “A Vanishing Race,” *CLA Journal* 37, no.3 (1994): 274–92.

<sup>21</sup> Sergio Arau picks up this premise and extends it to Mexican Americans in his 2004 film *A Day without a Mexican* (Alta Vista Films). The film, like the play, emphasizes labor issues.



<sup>22</sup> McAllister connects Ward's play specifically to Schuyler's 1931 novel *Black No More*, in which a scientist invests a way to turn Black Americans into white Americans. See *Whiting Up*.

<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (1935; repr., New York: Free Press, 1998), 723; emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> See Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," *Tulane Drama Review* 4, no. 4 (May 1960): 3–15. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>25</sup> The original premiere happened at Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris in 1959, and Ward had performed in Genet's successful New York off-Broadway production. McAllister extensively tracks the points of connection between *Day of Absence* and *The Blacks* in *Whiting Up*. Lorraine Hansberry's posthumously published *Les Blanc* (New York: Random House, 1972) is also a response to Genet's earlier play.

<sup>26</sup> See Ward's "Notes on Production," 29. He explores this issue again in the *New York Times* article "American Theater: For Whites Only?" August 14, 1966.

<sup>27</sup> See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> See Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014)

<sup>29</sup> McAllister discusses how this fact disturbed some critics and reviewers and made them think of the play as a failure in some ways (185).