

## On Being Cast: Identity Work

By Kirstin Smith

### Abstract

This article examines the relationship between being cast and identity, arguing that casting not only functions as an index of identity in a given context, but also reveals quotidian identity work. I analyse Zawe Ashton's *Character Breakdown*, framing it as an example of an actor's effort to decolonise casting (in a British context). Drawing on Judith Butler and Randy Martin, I define identity work as negotiating between value abstractions, social discipline and intimate corporeality. *Character Breakdown* depicts a search for different ways to cite identity and thereby different ways to labour. I explore how an actor materialises in being cast, the surrogation involved in identity work, and the possibilities that resistant casting practices have held for reconstituting that work. I contextualise the portrayal of present-day casting in *Character Breakdown* with archival sources documenting the history of casting and being cast in the United Kingdom. Casting in the present is portrayed as both haunted by repertory typologies and engaged in new, still limiting forms of stratification.

### 1. Being Cast

A peculiar condition of being an actor is that representations constitute material, working conditions. Being cast is a heightened experience of identity formation in relation to representations, in which self-commodification and abstraction coexist with embodied knowledge and intimate social- and self-relation. Just as bodies are abstracted into types and representations, the 'strangeness [...] the thingness, the quiddity even, of the body' (30)—in Kyla Wazana Tompkin's words—is brought to the fore. To use Judith Butler's description of corporeality, in the casting process, an actor's body materialises as 'a phenomenon in the world, an estrangement from the very 'I' who claims it' (105).

Zawe Ashton's *Character Breakdown* (2019) offers a complex portrayal of acting labour. In a combination of autobiography and fictionalised autobiography, a series of scripted scenes featuring

'Actress'—a woman similar to Ashton, but 'suffering from a disassociative malady'—are interspersed with Ashton's own memories (164). The scenes depict Actress (not Ashton, but not-not Ashton), often alone and on the telephone, trying to present herself to others as she becomes preoccupied with her diminishing sense of self. Ashton's memories, written in prose, each begin with an age, associated character breakdown, and casting notes, eroding the distinctions between personal experiences and acting roles. Her recollections include: hearing about a Black boy around her age turned away from an audition for the Milky Bar Kid; a sexually-threatening encounter with a producer masked as an impromptu audition; negotiating a nudity clause; and a conversation with a director about the director's implicit racism towards her during rehearsals. *Character Breakdown* depicts the self-commodification required of Ashton/Actress, the emotional work of performing the role of Actress, the exhaustion of embodying racist and sexist representations (contextualised by other quotidian racism and sexism), and a sustained search for different ways to undertake acting labour. I characterise all this as the work of *being cast*.

Brian Herrera describes casting as a form of 'cultural documentation', which reveals how subjects are racialised, sexualised and gendered in a given context (*Latin Numbers* 57). Casting offers an index to the representation of identity, indicating how bodies signify on stage and screen in particular cultures. As aspects of bodies are rendered signs, casting unavoidably 'concerns the objectification of bodies' (437), as Ashley Thorpe writes. Being cast reveals not only identity, but also—seen from the perspective of an actor—the everyday *work* of identity. I am conscious that connecting work to identity adds complication to an already vague, capacious concept. Therefore, three competing aspects of identity are important here. As Randy Martin notes, first, identity is a value abstraction which facilitates circulation: 'What we call identity is certainly an attribute of self that gets bundled, valued, and circulated beyond an individual person' (64). In casting, identity functions as a mechanism of commodification. Second, I understand identity in Butler's terms: as a form of social discipline. Butler theorised gender as

a 'regulatory schema' or 'historically revisable criteria of intelligibility' which is continually cited in social acts (xxii). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler's psychoanalytic discourse deploys 'identification' rather than identity (xiii). Through 'identificatory processes', norms are 'assumed or appropriated', enabling the 'formation of a subject' (xxiv). Butler poses:

identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation [...] they are the sedimentation of the "we" in the constitution of any "I" (68)

Rather than a stable and individuated condition, identity binds us through projection and attachments to others. Third, Butler argues that identity can also be cited differently, as a resistant practice. When a subject finds resistant ways in which to cite an aspect of their identity and hence alter their subjectivity, Butler argues 'the 'I' who would oppose its construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition' (83). However, this does not render such resistance 'reducible' to the norm it opposes (*ibid.*).

Identity work, as I frame it, lies in negotiating unstable connections between value abstraction, social discipline, and intimate experiences of corporeality. It is not strictly the labour of acting but is an unavoidable part of the work of being an actor. *Character Breakdown* intimates that being cast heightens and reveals quotidian identity work. Where the book's search for stable subjectivity could emphasise individual psychology, it instead persistently reaches beyond Ashton; its mesh of fictions and quotidian performativity increasingly incorporate other bodies. Paralleling Butler's 'cross-corporeal cohabitation', Ashton depicts the surrogation involved in performance, whereby—in Joseph Roach's theorisation—performers might become 'effigies' (36). Roach suggests that effigies hold open a place in memory, allowing a collective to remember (and forget) the dead and the past. The memories that casting maintains, I contend, are of how bodies are expected to materialise and make meaning.

As Ashton/Actress seek to liberate themselves from being cast, they fantasise resistant ways of working and embodying identity. I read *Character Breakdown* as an example of an actor seeking to decolonise casting, and I contextualise Ashton's effort by using rare archival sources which document experiences of casting and being cast in the United Kingdom.

The history of casting is seldom documented. As Herrera notes, 'Casting's iterative impact lends it a peculiar ephemerality' ('The Best Actor' 1). Only the end result of casting tends to be visible in archives, press releases, or programmes.<sup>1</sup> Casting has historically been undervalued as labour, often undertaken by women in roles which bridged administrative and creative work.<sup>2</sup> Casting directors have recently begun to be recognised in industry awards,<sup>3</sup> yet the characterisation of their work as subsidiary to a directorial vision has left a missing history and allowed casting, in Herrera's words, to 'largely elud[e] historical and theoretical inquiry' ('The Best Actor' 1).

Casting has come to scholarly attention in the last two decades, predominantly in the United States. Ayanna Thompson, Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Angela Pao, and Herrera have problematised the dominant transformational paradigms which emerged in the mid-twentieth century in relation to race: 'non-traditional' and 'color-blind' casting, as well as revealing histories of (mis)representations of Latinx, African-American, and Asian people (see Thompson *Colorblind*; Thompson

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1 The Old Vic archive, for example, holds CVs and headshots for those actors who were hired, kept by the publicity department in order to write press releases.

2 Two of the first women to make their names as casting directors in the U.K. and thereby create the role—Annie Wigzell at National Theatre and Gillian Diamond at the Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Court—have left little to no trace in the company archives. Diamond, who was reportedly a 'close confidante' of RSC artistic director Peter Hall (Coveny 2015), goes unmentioned in his autobiography, though is briefly mentioned in his diaries (Hall 51, 85, 190, 243).

3 Awards for casting directors were introduced by the Australian Film and TV Academy in 2018 and British Association for Film and Television in 2020.

*Passing Strange*; Wilkins Catanese; Pao). In the UK, controversy concerning the casting of the Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Orphan of Zhao* in 2012 led to scholarship by Amanda Rogers, Ashley Thorpe, Broderick Chow and others. A significant strand of research has stemmed from work with undergraduates and young people.<sup>4</sup> These scholars have interrogated the ethics of identity representation and embodiment in terms of class and race, brought into strong relief in education and training, and recounted efforts to—as I characterise it in this article—decolonise casting.

Through *Character Breakdown* and archival fragments, I analyse how an actor materialises in being cast, the surrogation involved in identity work, and the possibilities that resistant casting practices have held for reconstituting that work.

## 2. An Actor Appears

An actor's appearance in casting has historically been structured by categories which facilitate a system of training and employment. These categories act as 'cultural documentation', conveying what constitutes identity in context. In *Character's Theatre*, for example, Lisa Freeman reveals how identity was codified in eighteenth-century casting, arguing that while 'the subject' was irrelevant to the era's genre-driven theatre, a 'dynamic paradigm for representing identity' is detectable (7).

Being cast is a process of materialising through such culturally and historically contingent stratification. Ashton explains: 'Graduate actors need photographs [...] To show your 'type'. Not so much *who you are* but *you could be*' (101). *Character Breakdown* frames an actor's

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4 Building on an Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference panel in 2016, Claire Syler and Daniel Banks created *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative*. They framed casting as 'inherently a political act' and sought to mobilise a 'social movement' embracing 'access and representation' (23 and 26). Syler and Anna Chen analysed the relationship between casting and 'undergraduates' emerging racial-ethnic identity development' (*Casting a Movement* 5). Comparably, in the U.K., Katie Beswick viewed casting through the prism of a National Youth Theatre 'social inclusion actor training' project and its representations of class and race.

materialisation entirely visually, in contrast to early usage of ‘audition’ as a ‘voice trial’ (Anon. *Questions and Answers* 187). Actress auditions for the role of a doctor in a sci-fi drama, described by her agent as a ‘come-back vehicle’ for an actor who has been cleared of ‘allegations’ (13). Actress is invited to a screen test and asked to wear something ‘to the body’. The casting director explains:

CASTING DIRECTOR We need to *see* you, they need to be able to see you.

ACTRESS *See* me?

CASTING DIRECTOR Producers, the director, they’re tired, they want to be able to go –yep, there’s our girl. [...] Before you’ve opened your mouth. (26)

Actress’s second screen test doubles as a ‘chemistry’ test with male actor, Mikey (90). Apparently more intimate with the creative team, Mikey takes one of Actress’ lines and kisses her without warning, afterwards explaining he was ‘trying something’ (98). Unbeknownst to Ashton, the doctor’s scientific dialogue has been removed. She later hears that they have cast Mikey but not her: ‘maybe your hair is a little short—a little on the edgy side for them’, her agent suggests, rooting Actress’s rejection in a racialised aspect of her body (127).

*Character Breakdown* portrays contemporary mainstream casting as simultaneously haunted by twentieth-century British repertory-influenced frameworks, and engaged in new, but still limiting, forms of stratification. In the mid-twentieth century, repertory theatre split actors by gender and then organised them into ‘juveniles’ or ‘ingenues’ (if female), ‘leads,’ and ‘characters’. Heteronormative and hierarchical, it conceptualised identity as a series of co-dependent states, corresponding to stages of life, appearance, and bearing. Within those pathways, repertory theatre was often lauded as rigorous actor training which offered the possibility of virtuosity to all.<sup>5</sup>

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5 An Old Vic Theatre memorandum reads: ‘On the acting side, it develops versatility and style in actors by creating variety of opportunity, both in rehearsal and study, and in playing experience’ (*The Old Vic Theatre Company*).

In reality, access to virtuosity was limited. In 1967, Equity's Afro-Asian Artists' Committee reported: 'The number of opportunities for qualified coloured ex-students to go on to what is considered by many actors to be the most valuable post-graduate training an actor can have, in the repertory theatre' was 'infinitesimal' (Anon. *Equity Letter* 3). In combination with standard theatre repertoire, repertory theatre casting reproduced unquestioningly well-established pairings of embodied signifier and signified. This is exemplified in semi-legible and cryptic audition notes left by John Moody, who ran the Bristol Old Vic repertory company in the late 1950s. The physical appraisal associated with casting is evidenced in this smattering of observations and judgments: 'Old. Toupee'; 'Very short'; 'good-looking'; 'good heavy type'; 'No'; 'dark'; 'big, slow'; 'red hair'; 'heavy built'; 'Jewish looking'; 'Blond. Not bad looks'; 'Bad eyes'; 'one eye'; 'No. Pansy' ('pansy' appears twice; 'cissie' several times); 'silly parts' (referring to a woman who had previously played a maid) (JM/2). The stratification of repertory theatre layered onto many other readings of physical appearance relating to class, gender, race and ethnicity, disability, age, size, and sexuality, among other things. Speaking in the 1980s, actor Maggie Steed described her training twenty years previously:

They taught us to walk and to speak and we all tried to be 'good' actors. [...] It was all very reactionary and patriarchal [...]. The few who had a working-class background played maids and, if they were lucky, Mistress Quickly. (62-65)

Drama school and repertory theatre are presented by Steed as a training in re-presenting one's place in a social hierarchy. Perceiving her own body through an objectifying lens, she implies, was alienating work, which functioned to root lack of opportunity in the body.

Citations of repertory types in *Character Breakdown* suggest that they still haunt present-day casting. Actress bumps into Older Actress, who has just finished filming a programme in which her character was raped, strangled, and left in a ditch. 'Classic,' Older Actress remarks,

before describing being cast in terms that parallel the role's violence: '[t]urning thirty felt like being dead, work-wise, and having the kid was the final nail in the coffin. [...] You're not an ingénue and you're not a grandma, so – see ya!' (191) This zombie typology lies just under the surface of the present-day types identified by Ashton. At sixteen Ashton is suddenly 'too old for the parts I'm used to—tearaway daughter, street urchin, babysitter with a drug habit. But still too young for trainee policewoman and supply teacher with attitude' (80). In a long list of types, Ashton critiques the familiar roles generally available to young women of colour:

sassy Puerto Rican girls with one line in American house-party scenes/ Mexican younger sisters trying to get their brothers to leave street gangs [...] all the delineations of the African diaspora with non-speaking roles/ sassy girls who run their own salons/ the drug mule who goes down for life/ the convict surviving to tell her story. (150-151)

Ashton's memories mirror Actress's sci-fi audition experience. In one audition, a director tells her 'time is money' before yelling throughout her monologue about being abused as his silent colleagues look on: 'Get into that *place*, come on!' (260). On another occasion, having just come off stage, Ashton is approached by a man:

When I play it back in my head, it sounds like the opening dialogue from an eighties porn film. He tells me he is an executive producer on a film that has just lost its lead actress. He needs a replacement, someone with star quality. For the right girl, this could be a huge break. (118)

Like the repertory categories, the producer's dialogue seems to come from another era, haunting the present. On the street, they enter into a scenario in which he plays her abusive boyfriend. He kisses her, cajoling: '[p]lay, come on' (119). The improvised scene culminates in a moment of genuine fear for Ashton, in which 'his eyes glaze over like a shark before an attack' (121). The threat dissipates without violence, but

he takes no professional information on leaving.

Such experiences of abuse sit alongside a broader critique of parallels between exoticising and generalising conceptions of race and gender in many casting call-outs and the daily experiences of Ashton/Actress. A stylist suggests that Ashton wear a ‘nude’ dress for a red-carpet occasion (206). A man with whom Actress has a one-night stand tells her: ‘[y]our skin. [...] It’s like caramel, like honey dripping straight from the comb’ (200). In a publicity interview, a journalist repeatedly asks Actress where she is from. A white, female director complains that Ashton is ‘aggressive’ in ways she cannot elaborate (247). Being cast comes to stand in for the many ways in which Ashton/Actress are forced to cite or resist a social interaction which inscribes their exclusion, exoticisation, or misrepresentation—for race and gender as social discipline.

### **3. Surrogation and Identity Work**

An actor’s manifestation in casting, then, is interspersed with the broader abstraction entailed by identity. As Butler notes, such abstraction is both bodily and removed from the individual. Performance holds in tension repeatability and uniqueness, and casting filters this tension through a person. Being cast usually underlines the fungible quality of the actor, as auditions express a multitude of possible, similar representations. On the other hand, rhetoric concerning casting frames actors as unique talents, possessing inimitable qualities. The predatory producer tells Ashton he ‘just has such a good feeling about [her] being *the one*’ (118, emphasis original). Here, casting heightens a quality of professionalised labour, whereby workers are and must be replaceable, yet doing a job well involves a fantasy of irreplaceability, which Roach describes as ‘spurious immortality’ (2). Casting processes seem to transcend identity even as they perform it, promising that individuals can supersede the abstracting categories which structure their appearance.

*Character Breakdown*’s sustained exploration of bodies makes clear that identity work involves the subject but is not rooted in the

subject. Conversely, it rests on grossly unequal collaborations and exploitation. In a comment on the racist undertones of the concept of acting 'range', Ashton realises that she needs long hair to make her more castable: 'Versality is apparently just—long hair' (150). While Ashton shops for wigs, the shopkeeper offers her a weave, promising the hair is '[a]ll ethical'. She buys one with a sense of trepidation: 'I imagine this woman, the woman whose hair I have against my face. [...] *Did* she give it willingly? It *is* a perfect match. I can't think about this any more. I pay for it, whispering a small prayer' (152).

Soon after the hair is woven in, Ashton gains a leading role in a project she respects. While filming, a make-up artist confuses her by offering to cover her greys. Ashton realises that the weave is going grey at the root, marking the corporeal presence of the woman to whom it belonged: '[i]s she using me as a host? [...] Traumatized by hair theft? [...] I can *feel* them. All day. The more I bring the character to life, the more the hair lives – on me' (155). Ashton fantasises about finding the woman, returning the hair and seeking forgiveness. The experience implicates Ashton in a fragmented, multifaceted identity—part fiction, part brutal reality—breached across global iniquity and written on bodies and body parts.

In an inversion of this event, Actress complains to her father that her own hair is not hers, but rather dictated by the demands of industry and character: 'it's MINE. It's just not – mine. It belongs to another woman, I'm just looking after it for her until the next one comes along' (149). The condition Actress describes is not only the presence of characters that she has played in her body, but rather the presence of other women in a mesh of appearance and representation which goes beyond her. Fragmented surrogates substitute for one another, wittingly and unwittingly, in layers of exploitation. The unevenly distributed work of identity requires that 'attribute[s] of self' are 'bundled, valued, and circulated beyond an individual person', as Martin writes (64). Experiences of embodying types, of being cast, affords the knowledge that such work is shared, though workers are profoundly alienated from one another in highly exploitative and competitive relationships.

Offered a body double for a nude scene, Ashton is torn between a desire to liberate her own imperfect nakedness from the constraints of appearance on screen and contemplation of a fantasised woman, Wanda, who would represent her body: 'I'm objectifying every inch of her in my mind. TV has made me hate myself' (196). Ashton fantasises a situation in which Wanda suddenly claims agency, looks into the camera, calls cut and disrobes Ashton, '[d]emanding I be allowed to represent my own body, my own skin!' (197) The fantasy neatly ties together Wanda and Ashton's exploitation, but its hyperbolic terms imply Ashton's awareness of her own potential role in exploiting Wanda. When her agent suggests she could have approval over casting of the double, Ashton recoils and agrees to perform naked herself.

Ashton closely identifies with a fantasised body double (Wanda) and the woman who sold her hair. Both trouble what constitutes Ashton's labour because to differing degrees they seem to, or in fact do, fragment and sell the body. In being cast, the body's objectification and commodification vie with an actor's labour as the potential source of value.

#### **4. Decolonise Casting**

*Character Breakdown's* depiction of being cast demonstrates a pressing need to decolonise casting in the present. Actress's search for liberation initially results in her giving up acting, refusing both to work under exploitative conditions and to signify in the ways demanded of her. Actress nonetheless tentatively agrees to meet a female producer with whose work she is familiar. Producer announces the meeting is not an audition; the part is Actress's if she wants. She shows Actress a memento she has kept from her own acting career: a typically reductive character breakdown for the part of a non-speaking woman, who appears having sex and then dead on a mortuary slab. The insight Producer has gained into being cast structures how she now casts, reducing the power imbalance and refusing exploitative repertoire. These mitigations enable Actress to resume the labour of acting—at least for this project.

This single instance of a slightly more equitable casting experience uses strategies developed by the radical companies who first resisted repertory casting modes in the mid-to-late twentieth century. In this final section, I draw from company archives and Equity Letters to highlight practices of resistance in casting, which still have the potential to change casting now.

Casting became a focal point for a regime of normative representation, which included limited dramatic repertoire, the objectifying gaze of racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist perception on stage and off, and the authority of a director. Working collaboratively, practitioners sought decolonisation—or refuge from the normative regime—in three casting strategies: alignment between an actor's identity and that represented; separation of skills and identity; and casting as a metonymical employment process. Importantly, these three approaches do not add up to a coherent whole: they are contingent strategies for finding resistant ways to labour, rather than a totalising structure which dictates how meaning is attributed to bodies.

First, in an effort to portray under-represented experiences with accuracy, some radical companies sought *alignment* between an actor's identity and embodied knowledge, and that which was represented. An undated handwritten flier for No Boundaries, for example, stipulates that the company sought a lesbian actress (BF/PB/61). Companies such as Gay Sweatshop Women's Company aimed to make performances that were, to quote the programme for *WHAT THE HELL IS SHE DOING HERE?*, 'faithful' and 'truly representative', because they were sourced from their 'own thoughts, feelings and experiences' (Gay Sweatshop Women). This altered the asymmetrical power structure of being cast, because individuals shaped their own roles (creating the possibility that casting could be removed entirely within collaborative groups). The alignment approach enabled an extended focus on the differences within a shared identity, as in Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro*, produced by Theatre of Black Women in 1986. Deployed beyond small-scale companies, alignment-based casting ringfences roles and helps to tackle misconceptions and representational lacunae.

Second, and conversely, the Integrated Casting Proposal of 1967, sought to decolonise casting by *separating* an actor's identity and the assumed identity traits of a role. The proposal called for actors to be cast on the basis of *skills* rather than racial and ethnic identity, conceptualising skill as separable from identity. This strategy depends in part on the idea that skill itself is not a marked concept, which, like 'range', conceals preconceptions about ability in an apparently neutral framework for judgement.<sup>6</sup> It also raises a question implicit in the term 'identity work': are performances of identity aspects of skill? Nonetheless, the skills-based approach enables alternative citations of race and ethnicity, which can be repeated and expanded. The Integrated Casting Proposal took aim at the way that realism was deployed to limit opportunity, mirroring racist expectations beyond theatre. Rather than repeat a societal failure of imagination, theatre should show what could transpire were people being selected for social roles—in a metaphorical sense 'cast'—without racial prejudice. Integrated casting was intended to 'anticipate' and 'perhaps accelerate' an increase in employment opportunities more broadly (*Anon. Equity Letter* 4).

Concurrently, many of the women who formed feminist theatre companies in the 1970s and '80s focused on casting as a locus for concerns regarding *employment* in the performing arts. Gillian Hanna described Monstrous Regiment's commitment to 'jobs for women technicians, writers and directors' as well as 'good stage-parts for women' (46). Her statement contextualises casting among other employment decisions in theatre; its political value lay in it being a spectacularised instance of work distribution. This suggests that casting alone was insufficient for tackling a regime of normative perception: repertoire, training, and institutional working practices were all implicated in fighting for representational and employment justice.

These three approaches demand different kinds of identity work from an actor. Alignment centres aspects of identity, while separation

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6 David R. Roediger, for example, documents the role that skill played in emerging conceptions of the 'white worker' in the U.S.

de-centres them. The employment approach views the actor as a worker among workers, in the company and in wider society. Seen together, the three strategies usefully metamorphose and diffuse identity work, enabling resistance to the citations of identity demanded in mainstream casting of the moment. Several potential points of resistance in being cast come through: refusing acting labour itself; resisting the asymmetrical power structure of casting through collaboration; resisting realism when it amounts to identity as discipline; resisting unreflective conflation of identity and ability; and foregrounding labour through casting. Whereas being cast alienates actors from themselves and those who share their identity work, decolonising casting necessitates a redistribution of power and alliances between those ordinarily estranged. In place of identity work which demands that fragmented surrogates substitute for one another, wittingly and unwittingly, in layers of exploitation, decolonised casting offers explicit surrogation, foregrounding the mutual connections inherent in identity.

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