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## BLACK HISTORY MONTH / Theater scholar exposes myth of colorblindness

Neva Chonin, Chronicle Critic at Large Published 4:00 am, Tuesday, February 27, 2007



Chronicle / Christina Koci Hernandez

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Shot on Berkeley campus. As part of our Black History Month series, we profile Dr. Brandi Wilkins Catanese, an assistant professor in the departments of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies and African American Studies at UC Berkeley who has written fascinating papers and articles (and soon a book) on performance, race and notions of "blackness" in popular culture.(CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ/CHRONICLE) CHRONICLE Photos by CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ

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With one foot in academia and the other in popular culture, Brandi Wilkins Catanese epitomizes a new school of scholars.

After earning her undergraduate degree at UC Berkeley, the Los Angeles native put further education on hold to work in theater as an actor and director before going on to graduate school at Stanford University's drama department.

Now assistant professor in the departments of theater, dance and performance studies and African American studies at UC Berkeley, Catanese is still blending her academic and artistic pursuits. Her writings on race and popular culture have appeared in the *Journal of American Drama and Theater* and the *Black Scholar*, and her current projects include a book on the impact of colorblind casting practices on black identity.

Q: Was your eye always on academia? How serious were you about pursuing a career in theater?

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A: Well, I took a few years off before grad school and considered going into acting, but I realized my temperament wasn't really suited to being a professional actor. There's a type of entrepreneurship you have to have that I don't -- the acting opportunities I wanted in order to feel fulfilled didn't require an MFA and running to L.A. or New York and sleeping on someone's doorstep. So instead I did acting workshops and worked with the Actors Collective in San Francisco. We did shows and worked our regular day jobs, and it was exhausting but invigorating. When I decided to go back to grad school, I looked for Ph.D. programs that had a practical component built into them. I decided on Stanford, where I studied with Harry J. Elam Jr. He was my mentor.

Q: Your forthcoming book is a critique of the colorblindness myth, right? The official line that society has moved beyond racism, or even racial difference, and made the need for things like affirmative action obsolete?

A: It's about colorblindness and multiculturalism and performance, and how performance has often been the cultural tool for understanding our ideas of race. For instance, how do you perform multiculturalism? How do you perform colorblindness? How does that work? It seems to be an urgent question at this point, when we have efforts, state by state, to encourage colorblindness instead of multiculturalism.

Q: You've written about how colorblindness was debunked by the FX reality TV series "Black.White." in which a black family and a white family switched places to experience life from another race's point of view.

A: "Black.White." demonstrated that we are not colorblind. Colorblindness says it doesn't matter if you're black or white; let's recognize the similarity and stop obsessing over the outside difference. But the show wound up proving the opposite, that race is as much a way of seeing the world as it is being seen by it. It seemed to demonstrate the impossibility of implementing an overnight, metaphysical trick that would make people not be beholden to multiple histories of racism. I think the participants came out of it with an increased awareness of race as something too complicated to be reduced to external signifiers.

Q: You've also explored the pros and cons of digital satire. Do you think sites like RentaNegro.com and BlackPeopleLoveUs.com have an impact by exposing racist attitudes through humor?

A: It's a huge challenge, because the people who actually harbor the attitudes these sites are trying to criticize often have cultural blinders that let them take the satire at face value and miss the point. What you wish for is an instruction manual to accompany it, although then it wouldn't be satire. So the risk of giving voice to some people's frustration is letting other people feel affirmed in their stupidity. Still, I think a site like RentaNegro serves a purpose. It reminds me of the monologue at the end of Amira Baraka's "Dutchman" that talks about black expression, and how Bessie Smith and Charlie Parker wouldn't have produced any of their art if they'd just walked down the street and killed the first white person they saw. Art is a way of expressing rage, and it needs to be registered, even if the people whose behavior most needs changing don't register the critique. It's dangerous, but necessary.

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