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At the top of the musical *The Fortress of Solitude*, the audience hears a black soul singer croon on a shaky record. The record skips. Mingus Rude later plays the record in full for his best friend Dylan Ebdus, as the number ‘Superman/Sidekick’ comes to life on stage. The musical follows Dylan in 1970s Brooklyn, an outer-borough of New York City, where his white family is one of the few living on Dean Street and where he befriends Mingus. Abandoned by their mothers, the white boy and black boy bond over the soulful music of Mingus’ father and over their magic ring that enables them to fly. But racial difference and inequality separate them. While Dylan gains entrance to an elite high school and becomes a music critic dedicated to African American artists, Mingus ends up in prison with his dreams of becoming a famous visual artist shattered.

But in ‘Superman/Sidekick’, Dylan and Mingus share a moment of interracial harmony. Mingus’ father Barrett Rude, Jr., the lead of the musical group The Subtle Distinctions, intones on the record, ‘I could be Superman … If only I could fly’ (Friedman, 2015). He dons a red and blue robe evoking Superman’s cape, echoed in Mingus and Dylan’s red and blue striped clothes. By the end of the song, the tempo quickens as he becomes empowered, dropping the modal of ‘could’ and preparing to learn to fly. His voice soars in the long-held, triumphant note as if he were flying. Mingus uses this song as a jumping-off point, to imagine what if he, too, could fly and write his graffiti art on otherwise impossibly high walls. In an inversion of the trope of the white boy playing the
protagonist to the black best friend, Mingus says that Dylan could be his sidekick. By replaying this Motown-inspired song, changing the lyrics to embrace superpowers, and layering it with Mingus and Dylan singing of flying, ‘Superman/Sidekick’ in *The Fortress of Solitude* models how songs and superheroes can enable alternate ways of listening, telling stories, and flying above structural racism. But the dramatization of black–white intimacies comes at a price. In the actual framing of the musical, Dylan plays the narrator, while Mingus plays the sidekick.

In order to critique racism and to imagine spaces without racism, *The Fortress of Solitude* relies upon white authorization. The main character, Dylan, is white, and so are almost all of the artistic creators behind the musical: director Daniel Aukin, librettist Itamar Moses, composer-lyricist Michael Friedman, and the original novelist Jonathan Lethem. And yet, what remains of the musical is an original cast recording from Ghostlight Records that privileges blackness. This chapter traces the power dynamics of storytelling when white artists and characters recount black lives and music. After laying out the background of the musical adaptation and key terms from critical race theory, the chapter uses close readings of songs, literary scholarship, interviews with Friedman, and historical context to conduct its analysis. By starting with a black singer’s voice, *The Fortress of Solitude* and this very introduction suggest how to shift the centre to blackness. The musical does more than merely include black Americans. It reveals blackness as the necessary core. *The Fortress of Solitude* importantly pinpoints mixed race spaces, amplifies black characters, and stages the differing impacts of structural white supremacy on Dylan versus Mingus. By making Dylan the narrator, Aukin, Moses, and Friedman illuminate how the white protagonist fashions histories, appropriates blackness, and disavows complicity in racial hierarchy. The book centres on Dylan, yet the score centres on black voices and interracial spaces. Friedman incorporates black musical genres, including Motown, disco, gospel, soul, funk, R&B, and hip hop. Even so, white artists crafted these songs, and the storyline draws meta-theatrical attention to the creation of not only Dylan’s story, but also of this musical. Deliberately underscoring racial and aesthetic tensions, *The Fortress of Solitude* highlights the unequal socio-political life chances for white and black Americans and imagines interracial friendship through music and a magic ring.
But for that to be possible, the musical must rest upon whiteness. By pointing out the white frame itself, or reframing the frame, this musical shows clearly how white is also a race and how whiteness mediates storytelling. *The Fortress of Solitude* ultimately insists upon the responsibility of those with racial privilege to do anti-racist work, from the art they make to the scholarship they write.

**Origin Stories: Making the Musical and Making Race**

The origin story of *The Fortress of Solitude* musical begins with author Jonathan Lethem. In 2003, this award-winning white Jewish American popular fiction writer published a novel of the same title (a reference to the Superman comics universe). A semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story with fantastic elements, *The Fortress of Solitude* defies easy categorization. Drawn to Lethem’s novel, director Daniel Aukin reached out to composer-lyricist Michael Friedman on whether adapting the novel into a musical seemed viable. Given the significance of music to the story, they imagined that *The Fortress of Solitude* could sing. Aukin had off-Broadway directing experience, while Friedman is perhaps best known for his work with The Civilians, a New York-based group that makes theatre out of its creative investigations into subjects like climate change, as well as his scores to *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (2006) and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (2013). For the book, they recruited Itamar Moses, a playwright and screenwriter whose most recent musical work has been another adaptation, *The Band’s Visit* (2017).

In the transition from page to stage, the theatre artists wielded the possibilities and dealt with the limitations of live musicals. They materialized the songs of The Subtle Distinctions, sampled existing songs like ‘Play that Funky Music’, and lifted lines from Lethem’s novel. But they also had to condense this 500-page work into a couple of hours on stage. The musical streamlined black–white dynamics, whereas the novel also includes old Puerto Rican men and Chinese students in the community. In addition, the novel could let the characters literally fly, whereas the stage, as feminist theatre theorist Jill Dolan has noted, ‘elides this flight of
hopeful fantasy because the actors’ bodies are inevitably visible and earth-bound’ (Dolan, 2015, p. 300). In 2014, *The Fortress of Solitude* premiered at the Dallas Theatre Center in Texas and then transferred to the Public Theater in New York City, an institution that has a history of supporting Friedman’s works, as well as progressive musicals from *Fun Home* (2014) to *Hair* (1967), another text that examines blackness, as Sarah Browne discusses in Chapter 10 of this volume.

To understand how race and power operate in *The Fortress of Solitude*, it is crucial to understand these concepts as explained by critical race theorists. In *Racial Formation in the United States* (1994), a foundational text for the sociology of race, Michael Omi and Howard Winant locate how race has changed since the civil rights movement, from the 1960s onwards, seeing it as historically based rather than natural and stagnant. They conceive race as a social construct with no basis in biology, yet with measured, patterned effects in how different racialized groups are valued. Racialization names the process of making race. Race becomes racism when people sort others into hierarchical categories, not only on an individual basis but on a systemic one. In other words, racism is not just when someone yells a racial epithet; it is also when people with resources and influence keep that power for people like themselves. In the context of the twenty-first century United States, the system remains white supremacy. People with white skin have white privilege; they receive benefits such as better education, cleaner environments, and more jobs with fewer qualifications. Civil rights attorney and scholar Michelle Alexander has documented in *The New Jim Crow* how black Americans experience discrimination at every level of the justice system, from being disproportionately arrested and charged with more serious crimes all the way through jury convictions and job applications that ask if you have ever committed a felony (Alexander, 2012). Academics across disciplines from critical whiteness studies to black feminism have illuminated how race and racism continue to shape lives and institutions, even as most white Americans deny the existence of racial inequalities (Pew Research Center, 2016). These scholars bring to light how whiteness forms a race often thought of as invisible or neutral, and how race must be considered as intersecting with other axes of identity, such as gender. Musical theatre becomes a potent place for investigating racial dynamics because of the
interactions of different racialized bodies and the stories that they express through song and movement in front of an audience processing racialized meanings (Galella, 2015).

For this chapter, three ideas from critical race theory and performance studies are particularly helpful in grasping racial dynamics in *The Fortress of Solitude*. First, American Studies scholar George Lipsitz has dubbed the ways that whites, as a group, shore up their privileges the ‘possessive investment in whiteness’, as if privileges were property with increasing value distributed to whites and denied to people of colour (1998, p. viii). To comprehend how white people commodify people of colour – that is, make them safe and consumable – radical black feminist bell hooks suggests the term ‘eating the other’ (1992). Dominant white culture treats marginalized cultures like spices added to an existing dish. White people retain their privilege as arbiters of taste, enjoying the thrill of interacting with others, while avoiding the negative consequences of racism on actual people of colour. Finally, black performance studies scholar Daphne Brooks invented the term ‘Afro-alienation acts’, which ‘[call] attention to the hypervisibility and cultural constructions of blackness’ instead of taking blackness as an inevitable, generalized given (2006, p. 5). Putting these notions together, this chapter looks to how Dylan invests in whiteness and eats the other, but also how *The Fortress of Solitude* highlights and criticizes white dominance through its performances of Afro-alienation acts. Even though racism structures life and art, this chapter shows how *The Fortress of Solitude* offers glimpses of interracial possibility.

**Racialized Spaces and Sounds**

In addition to the interracial intimacies staged in the number ‘Superman/Sidekick’, *The Fortress of Solitude* imagines the block, the physical space of Dean Street, as a place for mixed race community. In the 1970s, the predominantly working-class of colour neighbourhood of Gowanus in northwest Brooklyn included Latinx people, black people, and white people. To set the stage for this memory musical and his friendship with Mingus, in the opening number Dylan recalls his mother, her vision, and their neighbours. She celebrates the block where everyone sings a
different song, ‘But if they all sing together then it can’t be wrong.’ As Dylan introduces each character, they introduce new music. They sing of who they will be when they grow up, who they will remember, and of not forgetting who they are and where they belong. Although the themes of time and memory link the songs, they do not specify character and circumstance. Through these snippets of songs, Friedman conjures how people listen to and sing along to songs. Pop songs become associated with moments in people’s personal lives, so that when they are replayed they bring up those memories, though the lyrical content may not be directly related to the situation at hand. The songs layer, coming in and out, and they do not harmonize exactly; to do so would suggest a sameness of experiences across racial gaps. Friedman adds, ‘I think the democracy of the opening number is extremely important to me, which is that the opening number has no protagonist and Dylan maybe is our guide to it, but he doesn’t sing […] it’s not counterpoint, like they don’t all fit together. They actually just collide’ (Friedman, 2017). The composer-lyricist proffers the street as a utopian space where each person sings side by side and holds onto their differences. But, by the end of the number, Dylan’s mother abandons the family. Perhaps her conception of interracial togetherness is not so easily realizable.

In her valorization of music as the key to togetherness, Dylan’s mom specifically champions records by black American artists. When Mingus shares his father’s music with Dylan, beginning with The Subtle Distinctions’ ‘Superman’, the boys develop an intense adolescent friendship. In turn, Dylan shares with Mingus a ring from his mother. Named for legends Bob Dylan and Charles Mingus, they have a special musical connection. Just like their namesakes, Dylan draws inspiration from black artists, and Mingus sings within black musical traditions. Their interracial intimacy over music, superhero comic books, and the ring endow them with superpowers, or at least what feels to them like flying, as the ensemble repeats ‘sing a song of two boys flying’ in the number ‘Take Me to the Bridge’. In these magical moments, the boys soar above the institutional racism that tries to separate them and ground them. On stage, silhouettes show them flying, while the physical actors stand on stage and lean forward with their arms extended. Choreographed by African American dancer-choreographer Camille A. Brown, the stage picture demonstrates the impossibility of really
taking flight and the difficulty of dismantling systemic white supremacy, yet stirs an anti-racist imagination.

In the score to *Fortress of Solitude*, black voices are the heart of the musical. Friedman composed the songs for *The Subtle Distinctions*, citing his work as a ‘jukebox musical with a jukebox that never existed’ (quoted in Churnin, 2014). Specific popular black American musical styles, which change over time as Dylan and Mingus grow up, inspired this score. In ‘Bothered Blue’, for example, Friedman echoes the social justice songs of 1970s Motown like Marvin Gaye’s ‘What’s Going On’. Although the lyrics begin by lamenting the loss of a lover, the colours take on racial dimensions. Barrett Rude, Jr. riffs that white is the colour ‘Of a world that seems to have no place for me’. His song names how whiteness shapes the world and appears to provide no room for people of colour, and no means for them to obtain racial justice.

Unlike the novel, which uses only third-person omniscient narration and Dylan’s first-person narration, the musical lends voices to black characters to speak for themselves. In ‘Gentrification, Authenticity and White Middle-Class Identity in Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude’*, Matt Godbey argues: ‘Told from Dylan’s perspective, though, the novel can only allude to the black perspective and perhaps its strongest statement about race is Mingus’s relegation to the periphery of narrative about the gentrification’ (2008, p. 147). Meanwhile, in the 11 o’clock number of the musical, the climax that showcases a forceful (often solo) performance, Mingus claims ownership of his own narrative: ‘This is the story of what really happened to Mingus Rude’. With each iteration, he emphasizes that he will speak his truth on the operations of the prison-industrial complex, the racial and economic mechanisms for keeping disproportionately black and Latino people in cages. He employs the passive voice, ‘what really happened to’, indicating the forces foisted upon black people. Using hip hop, Friedman gives Mingus a new musical idiom to express himself that is different from the rest of the score, as the narrative moves into the 1980s. After Mingus shoots his grandfather in self-defence, he becomes an inmate and returns to prison repeatedly for minor offences. Mingus describes the violence within prisons and his survival techniques: lifting weights, selling his artistic skills, and learning to appear invisible. In the refrain, he sings of running, though he cannot
escape, and of flying, though he cannot see the sky. Mingus follows his
father in aspiring to soar like Superman. Cultural studies scholar Devika
Sharma points out that ‘the motif of flying is a magic countermove to
the long history of material and symbolic incarceration shared by the
black characters’ (2014, p. 671). In ‘Black Movements: Flying Africans in
Spaceships’, Soyica Diggs Colbert (2014) traces this oral-literary tradition
to stories of enslaved black people flying back to Africa and representing
struggles over life and death. The superhero fantasies of Mingus’s and
Dylan’s youth cannot protect the black boy in the real world, where black
Americans face greater obstacles than whites. His class privilege from his
father’s success as a popular soul singer cannot save him either. When
Mingus is released, he encounters the gentrification of Brooklyn, where
whites and wealth have been pushing out poor residents of colour. Under
strict parole terms, he encounters police eager to catch him with mari-
juana or spray paint to send him back to prison. Black men are not pre-
sumed innocent but already guilty. Under the three strikes rule in states
like New York, people convicted of three felonies were automatically sen-
tenced to extremely harsh sentences, even a lifetime in prison. Mingus
has no space for freedom. The musical illuminates the differing life out-
comes for people with differently coloured skin. Although Mingus sold
and consumed drugs with Dylan, white characters receive second chances
whereas black ones do not. Mingus ends up in prison with another young
black man from Brooklyn, Robert, while their drug-dealing white friend
Arthur ends up buying real estate on the block.

White Privilege

For stories and critiques of racist systems to take centre stage, a white pro-
tagonist has to be the narrator making that possible. While black music
plays, from start to finish, Dylan frames the musical. He turns out to the
audience, breaking the fourth wall as he directly tells his story through
other people’s stories. Dylan does not condemn racial inequality out-
right but views his inheritance as deserved. His possessive investment
in whiteness leads him to believe that he ‘earned [his] place’ to attend
a top high school by passing the entrance exam, in contrast to Mingus.
He fails to consider how black students might not be encouraged to take the test in the first place. Their friendship never recovers from their separation in high school. Having internalized his mother’s liberal lessons and love of black music, Dylan becomes a journalist who repackages old records on compact discs. He persuades a producer to reissue The Subtle Distinctions’ music, and he pens the liner notes, literally telling his version of this black musical group’s history. A kind of white saviour, he provides the opportunity for a new generation to hear The Subtle Distinctions. Eating the other (to use bell hooks’s term), Dylan consumes and sells difference as he retains his white privilege. But his actions are not intentionally oppressive; indeed, he seeks to recuperate Mingus’s washed-up father and to give the black music that has shaped his life its due. Then again, his well-meaning actions indicate that the terms for including blackness rest upon foundational whiteness. To put it another way: Dylan must guide the narrative in order for black stories and sounds to be heard.

This racial dynamic mirrors the production of *The Fortress of Solitude* itself. Based in part on Jonathan Lethem’s experiences growing up in Brooklyn, Dylan serves as a surrogate for the white author, and for the white musical creative team of Aukin, Moses, and Friedman. It is not Barrett Rude, Jr. who wrote the songs for The Subtle Distinctions but Michael Friedman. Traditionally white institutions with predominantly white audiences, the Dallas Theatre Center and the Public Theater allocated resources to these white artists and not to others. Speaking in 2017, an age of Donald Trump’s overtly racist and popular policies from the Muslim ban to the Mexican wall (Coates, 2017), Friedman reflected on the musical, ‘It’s a project where it will always be by white men writing about a perspective of white men, and it’s very possible that the world does not need that perspective much right now’ (2017). But at the very least, *The Fortress of Solitude* does the work of showing that perspective to be subjective. For another artistic venture, during the 2016 US presidential election, Friedman travelled across the nation to interview Americans and put their words verbatim to song. When asked about his white privilege in providing a platform for other voices, he said, ‘I have chosen to use the power I have in that way and that can be that I have not voluntarily relinquished my power. Which is another option. And one I’m not brave enough to do’ (2017). Rather than lashing out or becoming defensive.
about his position and actions, Friedman acknowledged honestly the decisions that he has made in how to use his white privilege. He, Aukin, and Moses could have invited more black artists to the creative team or given up their opportunity to others. Nonetheless, as individual acts, neither option necessarily dismantles structural racism. They are part of a larger system in which resources tend to go towards whites, so systemic change requires whites as a group to make racial equality a reality.

The musical importantly provides a critique of Dylan’s white privilege and, taking a step back, that of the white co-creators. Like the novel, it ‘points to its own representational restraints’ (Sharma, 2014, p. 674). In Chapter 2, Broderick Chow analyses *Here Lies Love* (2014), another musical by white men at the Public Theater, and similarly suggests that the Imelda Marcos disco musical prompts critical awareness of personal positionality and constructed performance. As for *The Fortress of Solitude*, young adult Dylan has a girlfriend named Abby, who, though narratively underdeveloped, offers sharp insight into Dylan’s character. Her song ‘Something’ serves as a crucial Afro-alienation act in drawing attention to the politics of blackness and whiteness. She shows self-awareness in noticing his collection of records and comic books, wondering if she too is part of the collection as the black girlfriend, just like his ‘black best friend on Dean Street’. Instead of talking about his life and how he knows Mingus and Barrett Rude, Jr., Dylan changes the subject and puts on black records. Abby calls him out for how he decontextualizes and romanticizes history: ‘You said those people’s lives don’t matter/Only the songs’. These lyrics take on greater resonance in light of the Black Lives Matter movement, which arose in 2012 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who had killed Trayvon Martin, a young, unarmed black man in Florida. To create distance, Dylan glosses black people as ‘those people’ and asserts that their lives do not matter. At the same time, he believes that the songs wield profound truth ‘Because they sing their pain’. In his contradictory reasoning, he views music as separate (and separable) from people and politics, even as he locates authenticity in black people’s personal and political racial struggles. In discussing the influence of black music on white artists, Lipsitz ‘[warns] against a kind of romanticism that looks so hard for individuality, emotion, and an aesthetic rendering
of social pain that we overlook the collective, material, and political dimensions of our lives’ (1998, p. 129). When Abby asks Dylan, ‘Will you ever learn to sing anything but other people’s pain?’, he answers by singing lyrics originated by Barrett Rude, Jr. Although he sings the pain of black struggle, Dylan is simultaneously using the vehicle of black music to convey his own pain from his mother abandoning him and him abandoning Mingus. His life is the soundtrack of racial politics, no matter how hard he tries to remove himself from the obligation to raze racial hierarchy. By including this number, Aukin, Moses, and Friedman implicitly critique themselves as white artists mobilizing black sounds, stories, and struggles to compose *The Fortress of Solitude*. Rather than appearing to side with Dylan and his apparently objective white frame, the musical artists call out the privileges of who gets to tell whose story. It is at this point that Mingus breaks out into ‘The Ballad of Mingus Rude’ to tell his tale and criticize the racist prison-industrial complex.

In the end, Dylan confronts his past. When he visits Mingus in prison, he offers the magic ring in an attempt to repair the rift between them. But restoring interracial intimacy is not that simple. As hooks argues, ‘Whether or not desire for contact with the Other, for connection rooted in the longing for pleasure, can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance, is an unrealized political possibility’ (1992, p. 22). Dylan’s desire for Mingus’s friendship and for black musical culture does not equate to anti-racist action. Mingus rejects Dylan, who instead gifts the ring to Robert. Another black kid from the block, Robert had bullied Dylan when they were growing up, but Robert had nothing and no one to support him. While in the novel he accepts the ring and jumps off the prison tower to his death, the musical implies that he successfully flies away, leaving room for the fantasy of escape from the systemic confinement of unequal racial conditions. In a light but earnest a cappella voice, Mingus is able to finish singing the ‘Superman’ lyric from his father’s record that kept skipping at the start of the musical. *The Fortress of Solitude* names what holds back black Americans but, premiering in 2014 in an age of Barack Obama’s presidency, the musical also imagines hope, change, and flight if only people of colour were granted greater opportunities.
‘Middle Spaces’

In the finale, ‘Middle Spaces’, Dylan recognizes the racial politics of his narration and the utopian messiness of racial equity yet continues to insist on the potential of music to bring people together. Friedman explains, ‘he has been seduced and fooled by pop music’ as an easy way to solve the fundamental racial problems of the United States (Friedman, 2012). Dylan reflects that he created the song list, speaking literally to the music compilations that he produces and figuratively to the stories that he tells to comprehend his life and relationships. An unreliable narrator, he sings of his friendship with Mingus and how they could fly, or at least that is how he sees it, highlighting the ambiguity between perception and reality. Did the ring actually grant Dylan and Mingus superpowers? Yes, according to Dylan, though he also shares that truth is grounded in his perspective; it is not objective. Through this self-consciousness, he and the musical’s creators model responsible storytelling for people with whi...
In 2017, three years after the premiere of the off-Broadway production, Aukin, Moses, and Friedman continued to revise this musical as they planned for future productions. But that September, Friedman passed away from HIV/AIDS complications, and the musical theatre community lost a brilliant, leftist artist. The work of *The Fortress of Solitude* remains unfinished, and so is the work of students, educators, researchers, and activists to make a space where white people are willing to be sidekicks to black superheroes.

**Note**

1. All lyrics from *The Fortress of Solitude* musical come from the original cast recording.

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