



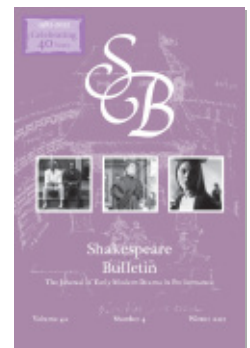
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Kevin Ewert

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**“You want to sort that out?”:
A Conversation on Overwhelming
Whiteness, Anti-Racism, Theater-Making,
and Shakespeare with Keith Hamilton Cobb**

KEVIN EWERT

University of Pittsburgh at Bradford

*I*t's been more than a quarter century since August Wilson called bullshit on “colorblind” casting, rejecting empty gestures of white benevolence in favor of more Black theaters, Black playwrights, and Black stories, so that a Black performer's humanity will not simply be put to use in mimicry of the dominant culture in its favored/favorite artefacts. The problem, alas, has not gone away. Tokenism still tries to pass itself off as diversity and representation, because tokenism makes (insidious) use of representation. Inclusion without (company-wide) investment or (Black practitioners' actual) influence is at best a missed opportunity, and at worst does more damage. It amounts to yet another empty gesture in which the story is peopled with contemporary Black and brown performers, but no investment is made in or through what their lived experiences bring to the table. The storytelling, and all the entrenched ways of art-making, continue on the way they were going anyway, regardless of this new “look” for an audience. Gestural inclusion without actual investment or influence is, as Nora Williams astutely argues, a woefully incomplete dramaturgy.

During the course of the interview that follows, the actor and writer Keith Hamilton Cobb told me a story about being cast in a stage production of Reginald Rose's 1950s classic legal drama *12 Angry Men*. Both the original 1954 television version and the famous 1957 film version had all-white casts, but the stage production Cobb was cast in chose to go the colorblind route. Cobb explained just how “blind” colorblind can be:

They hired me, another Black man, and a Mexican American to be in the room. And I was the mean guy! I was the most racist of the angry men. And I said “so when is this?” They said “what do you mean?” And I said “well, if it’s at the time when the play is set, [the Black and brown people here] wouldn’t be in this room. So it must be some other time.” They said “right, so, yeah, well it’s later.” I said “how much later?” They said, “well, you know, I don’t know, later. 1970s.” I said “In the 70s I couldn’t bring a switchblade up in here [a crucial plot point], right, I’d never get past the metal detectors. Wouldn’t happen. So what are we doing? And if it’s me in this room as I would be in a room contemporarily, saying the things I’m saying being who I am, with my size, head and shoulders over all these people [Cobb is 6’4”], they would not be coming at me the way that these white men come at each other in the play as written by Rose. So, you want to sort that out?”

In the American professional theater, when actors start rehearsals, they are usually already very close to opening night. Sometime earlier in the process for this particular production, Black and brown people had been cast, but apparently the implications of Black and brown characters being in the story hadn’t been considered. One might think “that’s what rehearsals are for!”, but that work can only happen if a company is willing and equipped for those discussions. In this particular case, time, money, and the history of not-being-able-to-talk-about-race in the United States were lined up against progress, imaginative or otherwise. Cobb continued: “We’re in the room, and the director is uncomfortable, and other actors are uncomfortable, everybody is uncomfortable because they don’t want to sort it out, they just want to do their three weeks and get that check and go home.” The best of intentions—racial diversity in casting—meets the worst of unconsidered afterthoughts: as written, this is a white play, and thus not some neutral repository for whatever or whomever may be thrown into it. The evasiveness of “colorblindness” actually represents “directors declining to take responsibility for a production’s images, and deflecting responsibility onto the audience (particularly through silence about race)” (Gordon 598). Better than agreeing to “blindness” would be for “audience members to question the production companies” (Scott-Douglass 201).

12 Angry Men is an old chestnut of American theater. Shakespeare is something else again. In theory, Shakespeare should open up more room for artistic maneuvering than would a gritty, single-location, seemingly unfolding-in-actual-time slice of jury room realness. But even if Shakespeare can be considered more mythic than realistic, the rehearsal room, and the people in it, and the process of making theater, and time, and

money, and the history of not-being-able-to-talk-about-race in America . . . those things are still real, and they remain in the room. Shakespeare perhaps is a stronger container into which may be poured all those personal and social and theatrical energies, but some things are always going to need to be questioned and, in Cobb’s words, sorted out.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers methodological frameworks for questioning the foundations of our social orders and constructions, and with that some of our purported ideals, such as equality and neutrality (Delgado and Stefancic 3). It seems more than appropriate to apply it in a practical engagement with our most social of art forms, and with one of if not the foundational playwright of our theater, and also with the imagined equality and neutrality of “colorblind” casting. Furthermore, the “activist dimension” (Delgado and Stefancic 8) of CRT can be a spur to sort things out, to transform “the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado and Stefancic 3) rather than tinker around the edges. A key affordance of CRT is the tools it provides us for identifying and distinguishing between procedural rights and substantive rights. This insight arose from an analysis of the ways in which civil rights-era gains (on paper) seemed to stall when they were put to the test in actual lived realities (of food, housing, education, etc.). Procedural rights are an invitation to, and allow for a place in, a process. Substantive rights provide a means to effect actual material change. The difference between procedural “equality of opportunity” and substantive “equality of results” (Delgado and Stefancic 29) is the difference between *inclusion* and *influence*, and it highlights the essential contradiction of colorblind casting: the Black actor is invited in, only to pretend the actor’s Blackness isn’t there. Even for all Shakespeare’s supposed universality, the “theoretical underpinnings” of colorblind casting remain “unstable” and “fascinating suppositions” at best (Thompson 1, 6). If a company’s dramaturgy is both incomplete and disingenuous, then existing practices will continue to reproduce similar results. Representational visibility alone runs the risk of leading straight into untenable contradictions for Black artists, and allowing a “look what we’ve done!” complacency amongst white allies and the powers-that-be, in the face of all the other intransigent, untransformed structures and ways of doing.

After the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, it seemed like every corporation and company in the US sent out a statement in support of anti-racism. A flood of emails is not the same thing as a cultural sea change, however, and so in June 2020 a group of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) theater-makers released a statement/

testimonial/call to action, addressed “Dear White American Theater.” It precisely calls out the lip service and half measures that mainstream theater has traded in while avoiding real, substantive, systemic change; it says, we see what you’re doing. Systemic racism and its day-to-day harms live quite comfortably in all the things and the places, all the ways and means, that the dominant culture doesn’t spend time and energy considering, examining, or even seeing. The “We See You, White American Theater” (WSYWAT) manifesto is asking theater practitioners, leaders, and funders to look again at everything. Everything. Casting, hiring, budgets. Spaces, media, marketing. Investments, funding, boards. Hair, make-up, lighting. Codes of conduct, trainings, protocols. Unions, the press, the academy. WSYWAT demands “transformative practices” in all aspects of theater-making in order to bring about change and accountability, at micro and macro levels (“Dear White American Theater”). As Delgado and Stefancic point out, “color-blind, or ‘formal,’ conceptions of equality” are ill-equipped to tackle the “ordinariness” (8) of racism that seeps into every aspect of doing business in our culture.

One isolated and incomplete step, even a very visible one, is frustratingly unhelpful. In her conversation with Ayanna Thompson on social justice and Shakespearean practices, Farah Karim-Cooper makes exactly that point: “having a diverse cast [. . .] is not enough. It’s how you frame that casting” (543). Similarly, De’Aris Rhymes, in a wide-ranging look at some American, primarily Shakespearean theater companies post-2020, notes that “commitment to diversifying [a show’s] cast, without further evidence of how this practice works with actors of color, is not sufficient” (566). For WSYWAT, “framing” is not just a concept within a production, but also includes the complete constellation of elements surrounding the ways in which a piece of theater gets made. Otherwise, as Williams points out, incomplete dramaturgies leave “entrenched norms lurking like specters behind a sheen of progressivism” (16). Companies can make gestures towards diverse casting, and then hope that we don’t “see” the overwhelming whiteness of every other aspect of the complex ecology of mainstream theater-making. In the American theater, as in the American academy, whiteness might prefer to wait it out, hoping that calls to action are only “temporary boutique obsessions” rather than a laser-focused scrutiny of “the operations of whiteness [which] have historically been further manipulated and formalized in order to promote and justify a legacy of white racial supremacy” (Brown, Akhimie, and Little, Jr. 18). Tokenism in whatever form is a shell game, a short con rather than a considered, irreversible, long-term change to the system.

What follows is an attempt to point towards something other than inclusion without influence in staging Shakespeare. Keith Hamilton Cobb is the writer and performer of *American Moor*, a brilliant examination of race, power, and Shakespeare, expressed through some ninety minutes of interior monologue swirling around a Black actor’s five-minute audition before a young white director for *Othello*.¹ Cobb is currently the director of The Untitled Othello Project, an open-ended endeavor in theater-making and educational outreach now in a multi-year partnership with Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT, which engages artists, students, and educators in an attempt to put into rehearsal room practice many of the ideas discussed here (see “The Untitled Othello Project”). Our conversations took place by Zoom, text, and email in December 2020 and January 2021, and have been edited for clarity and length.

Kevin: So that hopeless white director in *American Moor* isn’t really a straw man because he looks and sounds too much like most Anglo-American directors of Shakespeare.

Keith: He looks and sounds like every American director of everything—

Kevin: Directors of companies, directors in boardrooms . . .

Keith: Which is precisely the point. *American Moor* is not so much a play about theater as it is a play about the inability to see, much less operate beyond the dominant caste perspective that white Americans have forever been born into. So it’s not simply someone in a traditional position of authority, like a director of theater, although that does offer a few ready excuses for it, but every white Anglo-American. What is so frightening to so many about Critical Race Theory is the idea that “anti-racist” is not a thing that any white person can simply claim. It is nearly impossible to be white without tendencies of all sorts that are influenced by long-entrenched and meticulously crafted racial hierarchies.

Kevin: Shakespeare wrote default white worlds, whether they’re inhabited by English kings or woodland fairies. As soon as you put Black actors on the stage, audiences see that the (stage) world is supposed to have some place for Blackness, so how do we consciously make that happen? How does a director and a company make it a Black play?

Keith: The mythic scope of most of Shakespeare's plays is so vast that all forms of non-traditional casting seem not only possible, but inviting of all sorts of new vistas with regard to what these plays might be about, not what they were about to Shakespeare, but what they might be about to us. The place where it falls short is [that] directors will do that and then not allow for the non-white individual to be a non-white individual.

If, four hundred-plus years from now, someone picks up and produces an August Wilson play with a white cast, an audience might have no accurate sense of how the play was ever done any other way, or about any other people. I feel no need to make any of Shakespeare's plays "Black plays." I'm interested in allowing the non-white performers to interpret the characters they enact through their instruments, all individually unique, but made even more so by experiences of race and ethnicity. Only the deeply indoctrinated non-white performer longs to get on stage and imitate whiteness. The rest want the audience to see the depth and nuance in the John Proctor or the Hedda Gabler that *they* are. The director can facilitate those expanded vistas or not, commensurate with their ability to drop the complex psychological framework of superiority that has rendered them mediocre at their job. This is made even more difficult because the overarching culture whom their mediocrity serves has told them that [their work is] brilliant.

Kevin: What about the director as theatrical gatekeeper: only letting certain things in (things that go with the concept of his/her production) and keeping other things out (like, say, the actor's actual experience of the world). How can the director's role be shifted towards keeping the gate *open*: to Black practitioners being centered in that creative space?

Keith: You and I have discussed this before, and we can continue to endlessly, which is what it takes: a perpetual discussion of undoing cultural paradigms and creating new "normals" of creative practice. It is a full-time job and an endless task, that of maintaining awareness that what has been put upon us as a culture will always only make us all less. There is no "better" theater under these circumstances. There are only hierarchies of people communing with one another in the lie that what we are doing is good, and that is this country in a nutshell. It has always been. Anti-racist practice is not easy. It can never be easy because of how intentionally difficult to deconstruct American racism was so carefully made.

The awareness of that can be a difficult thing for everybody to see, but it's there. You have to start with this like the first day of Daytop Village:

let’s admit that we are an addict! You have to start there or you can’t get any better. And that’s very difficult for any culture brought up being told lies about itself, about American exceptionalism and altruism and democracy and all kinds of bullshit, none of which is true. With that stacked against us, we poor artists venture out saying “let’s do something that makes *anything* better. . .” It is herculean to stand up for oneself, to push back, for Black actors to say “I don’t buy that.” First job an actor’s had in six months! He’s going to stand up to all that? “I don’t buy that. I can’t make that happen. I could make *this* happen. I want to talk about *this*, but I can’t make that happen.” Or for his white colleague to speak back, to say “You know what’s going on here is, you are creating a situation for him, in this racialized structure, that is inappropriate. I have to tell you I see it and I’m standing over here and it doesn’t affect me like it affects him, but I have to tell you I see it. He’s right.” Who’s going to do that work? And we’re all complicit, and we’re all hugely fallible, because we’re human, and we’re frightened. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” but it’s totally broke. Despite 400 years being told it ain’t broke, it’s broke.

Kevin: When I was a grad student I saw a darkly comedic sketch at the Royal Shakespeare Company Fringe Festival about a young Afro-Caribbean actress being asked in a Shakespeare audition to eradicate the rhythms, cadences, and pronunciations of her actual voice in favor of Received Pronunciation “proper” Shakespeare. Perhaps directors are not so obvious anymore, but there are plenty of surreptitious ways to eradicate what in *American Moor* you call your “glorious African-American emotional arrogance” in favor of an accepted “received” emotional life of Shakespeare’s characters (6). What can a director do to allow and utilize Black emotional life, or maybe a Black person’s particular inner monologues, instead of ironing it out through “universalizing” and whitewashing?

Keith: There are a great many directors who are *still* absolutely that obvious and then some. The frightening thing is that *they* don’t realize that they are. What you’re really talking about here, after we have done and are continuing to do the work of self-awareness, and of perceiving the value in myriad things beyond one’s own sense of superiority—all that has to come first—is a matter of time. The time limit for the creation of a Shakespeare production is yet another traditionally accepted practice that allows us to be nothing above mediocre. The director in question needs the time to first get past what he thinks he wants to hear. He needs the

time to interrogate his own sense of rightness in the matter. He needs to question why everything every Shakespeare teacher ever taught him is agenda'd and fraught with age-old ideas of what I call the rightness of whiteness. Then he needs time to hear the Afro-Caribbean actress speak the speech, again, and again, and again. He needs time to hear what is *in* her rendering of the speech as much as he hears what is *not* in it, and this may all be *before* he hires her. Once in rehearsal, he needs time to watch where she is inclined to go, what she is inclined to do as the text is synthesized through *her* instrument, not his with her as the mouthpiece. He needs time to watch and hear this in every individual actor, and then in the ways that they interact, and then he needs time to contemplate all of it, to watch and hear it again, and then to dialogue, to ask questions. She is playing Emilia. When Othello says to her of Desdemona's death, "You heard her say herself it was not I," she responds, stressing the pronouns, "*SHE* said so; *I* must needs report a truth." And everything everyone has taught this director is that you don't stress pronouns in the verse, so she must be wrong, and yet, she hears people speaking to her as she grew up stressing pronouns, not always, but at times, perhaps under stress. Can he hear what it does to the line? "That's what *SHE* said . . . *I* think *YOU* did it . . ." Before too long, you are playing a whole new play, and perhaps that's the most frightening thing of all, that it isn't yours anymore.

I think that the Shakespeare plays that I think are good make that easier. So many places to go, so much to do: in terms of language and spectacle and beauty and bodies on stage, these are magnificent beings wandering around and everything they say is gorgeous! What wonderful theatrical constructs to be able to play with, and everybody should be able to play, and it shouldn't be the pressure of someone or something behind the director forcing his or her hand, forcing them to make choices and harrying them to not be relaxed enough to let a piece happen.

Kevin: It seems to me that discarding "the rightness of whiteness" can help to pull down a couple of false gods, or unconsidered aphorisms attached to Shakespeare that work to hide privilege of place. They've come up in my research and writing, but I never fully questioned them before. One is the idea of Shakespeare as a "fully expressive author" with the implication that everything you, or the production, needs is somehow there in the text. The other is the notion of the actor "serving the text" or working "in service of the playwright" which then elides into serving the director and serving the production. These aren't statements of humility, they are indicators of privilege and of social and cultural *entrée*: the ease

of access, the quiet confidence that a white actor’s voice will be heard and basic humanity not questioned. Can a production help Shakespeare serve a Black actor’s creative process, rather than asking a Black actor to serve the “universal”/Eurocentric/white cultural structure?

Keith: Clearly [the notion of a “fully expressive author”] is bullshit. In fact, if we rely upon only what is in the text, we will forever be stuck somewhere in this odd purgatory where twenty-first-century human beings are attempting to behave like seventeenth-century human beings, saying things that make absolutely no sense to the contemporary ear, and attempting to speak from a seventeenth-century English mindset that they have no connection to nor understanding of whatsoever. What the museum piece does offer is a time when there were no Black or brown players on the stage, just the good white people and their white-centric stories . . .

[As far as “serving the text or the director or the production”], this sort of says it all. The American world, and by extension the white world is rife with reasons why the non-white should NOT be in service to themselves. There have been instances, even in rehearsing and performing *American Moor*, where I have been told by voices in the white structure that surrounded it that my making a change in lessening the vehemence with which I delivered a certain speech was “in service” to the play . . . My play! In any number of respects about me, and my experience! Of course, these are all manifestations of control, which is a deathly frightening thing for people who have had it all their lives to envision not having. The pushback against non-white people assuming self-agency is violent.

Kevin: In contrast to the one in your play, what would a director look and sound like who did make room for a Black actor to bring his/her contemporary Black self into the work?

Keith: I think the question should be, “How does a white American overcome ego, and how does that particularly tricky human apparatus cause them to look, or not look, at their privilege, specifically their access to income as reward for doing what they do?” American capitalism is one with American racism, and white Americans are rewarded for maintaining control in every aspect of life. How does one put down all that and say, “As an artist, I would rather be available to whatever will help me to craft the most beautiful, the most mind-expanding, and the most transcendent art?” It’s nearly impossible because of the curse of privileged perspective

that the generations of foremothers and forefathers have put upon us. And I don't have a prescription for how it is achieved. But if one can achieve it, what that individual would look and sound like might be any odd number of astounding things, just like the theater that they would tend to make. I imagine we've really yet to see it.

Actors long to go out there and have the audience see them manifest characters through their instrument, through the work that they do as individuals. I don't want to do Olivier's Hamlet. I want to do my Hamlet and I want that to have value. And I want the audience to see its value. So I'm going to do all the things that give it value to me. And I'm going to hope to hell for a director who is able to see more than the value he has been taught things have.

Kevin: And pretending to be objective about it. And then doing what is easier, what saves time in rehearsals, which is saying "Hmm, maybe, instead, can you do it like this please?" Which implies "I see what you're doing. I've made a judgment call on it. I haven't asked what your interior monologue is but I've seen the external manifestation, I've made a judgment call and I'm going to ask you to change your external manifestation. And now we're good. Because my eyes are objective and your eyes . . . well, whatever your mind's eye sees, I'm going to tell you what I see. I am not physically in the play and so then I'll pretend psychologically I'm not in it either and I can just give you my objective views on things and they will be right." There—that's the standard director's interior monologue! As opposed to, maybe just the first step is to say "Okay, I'm looking at what you're doing and I'm seeing this. Is that what's going on with you? I think I'm seeing this. Tell me if I'm wrong."

Keith: Psychologists and therapists will tell you, this is standard operating procedure: that's how you know anybody who's sitting opposite you! You'd listen, right? You're listening and you're saying "Just so I know, is this what I heard?" "No, it's not. I meant this or I was trying to say this." "Oh, OK, let me feed it back to you again. Is it this?" Let's go from there. We've taken a step and many would say that's how we should all be dealing with each other all the time. So how is it that when [directors] walk into these rehearsal rooms—and all of a sudden you've got all this history and pedagogy and dogma and structure of privilege behind you pushing you into this room—how do you behave differently? Unless you cast the jury of your peers, unless you cast all the people who are just like you, you're not going to have the opportunity to do [the same old thing] any-

more and be any good. You’re going to have to learn to listen. You’re going to have to learn to discuss. And you’re going to have to want to or you’re in the wrong profession.

* * *

A coda of sorts, and a cautionary example of how hard this work is and how easy it is to slip into old ways. In our extended Zoom conversation, Keith and I played around with some specific Shakespearean examples in search of different ways of working. I think it is instructive that I go and do here exactly the thing I set up the whole conversation to talk about *not* doing. Cobb’s gracious response is: keep trying.

Kevin: So we’re doing *Richard II*, in a rehearsal context that allows you to be the Black person you are as opposed to ignoring it—

Keith: It’s an interesting question because, as is also caused by the structure that exists now, when we create a Black cast to do Shakespeare there is almost a pressure put upon them, in certain ways, to “be Black.” So you’ll see an iconic Shakespeare character, and that actor or actress will be doing something that you could almost say was lifted out of a 1980s Black sitcom. Because that’s the *recognizable* Black character. So now, whoever, from Hermione to Ophelia, is *that* thing.

Kevin: These are cultural shorthands, plucked preformed from the bag of tricks to make something seemingly intractable “work” and work quickly.

Keith: Exactly. So you’re directing *Richard II* and I’m being Richard II and, again, come back to time. I need time to wander through this. Who is he? Why is he? Richard has a really interesting arrogance that I understand. I think there’s a trap, that he perceives the rug to be pulled out from under him very early in the play and can be seen to whine through the last four acts if you’re not careful, and I really don’t think that that’s what he does. I think he complains. But I don’t think it’s this “Oh I’m done for” from late in act one onward. So how does that manifest in my African-American body? We have to take some time and watch that, and have no pressure to make early decisions. Talk about shorthands: I was a baby in the waning days of the American resident company, and I worked with some companies that were very incestuous and not friendly to people from the outside—unless they were celebrities—who would say “oh, this is the stodgy professor!” so they open

their bag of tricks and pull that out and on the second day of rehearsal that'd be the character! What we're talking about is creating new forms, new normals. We have to push back. You need to give actors the time to wander around this shit! We need to have it on the table for a month and talk about whatever comes up, among these different individuals in the room. What does it make each of you feel and why? Can we have a process where there's sort of a hybrid where we can get up and do things with bodies in space just because this has come up and we want to sort of interrogate that on its feet, and then go back to the table. Can we do that with no pressure that it's going to, you know, "cut into," you know—

Kevin: I was thinking, just what you suggested a second ago, it's like well, what if Richard II is this guy who sees it coming? What's that say to you, Keith, specifically, as a Black man in America today? When you look at the culture around you and its manifestations and you can say "I see where this is going." That's not whining and complaining, that's clarity. As a Black person looking at the culture around you, if you said to me "I see where this is going," I would understand that very differently from overly emotional whingeing of the effete king or whatever short-hands that have been applied to Richard II. That's a very different play.

Keith: It's a different play, and it might very well manifest that way if that's what I the actor were looking for in the connective tissue between Richard, as he is represented in text, and me, and my experience. That might very well come up. It might be something else entirely, right? That might be something you the director saw, right? So here's my overeager director [*laughter, thank god*] wanting to say "See! He's a Black guy and he'd probably feel this!" And your Black guy might say, "well, I see that, but you know there also might be this other thing." Are you available enough, aware enough to say "OK, go there."

Kevin: As opposed to "Oh I'm sorry, but we've passed the moment by which my concept needs to be set, I'm afraid we're going with this idea ..."

Keith: That's right! "Uh, we have to move on to the next scene!" I just feel we never give ourselves the opportunity to see what it would look like. We can't know what it'll look like until we see it, until it starts to look like that thing. It's a huge experiment, but we have to put all the pieces in place. It's going to cost money. It's going to take risks and it

is for the sake of just making better theater. We have to agree that the theater sucks. If we're telling ourselves the lie that we're doing this great work, like we're telling ourselves lies about everything else, then the argument is lost already. If we're trying to move forward and take some bolder steps, the things that might show up might astound us in glorious ways. Or they might not. I mean there are failures and everybody should have the right to fail, that doesn't happen enough. I'm putting myself in the position of director now: do I have time to be able to *dis-arm* an ensemble who, remember, are also on guard. They are sharing all my same stressors in this pressurized, truncated process, knowing how this work always goes, how it's always gone. Am I able to say to them “we're going to just look at this until we have something that really excites us.” Not just “we have to get through it,” but we're going to look at all this stuff until we're feeling compelled by what it is, what is being manifested somewhere between us and the text and everything else built around us, so we are truly excited by the depth and beauty of the picture we're painting. How do you do that? I don't know, but we won't know until we start trying to do it.

Notes

¹On *American Moor*, see Hall; Ewert; Corredera.

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