

# “Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something”: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and the Reconstruction of Melodrama

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A hush falls over the previously raucous crowd as the image projected across the wall of Theatre for a New Audience and onto the bodies of the actors on stage suddenly becomes clear. The famous photograph of the August 7, 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, fills the space. Shipp and Smith hang from a tree in the background, while in the foreground a huge crowd of white spectators smile, point at the bodies, and make eye contact with the photographer. As the audience watches in mute horror, the projection is manipulated so that Smith and Shipp’s bodies appear to sway in the trees, bringing immediacy to a decades-old event.

It is within and against this backdrop that BJJ, Playwright, and Assistant, the three most versatile characters in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s *An Octoroon* (2014), attempt to stage a lynch trial on the docks of a Louisiana town for Wahnotee, a Native American accused of murdering a black child. The photograph of this particularly brutal twentieth-century lynching deepens the action on stage, occurring in the 1850s of the original play. These innovations force the audience to become complicit in the trial and its bloody aftermath and simultaneously bring the audience as close to a sensation of death as possible without burning the theatre down around them.<sup>[1]</sup> This eye-catching and difficult scene, which I call reconstruction, is a key part of Jacobs-Jenkins’ compilation of theatrical techniques. Collectively, these techniques teach Jacobs-Jenkins’s twenty-first-century audience to respond both on a theatrical and a racial level in order to work in a manner they would not have been able to otherwise. Jacobs-Jenkins manipulates melodramatic structures— such as the sensation scene, tableau, and what in this article I term melodrama’s gaze—that play upon and reimagine the history of melodrama in the United States. These changes not only alter the way slavery’s violence is portrayed on stage but make melodrama comprehensible to a twenty-first-century audience unused to the genre’s demands.

These reconstructions allow Jacobs-Jenkins to transform Dion Boucicault’s wildly influential melodrama *The Octoroon* into his own version, *An Octoroon*. The two plays follow essentially the same plot, but Jacobs-Jenkins makes crucial changes to the universe of *The Octoroon*, particularly to the characters. Jacobs-Jenkins removes many of the white characters, notably the majority of Boucicault’s plantation owners, while consolidating those he keeps. George Peyton, the new owner of Terrebonne (the plantation on which both plays take place), is merged with Salem Scudder, the well-meaning but destructive Northern overseer of Boucicault’s original, who feels particularly protective of Zoe, the eponymous octoroon.<sup>[2]</sup> George inherits Scudder’s interest in technology, particularly photography, maintaining an important plot point and gateway to the sensation scene.<sup>[3]</sup> Cuts such as these are logical, as the removed figures emphasize previously established power structures. However, these changes then create a lack of

economic diversity, as the white characters who remain all belong to the upper echelons of slave-owning society. That separation makes even starker the divisions between the enslaved and laboring African-American characters and the white leisure class. Further, the elimination of characters like Scudder, Judge Caillou, and Jules Thibodeaux narrows the universe of the melodrama. Rather than showing “life in Louisiana,” which is Boucicault’s subtitle, with Terrebonne as one of a network of plantations, Jacobs-Jenkins’ edits make the plantation a world unto itself. As we shall explore at greater length below, Jacobs-Jenkins also makes significant changes to the ending of *The Octoroon*. Thus, with changes to character, plot, and form, Jacobs-Jenkins walks a fine line in *An Octoroon* between rewriting a singular play and reconstructing an entire genre.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of melodrama as a theatrical form in the nineteenth-century American landscape. Between 1820 and 1870, melodrama was ubiquitous in American culture, attracting diverse audiences “from elite males to urban workers and business-class women, by the time of the Civil War.”<sup>[4]</sup> Cutting across class and racial lines, melodrama served as a location for audiences to project their hopes and assuage their fears of a rapidly changing society. The theatres and the plots explored therein served as a training ground for business-class audiences to “acquire, rehearse, and perfect the manners of polite society.”<sup>[5]</sup> Knowing this history helps us to understand the effect of Jacobs-Jenkins’ reconstructions. As part of this reconstruction, Jacobs-Jenkins chooses several tools that are essential to melodrama, including the sensation scene, the tableau, acting styles, and staging methods, and then fundamentally changes their core by altering melodrama’s gaze. “Melodrama’s gaze” refers to what could be included on stage in these productions: the plotlines that were of interest to the consumers and creators, the characters who could embody those stories, as well as the tools and techniques used to actualize these narratives.

Jacobs-Jenkins’s changes allow him to represent subjects—slaves and slavery—that nineteenth-century melodrama’s toward which practitioners were often happy to gesture but with which they refused to engage in any depth. Slavery was long a topic on the melodramatic stage in both England and the United States, as is evident from the multiple versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* playing simultaneously during the nineteenth century. As Linda Williams argues in *Playing the Race Card*, melodrama is “the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has ‘talked to itself’ about the enduring moral dilemma of race.”<sup>[6]</sup> The subjects of the stories and the stories themselves that the genre told, however, were not as capacious as one might expect. An example of this exclusionary effect is the way Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was adapted into melodrama, stripping away the agency of many of its female characters. While these plotlines were partly cut for time, as only so many plots and characters from a novel can be translated onto the stage, there is also a specific set of generic conventions that Stowe’s characters like Mrs. Shelby or Mrs. Bird could not fulfill. In discussing George L. Aiken and Henry J. Conway’s adaptations, Bruce McConachie explains that:

both playwrights were necessarily drawing on production practices and theatrical conventions ill-suited to realizing Stowe’s matrifocal ideals in production. Strong-willed mothers rarely appeared on the antebellum stage; most stock companies would have been hard pressed to cast several such roles since companies generally contained two to three times as many male as female actors.<sup>[7]</sup>

We can thus see melodrama’s gaze at work. While Stowe’s original included a character like Mrs. Shelby, who decried the slave system from a matrifocal, anti-capitalist point of view, the melodramatic

form could not accommodate such a character. There is thus a space for Jacobs-Jenkins to expand the audience's understanding of and experience with slavery.

Jacobs-Jenkins's weaving together of theatrical techniques from different eras creates a new genre, one that incorporates elements of performance styles from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries alongside each other rather than prioritizing one century's vision over another. Through these techniques Jacobs-Jenkins reconstructs the violence of slavery, bringing it onto the stage in a manner that marks a significant departure from the ways the institution had been represented previously, which often emphasized and lingered on physical and sexual violence. Excessive violence is often depicted to evoke sympathy for its victims. However, the spectacle can have the opposite effect: not only leaving the audience with an uncomfortable sense of voyeurism but habituating them to the sight of a black body in pain.<sup>[8]</sup> On the other hand, just as reprehensible as overemphasizing the violence of slavery is pretending that violence didn't exist or attempting to make it palatable. Jacobs-Jenkins takes a third route, and his reconstruction of certain elements of melodrama helps the audience see the institution's violence in a new light.

Jacobs-Jenkins's interest in form is apparent in the way he mixes elements from the American and British versions of *The Octoroon*. In the American version, distraught over her inability to be with George and her fear of M'Closky, Zoe commits suicide, and the play ends with her death. In the British version, M'Closky is stopped by George, and the owner of Terrebonne marries Zoe. The British audiences were outraged at the separation of the lovers, which Mark Mullen, in "The Work of the Public Mind," reads as a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of slavery. The audience in London didn't understand why the Peytons could not just move to a state where the law forbidding George to marry Zoe did not apply.<sup>[9]</sup> As part of his amalgamation, however, Jacobs-Jenkins includes the onstage stabbing of M'Closky, an addition in the British production, but concludes *An Octoroon* with the bleaker ending of Zoe's desire to kill herself rather than become M'Closky's property, an element of the original American version. This blended production then concludes with Jacobs-Jenkins's own interpolation into the narrative, giving the last words and emotional beats to the female slaves Dido and Minnie, who emerge as the real heart of the play. These various endings drastically change the impact of the play, as it is significantly different, for example, if Zoe is sold but then redeemed by her white lover than if she kills herself to avoid becoming property.

His reconstruction of melodrama's gaze through his elevation of the three female slaves, Dido, Grace, and Minnie, to the center of the play, is Jacobs-Jenkins's most extensive and provocative alteration to Boucicault's original. These women are reconstructed as desiring agents with distinct backgrounds and personalities, who challenge the melodramatic conventions regarding the representation of slaves, especially the violence of slavery. Dido, Minnie, and Grace's conversations educate the audience about the emotional, familial, societal, and violent cost of slavery for its victims. They actively mold the performance of their enslavement, rather than functioning as passive signifiers of slave life as they do in Boucicault's original. This shaping occurs not only at the verbal level, through their self-conscious commentary on their positions, but also through a physical level, as Dido and Minnie are the only characters who work. They sweep cotton in the opening moments of the play, as well as serve breakfast and clean up the messes left by the white characters. While *An Octoroon* does include male enslaved characters (an older slave named Pete, and his grandson, Paul, both played by the Assistant in blackface), Jacobs-Jenkins's most significant generic reconstructions occur with the enslaved women.

Jacobs-Jenkins's focus on Minnie, Grace, and Dido is also a significant departure from the genre's customary depiction of the institution and the people trapped within it. Typically, the "stage Negro" fulfilled the low-comedy stereotype, whose comedic value was derived from "his odd dialect and his misuse of words. His special characteristic was inflated pride in badges of rank."<sup>[10]</sup> While *The Octoroon* partly broke this tradition by placing Terrebonne's slaves at the forefront of the play and turning them into a constant visual presence,<sup>[11]</sup> it did use these slaves as comic relief, with Peter, Solon, and Grace performing minstrel-like routines.<sup>[12]</sup> Boucicault's slaves also adhere to many of the character tropes proliferated by minstrel depictions of black life. Minnie, Grace, and Pete are happy and loyal to their masters and do not run away, as most slaves at Terrebonne do in Jacobs-Jenkins's version. The slaves are so secure within the system that the oldest slave, Pete, corrects a neighboring planter and Captain Ratts regarding how much his grandson was worth before he died, monetizing Paul even as he is mourning him: "What, Sar! You p'tend to be sorry for Paul, and prize him like dat. Five hundred dollars!—Tousand dollars, Massa Thibodeaux."<sup>[13]</sup> The genre's traditional refusal to engage with slavery is surprising, as melodrama would seem perfectly poised to stage the sights of slavery as a method of critique. However, while melodrama frequently depicted the institution of slavery onstage, either as sensational material or for abolitionist purposes, the scenes had to fit into larger established narratives so that the story could achieve legibility,<sup>[14]</sup> and the genre used the institution as a "mere resting point in the rush to affirm order at the play's close."<sup>[15]</sup> Additionally, melodrama by necessity was reactionary rather than revolutionary: the structure of the form is generally an arc that describes a fall from, and restoration to, innocence.<sup>[16]</sup> This compulsion to return to stasis has a wide-ranging effect not only on the genre's sensibilities but on its portrait of American society, which was by definition conservative. Jeffrey Mason writes that melodrama was ever in pursuit of "the restoration of a condition that had, unexpectedly, inexplicably, and unfortunately been altered . . . culture is constantly in the process of attempting to come full circle and return to its point of origin."<sup>[17]</sup> This originary impulse undercuts any great social change the melodrama might show, such as a successful slave rebellion or abolitionist appeal.

However, Jacobs-Jenkins directly opposes the generic conventions and representations discussed above, by means of the characters that actively participate in the plot through their speech and commentary upon the action. His reconstruction centers on Dido and Minnie and occurs on multiple levels, but it is particularly noticeable in the unexpected way the two house slaves, and to a lesser extent, the field hand Grace, speak when they are in private, as well as what they say. When the three women are not observed by the white characters, they use contemporary slang and jargon, and demonstrate modern opinions regarding the division between labor and self, encapsulated in Minnie's advice to Dido: "I know we slaves and evurthang, but you are not your job. You gotta take time out of your day to live life for you."<sup>[18]</sup> Essentially, these women speak their own language. While it is true that BJJ and Assistant use a similar elastic vocabulary, their speech appears less out of place, as it is primarily bracketed off in the metatheatrical scenes, such as the prologue or the introduction to the sensation scene. In both cases, BJJ brings the audience out of 1859 into a significantly more contemporary space. Thus, what is crucial about Dido and Minnie's language is that there is a meaningful disconnect between their surroundings, the 1859 plantation of *The Octoroon*, and their dialogue. The intention behind this change is explained in the script, as a note at the very beginning of the melodrama section. Jacobs-Jenkins writes: "I'm just going to say this right now so we can get it over with: I don't know what a real slave sounded like. And neither do you."<sup>[19]</sup> What emerges from this ignorance is a language that rejects the stereotyped "black voice" accent most commonly associated with slavery in the popular media. In *An Octoroon* this language particularly emerges when Dido and Minnie escape from the panoptic gaze of the white characters.

Dido, Minnie, and Grace's manipulation of language gains additional significance when we consider the history of the representation of slavery in the theatre and other genres, such as prose. In slaveholding societies like the United States and England, there was a long tradition of employing slave narratives to publicize and garner support for abolition. While some of these narratives were written by the subjects themselves, they were often channeled through white interlocutors, who changed events and attitudes to appeal to wider audiences and in the process monetized the slaves' stories. Sometimes the attempt to include more authentic elements, such as the reproduction of accents recorded in the Slave Narrative Project conducted by the W.P.A. in the 1930s, resulted in more obstruction than illumination and reinforced the damaging stereotypes they aimed to combat. This heavy-handed imitation obscured any deep engagement with the personal lives of the enslaved.[\[20\]](#)

The impact and importance of Dido, Grace, and Minnie's modern language is especially apparent when these women interact with the white characters. When they are back under the disciplinary gaze of George and Dora, the daughter of the neighboring plantation owner, Dido and Minnie use the same black-voice accent as Pete and Paul, emphasizing deference and obedience:

DIDO: Bless'ee here it be. Here's a dish of hoecakes—jess taste, Masr George—and here's fried bananas; jess smell 'em.[\[21\]](#)

The artificiality of this devoted and obsequious slave is glaringly obvious especially when we consider Dido and Minnie's introduction. At the beginning of the play, Minnie chats with Dido about their work, while Dido reluctantly sweeps cotton about the stage:

*DIDO and MINNIE are discovered. DIDO is sweeping laboriously. MINNIE is just sort of lying down somewhere, fanning herself.*

MINNIE (*eventually*): Do you need help or...?

DIDO: Naw, girl, I got it.

*Beat, while DIDO sweeps.*

MINNIE: You know, if you sweep on a diagonal with lighter, faster strokes, it's a little more efficient.

DIDO: Girl, what are you talking about?[\[22\]](#)

From this brief exchange, we learn that Minnie thinks critically about how to make her job easier, and that Minnie and Dido address each other with familiarity, even if that familiarity is tinged with annoyance. It is leagues away from the style of speaking reproduced above.

From examining the form of their conversations, we now turn to the content, analyzing what they say. At the end of the show, Dido speaks to Zoe with the same obsequiousness that she showed with George. When Zoe steals away to visit Dido in the slave quarters to obtain some poison to kill herself so that she doesn't fall into M'Closky's hands, Dido delays Zoe with an exaggerated black voice accent: "Missey

Zoe! Why are you out in de swamp dis time ob night? And you is all wet! Missey Zoe, you catch de fever for sure!”<sup>[23]</sup> Dido and Minnie’s self-conscious performance while under the panoptic gaze of the slave-owners is not surprising. What is surprising is that, as we can see, they reproduce those behaviors when in conversation with Zoe, who is not white, but is a member of the plantation aristocracy.

Dido and Minnie’s interactions with authority figures, as well as their descriptions of their quotidian lives, is made possible by Jacobs-Jenkins’s reconstruction of melodrama’s gaze. Dido and Minnie frankly discuss how various forms of slavery’s violence impact them, and this discussion is underlined with a specific brand of humor. In an interview with the *Village Voice*, Jacobs-Jenkins asserted that the goal of his writing is to make the audience “laugh and then you have to think about your laughter for a second.”<sup>[24]</sup> Jacobs-Jenkins achieves this goal, as the moments that are most distressing are also the most humorous, reaching a crescendo when the two women discuss the physical violence that plagues their lives. While Pete, Paul, and Wahnotee exchange threats of perpetuating physical attacks,<sup>[25]</sup> Dido and Minnie are subject to threats of sexual violence. Within the first few moments of their introduction, they discuss the reality of plantation life, and the constant threat of assault:

MINNIE: You ever had to fuck him?

DIDO: Who?

MINNIE: Mas’r/Peyton

DIDO: Oh, naw! You?

MINNIE: Naw, he only like lightskinned girls. But Renee, you know, who was fuckin’ him all the time . . .

MINNIE: Would you fuck him [George]?

DIDO: No, Minnie! Damn. Would you?

[Beat]

MINNIE: Maybe.

DIDO: Yeah, well, I get the feeling you don’t get a say in the matter.<sup>[26]</sup>

This exchange turns on a subtle humor, more understated than Dido and Minnie’s other revelations, such as their acknowledgment of forced illiteracy<sup>[27]</sup> or their reluctance to run away.<sup>[28]</sup> However, this discussion regarding the implicit and constant presence of sexual violence raises disturbing questions. It seems to endow Minnie and Dido with a measure of agency and suggests that they and Renee had a choice in whether or not to sleep with George. The implications of this conversation spiral outward quickly, asking the audience to consider who Zoe’s mother was; though Zoe is treated well by the Peyton family, she was most likely the product of some measure of sexual violence. This awareness of unspoken sexual violence in the punch line is the closest the play comes to using the word “rape.” The agency that

the modern dialect seems to ascribe to Minnie and Dido reveals itself to be fleeting, and it is clear that they exist within a violent system. While Jacobs-Jenkins recognizes and represents the violence inherent in the system, Minnie and Dido's conversation is an important departure from the method by which melodrama staged slavery's violence.

In his version of the seminal melodrama *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, George Aiken greatly increased and stylized the brutality of Tom's cruel owner, Simon Legree, against Tom. He brought onto the stage "an aestheticized paraphernalia of cruelty (long whips, cuffs, and chains)," [29] which were put to great affective use. However, this display of physical violence was not a condemnation of the institution of slavery, but a demonstration of the wickedness of Legree, certifying his status as a villain of melodrama. Indeed, all of Legree's added violence and wickedness became attributable to his personality, in fulfilling his role as an "anti-man-of-principle." [30] Because the focus of the melodrama was on character, and not the institution, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "presents not a dialectic of class and economics, but specific interactions between villains and victims." [31] This collapsing of focus can also be seen in *The Octoroon*, as the abuses on the plantation can be attributed to M'Closky and the mismanagement of Northern interlopers, rather than the systemic corruption of an unfair practice. Abolitionist melodramas also relied on violence in an attempt to make the horrors of slavery real for an audience who may not have understood them. However, as Douglas Jones writes, this attempt to bring the brutality of slavery closer to the white audience depended on an empathy that "readily occludes the inimitability of the captive's suffering as a means to confirm the onlooker's freedom; as a result, it promotes stasis and erases the magnitude of the nation's ordinary sin." [32] The brutality of these representations was thus more about the effect they created in the white onlookers than the subjects of that violence. The saturation and highlighting of the black body in both physical and emotional torment was the most common path through which ex-slaves could claim humanity. [33]

A secondary but no less important element of the reconstruction of melodrama's gaze is that it shifts the representative world, exploring and acknowledging multiple types of violence beyond the physical and sexual. Jacobs-Jenkins's reconstruction highlights the institutional demands that the enslaved see themselves as property and participate in their own dehumanization. In conversations that are hidden from their masters but are heard by the audience, Dido tells Minnie that she "grew up at the Sunnyside place on the other side of the hills. Mas'r Peyton won me in a poker game like ten years ago." [34] Dido's blithe story of how she came to Terrebonne is startling, as is her disregard for the destruction of familial relationships that this narrative implies. But what is most unexpected is the casualness with which she describes a complicity that is revealed to be widespread:

DIDO: And this one time, Solon was like, "Girl let me borrow your baby for a second?" And so Rebecca's dumb ass like gave him the baby and then that nigga turnt around and fucking sold the baby.

MINNIE: What?

DIDO: Yes, girl. Apparently Massa was about to sell Solon and Grace's baby, but then Solon switched Rebecca's baby out for they baby at the last minute and Massa didn't know the difference so he just sold Rebecca's dumb-ass baby. [35]

The humor carrying this exchange is complex. On one level, it is funny because there is an asymmetrical relationship between the form and the content: what Dido and Grace say and how they say it. This exchange is also comic because it is a rare moment of triumph: Solon and Grace are able to take advantage of Judge Peyton's stupidity. However, Dido and Minnie's discussion simultaneously gestures to a darker point: a Peyton family inability to see African-Americans as individuals. Zoe can't distinguish between an older and a younger black woman, and her father, Judge Peyton, also thought that African-Americans were interchangeable.[36] While this exchange reflects badly on the Peytons, it also reveals Dido and Minnie's complicity with and active participation in perpetuating this system. This willingness is apparent again when Dido and Minnie learn that they are to be sold to help pay the debts on the plantation. Rather than run away, they participate in the sale, manipulating the process so that they will be purchased by Captain Ratts rather than Jacob M'Closky, who has a reputation for beating his slaves.[37] Dido and Minnie dress in their best "slave tunics" to convince Captain Ratts, whom they "seduce," into buying them.[38] Minnie describes living on his boat as though it were a vacation:

Imagine: if we lived on a steamboat, coasting up and down the river, looking fly, wind whipping at our hair and our slave tunics and shit and we surrounded by all these fine, muscle-y boat niggas who ain't been wit a woman in years?[39]

For both Dido, who thinks that the situation still sounds dangerous,[40] and Minnie, this is a chance at a better life, although this new life still seems fraught with the potential for sexual assault. Minnie and Dido's attitudes run counter to modern cultural expectations, which would have them run away for the possibility of a better life rather than accepting the confines of slavery. However, in the world of *An Octoroon*, this is one of the only opportunities Minnie and Dido have to take control of their situation and make decisions regarding their bodily autonomy. While the ending is played for laughs, when Minnie wonders if "something were to happen that somewhere rendered these last twelve hours totally moot," it is an indication of the effect of Jacobs-Jenkins's reconstruction that the audience really feels for Minnie and Dido and their lost autonomy.[41] In *An Octoroon*, Dido, Minnie, and to a lesser extent, Grace, are not the objects of the jokes, and the audience does not laugh at them or their situation. Rather, Jacobs-Jenkins manipulates the humor found in the distance between Dido and Minnie's modern vocabulary and performance style and their nineteenth-century conversational topics. He makes their situation strange and unfamiliar at the same time as they sound as though they are standing on a street corner in twenty-first-century Brooklyn.[42] Instead of relying on overly familiar tropes, *An Octoroon* shows us anew the horrors of slavery, forcing us to consider the depth and diversity of the institution's brutality.

Jacobs-Jenkins continues to represent the diversity of the institution's brutality in his next revision of melodrama's gaze with his treatment of Zoe. While the majority of her dialogue emerges from *The Octoroon*,[43] Jacobs-Jenkins uses Zoe to juxtapose melodramatic convention with a modern understanding of racial performance. As we have seen, Zoe enthusiastically participates in the hierarchical structures of the plantation, holding herself above the house and field slaves alike. She insults Dido and kicks Pete, ordering him to "Wake up you, silly Nigger! Where's breakfast?"[44] Not only does she place herself above the field hands and participate in the casual violence of her peers, but she also does no work aside from showing George the plantation. It is thus clear that Zoe is afforded freedoms as the daughter of Terrebonne's owner.

However, Jacobs-Jenkins indicates that despite her real privileges, Zoe's status as an octoroon requires that she suffer within an institution that surrounds her and is responsible for her birth. Indeed, Jules

Zanger argues that in the North, an octoroon “represented not merely the product of the incidental sin of the individual sinner, but rather what might be called the result of cumulative institutional sin, since the octoroon was the product of four generations of illicit, enforced miscegenation made possible by the slavery system.”<sup>[45]</sup> In fact, Zoe's entire presence in the play, especially her heritage, reminds the audience of the reality of interracial desire and an uneven balance of power.<sup>[46]</sup> This attitude then helps us to understand Zoe's response when she is forced to reveal herself as mixed race. When George confesses his love to her, Zoe racializes herself and teaches an unbelieving George how to recognize the signs of her African heritage. This scene is a crucial demonstration that, despite all her other advantages, she is still trapped within a system that is interested in controlling its victims' minds as well as their bodies.<sup>[47]</sup> In a scene that is taken in its entirety from *The Octoroon*, Zoe shows George the signs of her African heritage, transforming her body into “an artifact of racial hybridity”<sup>[48]</sup>:

ZOE: George, do you see that hand you hold? Look at these fingers; do you see the nails are of a . . . bluish tinge?

GEORGE: Yes, near the quick there is a faint blue mark.

ZOE: Look in my eyes; is not the same color in the white?

GEORGE: It is their beauty.

ZOE: No! That—that is the dark, fatal mark and curse of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the rest.<sup>[49]</sup>

George's examination of Zoe's physical features for signs that the audience cannot see is a deeply tragic image. Zoe reveals not only her self-hatred—she calls herself “an unclean thing”<sup>[50]</sup>—but also the extent to which she is trapped within the system of chattel slavery. Anyone who is able to read Zoe's body will know how to classify her, thus endangering not only her body, but her education, upbringing, and social class. Zoe is trapped within a disciplinary system that limits her choices and her happiness and curtails her options. While this scene is remarkably affecting, there remains a significant disconnect between written text and what is seen, a discord not present in Boucicault's original, and the potent emotion and danger behind Zoe's confession seems misplaced. This disconnect is deliberately designed, as Jacobs-Jenkins stipulates that Zoe's role be played by “an octoroon actress, a white actress, quadroon actress, biracial actress, multi-racial actress, or an actress of color who can pass as an octoroon.”<sup>[51]</sup> Jacobs-Jenkins thus seems to undercut the reveal of this scene: if the audience can read Zoe as mixed-race already, there's no need for her to confess. However, I would argue, that these casting specifications demonstrate the insidious nature of racializing thoughts, which ascribe negative qualities to physical minutiae, rather than the revelation of Zoe as an octoroon. Because Zoe's opinions on race and self-worth are directly imported from the melodrama, they are in direct contrast to the play's other explorations of race.<sup>[52]</sup>

Jacobs-Jenkins builds on his reconstruction of melodrama's gaze with a re-engagement with elements of nineteenth-century melodrama: the tableau and the sensation scene, discussed below. The tableau manipulates several artistic practices, operating simultaneously on a visual, emotional, and auditory level. The technique allows the audience to pause, read, and absorb the emotional impact of a scene, much as

one would do with a painting. Peter Brooks describes tableau as providing a “visual summary of the emotional situation” of a scene, in the process fulfilling “melodrama’s primordial concern to make its signs clear, unambiguous, and impressive.”<sup>[53]</sup> In nineteenth-century melodrama, the tableau appears in moments of crisis, wherein speech and narrative fail and the emotion of the scenes can only be understood through images. Typically, it works as a punctuation mark to a particular plotline, occurs at the end of a scene, and inspires an affective response. Jacobs-Jenkins primarily follows its usual placement as a punctuation mark at particularly emotionally-charged moments.

The ends of the first three acts of each melodrama section includes a tableau: Jacob M’Closky triumphing at the end of Act One, Wahnotee mourning over Paul’s body at the end of Act Two, and Zoe’s auction at the end of Act Three. However, BJJ also draws particular attention to the extraordinary nature of this theatrical feature, engaging and exploiting it. As Act One nears its end, Jacob M’Closky sets in motion his plot to ruin the Peyton family and purchase Zoe. As he revels in his expected outcome, he dives into his tableau. The stage directions describe the scene:

*M’CLOSKY stands with his hand extended toward the house. Music. An attempt at a TABLEAU. He holds the TABLEAU for a while before DIDO walks in with a washing bucket and some laundry.*<sup>[54]</sup>

We see BJJ, the character-as-playwright, rewriting melodrama in real time as M’Closky poses uncomfortably on stage. M’Closky fulfills all the requirements for a tableau: he stops the action, allowing the audience to read his posture, establishing him as the villain. Rather than serving as a punctuation mark, or creating a moment of overwhelming emotion, however, M’Closky’s overtly performative pose never quite lands, and the life of the plantation quickly resumes around the frozen overseer. This change is signaled through a return to the constant, underlying musical accompaniment.<sup>[55]</sup> Furthermore, the reassertion of the quotidian is signaled by Dido’s entrance with the laundry, which startles M’Closky, and resets the scene to a normal theatrical time. However, a moment later, the tableau is attempted again, but this time it emerges from a moment of real violence:

*[M’CLOSKY re-enters, stalks over to DIDO]*

DIDO: Hi, Mas’r M’Cl—

*[M’CLOSKY strikes her violently]*

M’CLOSKY: And don’t you ever fuckin’ sneak up on me like that again, you nigger bitch!

*[An actual TABLEAU.]*<sup>[56]</sup>

The legibility inherent in this image is why the tableau works: because the audience can quickly grasp the power dynamics of a white-presenting man physically threatening a black woman, allowing the audience to read and understand an essential power dynamic of slavery, without lingering on Dido’s pain. This tableau also reveals how much is left up to the director in *An Octoroon*. The stage directions only suggest that a tableau occurs, but in performance, we see that M’Closky strikes Dido, then remains standing over

her. Jacobs-Jenkins's reconstruction of the tableau forces us to re-evaluate the genre's ability to produce and manipulate our emotions. The tableau only works when it is connected to real emotion, rather than to the conventions of the drama. Jacobs-Jenkins' reconstruction of the tableau helps the audience see anew the violence of slavery. Like the sensation scene, tableau insists on the audience's attention.

This demand for awareness is reiterated in Act Two's tableau, which finds Wahnotee, in an expression of grief, bending over the body of the slain boy Paul:

*To his horror, WAHNOTEETEE finds him dead, expresses great grief, raises his eyes. They fall upon the camera. He rises with a savage growl, he seizes tomahawk and smashes camera to pieces, then goes to Paul, expresses grief, sorrow, and fondness. Maybe he starts to make a grave—sobbing and digging his hands? I don't know. In any case, there's a TABLEAU.*[\[57\]](#)

The violence against black bodies is an essential part of slavery, and the incidental way in which Paul is murdered, mentioned in the stage directions, but not noted in the dialogue, mirrors the Peytons' inattention to the details of their slaves' lives: "M'CLOSKY strikes PAUL on the head. PAUL falls dead. During the following, a large pool of blood begins to gather around PAUL'S body and M'CLOSKY'S feet."[\[58\]](#) This tableau provides the audience with a rare moment of unbridled pathos that isn't undercut by an attempt at humor. Indeed, this is a moment that deeply humanizes Wahnotee, who is otherwise, even in Jacobs-Jenkins's version, a thinly drawn stereotype, addicted to rum, speaking a mishmash of various languages, and prone to violence. This tableau also defies stereotypes of Native Americans that were familiar from the so-called Indian plays of the early nineteenth century, where Native American characters often played upon racial fears, threatening white characters with the possibility of sexual and physical violence. But in this tableau, Wahnotee is given space to grieve. Although M'Closky may not take notice of Paul's death, Jacobs-Jenkins's reconstruction of Wahnotee's tableau requires the audience to realize that these characters are not disposable.

Jacobs-Jenkins's reconstruction of the first two tableaux links these highly performative moments more closely with the text of *An Octoroon*. These scenes join together emotion and the violence against black bodies on stage. The final tableau, appearing at the end of Act Three, continues this work, as it punctuates the auction of Terrebonne and Zoe's sale to M'Closky. The slave driver's interruption of the auction adds a layer of drama to an already spectacular venture, which "materializes the most intense of symbolic transactions . . . money transforms flesh into property; property transforms flesh into money; flesh transforms money into property."[\[59\]](#) The practice of staging slave auctions has a long history as a method of creating pathos for the enslaved. Henry Ward Beecher, the famed Northern abolitionist preacher, raised money to liberate young biracial girls from slavery by transforming the pulpit of his Brooklyn church into an auction yard to "heighten the emotional power of his rhetorical appeal as he evoked . . . a form of 'spectatorial sympathy' to play upon the affective responses in his audiences."[\[60\]](#) It was converted into a specifically theatrical spectacle, however, when in *The Octoroon* Boucicault represented it onstage for the first time.[\[61\]](#)

Like its first-act cousin, the tableau that emerges from *An Octoroon*'s auction scene also results from a theatrical failure. The sale of Terrebonne is, as Lafouche the auctioneer describes it, "a shitshow,"[\[62\]](#) as the majority of the Terrebonne slaves have run away, and those that are left are either old and infirm like Pete, or three women, not nearly enough to save the plantation. The scene, which should be one of high

tragedy, is turned uncomfortably comic, as Dido and Minnie request to be sold together, and spend time preening to attract the attention of Captain Ratts. Lafouche reports, “the, uh, the property has requested that it be sold along with another piece of property? . . . can it do that?”<sup>[63]</sup> While not part of the reconstruction of the tableau specifically, Jacobs-Jenkins’s modern intervention into the scene emphasizes the auctioneer’s dehumanizing language, turning what should be a moment for consternation into comedy. The momentum of the scene is further derailed by the spectacle of George and M’Closky, played by the same actor, fighting each other. While double casting is a cause for humor in this scene, it is part of a larger historical argument and an important feature of Jacobs-Jenkins’s reconstruction of melodrama.

These two types that George and M’Closky embody, the kind slave owner hero and the evil, scheming overseer villain, were common roles in American melodrama, and come with expected behaviors and performance histories. But because these characters are here contained in one body, all of their actions are collapsed into a single, interchangeable entity. The only differences between them are a broad accent and M’Closky’s mustache and hat: easily removable costume pieces. Jacobs-Jenkins thus erases any difference between these historical touchstones, suggesting that the authority figures in plantation culture were exactly the same. Lisa Merrill and Theresa Saxon, in their article “Replaying and Rediscovering *The Octoroon*,” also note that “by having one actor play both of these white male characters, *An Octoroon* illustrates the uncomfortable similarity between a desire to own, master, or marry the mixed-race heroine, Zoe, and the implicit similarity in both endings.”<sup>[64]</sup> Merrill and Saxon acknowledge that George’s desire to possess Zoe, while dressed in slightly kinder clothing, mirrors M’Closky’s.

As the bidding war over Zoe escalates, and the other powerful members of the plantation class, including Captain Ratts and Dora Sunnyside, attempt to trump the slave driver’s bid, M’Closky and George’s animosity erupts in violence: “*GEORGE rushes M’CLOSKY, slash himself, who draws his knife.*”<sup>[65]</sup> After a measure of order is restored by Lafouche, M’Closky exalts over the members of the established plantation class, and goes into his pose: “*M’CLOSKY jumps on up on his chair, throws money in the air, and makes it rain.*”<sup>[66]</sup> M’Closky’s purchase of Zoe, and his subsequent flaunting of his wealth, results in a tableau that whiplashes the audience into a realization that Zoe has been commodified and dehumanized even more pervasively than when she identified her African features to George. Similar to the tableau in Act One, this frozen image quickly transmogrifies the humor of the scene to tragedy. Thus in this tableau, Jacobs-Jenkins’s reconstruction operates on two significant levels: first, the tableau’s sudden shift in tone draws attention to its violence, and second, it breathes new life into a nineteenth-century theatrical element. In both cases, Jacobs-Jenkins’s reconstruction of the tableau forces the audience to absorb the quotidian violence of slavery, working through legible images and sensations rather than overwhelming scenes of physical violence.

Just as the tableau operates through easily graspable images, so does the sensation scene. These two devices work on multiple levels of signification beyond the spoken word, revealing an unspeakable truth to the characters and audience. There are similarities between the way the tableau forces the audience to confront the ordinary violence of slavery and the operation of Jacobs-Jenkins’s reconstructed sensation scene. After a long, metatheatrical prologue, where BJJ, Playwright, and Assistant explain and walk the audience through the meaning and history of the sensation scene, they end up reciting the whole scene, with interjections and commentary.<sup>[67]</sup> As they approach the end of the scene, BJJ announces that he “tried to figure out the next best thing, something actually related to the plot. I hope it isn’t too disappointing.”<sup>[68]</sup> The actors give themselves a shake and dive right back into the scene. George

delivers an impassioned condemnation of lynch law, attempting to persuade the surrounding crowd of angry sailors not to rush to judgment, with one crucial change: he stands in front of, and among, Shipp and Smith's swaying bodies.<sup>[69]</sup> George's plea catalyzes a series of revelations that culminate in the exposure of *An Octoroon's* villain: the dastardly slave-driver Jacob M'Closky. The sensation scene unfolds as the villain is revealed, and the boat carrying the last shipment of cotton from Terrebonne plantation explodes, represented in this version by an expulsion of cotton into the audience.

Due to casting restrictions that are enumerated at the top of the show, BJJ, the playwright of the frame narrative, confesses that he "grossly underestimated the amount of white men I actually would need here,"<sup>[70]</sup> and the mob that surrounds the action and heightens the stakes is played by the audience rather than actors. George's commentary on justice and lynch law spills beyond the confines of the stage, and into the twenty-first-century crowd. Audience members were unsettled by George's speech, made clearly uncomfortable with their sudden involvement in the story. This discomfort expressed itself in many ways: from strained and nervous laughter, to gasps and murmurs, growing stronger as they sat with the image that seemed to expand as the photograph extended beyond its frame and onto the bodies of the actors. The face of a man staring at the audience and pointing proudly at the bodies that hang in the trees was newly embodied as it was projected directly onto George's shirt. It is through this alchemy of dialogue and image that George's body, ambiguously raced to begin with as he is played by a black actor in whiteface make-up, becomes the medium for bringing the violence of the Shipp and Smith lynching onto the stage without exploiting it. As George and M'Closky debate Wahnotee's innocence or guilt, the projection remains, hanging over the action. The photograph is not given any context and the actors do not refer to it, except when it needs to come down.<sup>[71]</sup> By projecting the image of the Shipp and Smith lynching above this fictional debate, Jacobs-Jenkins summons a sharper sense of danger to M'Closky and George's argument, reminding the audience that the discussion of lynching taking place had real-life consequences.

The use of this photograph, and the diverse feelings it provoked in the audience as it remained projected on the back wall, are crucial elements of Jacobs-Jenkins reconstruction of the sensation scene. In its original context, the sensation scene mixed pathos and action, often overwhelming the audience. These scenes were produced by "extraordinary theatrical effects, often featuring disasters such as shipwrecks, avalanches, volcano explosions and so forth."<sup>[72]</sup> The scenes were exciting in their own right, but the nineteenth-century audience particularly marveled at "the technical feat involved in replicating aspects of life that seemed beyond the resources of the stage."<sup>[73]</sup> These technical feats created perceptible physical reactions in the audience, forging a community out of the spectators. Lynn M. Voskuil describes the construction of this feeling community:

what mattered most was not merely that spectators felt such responses, but that they believed they felt them in common . . . intrinsic to their play-going experience was not only the bodily sense of nervous shudders and quivers but also the sagacity both to cultivate and manage them. [Sensation theatre required] a sophisticated spectator, one practiced at decoding spectacle and awake to its mechanisms and bodily effects.<sup>[74]</sup>

While the photograph of the Shipp and Smith lynching produced these feeling communities (and the most memorable moment of the play), the projection had other consequences. The maintenance of the photograph requires the stage to be darkened to appreciate the full effect, which in turns requires an

unnatural cessation of movement by the actors, as well as plot. The action can only proceed to the point at which the three frame characters, BJJ, Playwright, and Assistant, described it in the metatheatrical prologue of the scene.<sup>[75]</sup> The photograph transfixes the actors and the audience, holding both in place and preventing them from looking away, either from the lynching that has already occurred or the threat of the lynching that is possibly to come. However, the focus on the Shipp and Smith lynching literally blocks out and overwhelms the situation on stage. The audience cares less about the trial of Wahnotee when its attention is focused on the Shipp and Smith photo. Thus, like the tableau, which can only be held for a short period of time, the sensation scene sets the stage, but needs to be removed for the plot to continue forward. However, once the photo is taken down and M'Closky is revealed as a villain, Jacobs-Jenkins offers us one more complicated result of his reconstruction of the sensation scene, as he stages M'Closky's murder. Examining this moment in terms of the characters, we see a Native American planning to kill a white man in retaliation for the murder of a black child. But when we look at the bodies of the actors, a different image emerges: We see a white man dragging a bleeding black man off to be lynched, choking and screaming, "Help! Help! Help!" The stage directions note that the violence in this moment—Wahnotee and M'Closky's fight, Wahnotee's stabbing of the slave driver, and Wahnotee's clear desire to lynch M'Closky—should seem "*incredibly real.*"<sup>[76]</sup> The violence of the Shipp and Smith lynching, projected and overwhelming the debate on how to move forward, is repeated and recreated, as Jacobs-Jenkins wraps up the recreation of the sensation scene.

After the emotional intensity of the sensation scene, Jacobs-Jenkins's reconstruction ends on a deadpan note. Once Wahnotee drags a screaming M'Closky offstage and the audience is pelted with explosive cotton balls, Assistant is the only actor left on stage. He turns to the audience, and recounts the action: "And then the boat explodes (*beat*). Sensation."<sup>[77]</sup> This impassive delivery undermines the traditional forms of the genre, as it points the way to new methods of representation and emotion.

Jacobs-Jenkins's subversion of the sensation scene is part of *An Octoroon*'s larger effort to reconstruct the formal aspects of the genre so that it becomes increasingly capacious in its representation of slavery. It accomplishes this first by shifting melodrama's gaze so that the play not only foregrounds characters Boucicault's original treats as punch lines, but elevates them so that these two dark-skinned black women are the heart of *An Octoroon*.<sup>[78]</sup> By interjecting and juxtaposing modern dialogue and character development with dialogue that casually confirms the horrors of their quotidian existence, Jacobs-Jenkins makes slavery's violence understandable in new ways. The changes in melodrama's gaze also alter the way that we understand the damage slavery has done to Zoe, who, although she is privileged in some ways, is still bound both by the self-hatred and racialization that leads to her suicide.

This article also argues that Jacobs-Jenkins takes on more traditional elements of melodrama, such as the sensation scene and the tableau. In both cases, his reconstructions allow a twenty-first-century audience to feel some of the same effects as their nineteenth-century counterparts. By using comprehensible images, the tableau and sensation scene insist on the audience's attention. Simultaneously, Jacobs-Jenkins's reconstructions rocket between emotional states: from comedy to tragedy, from overwhelming sensation to blunt statement of fact, reinventing before our eyes a core American theatrical tradition. And in the process, he provides new ways of viewing and understanding slavery.

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[1] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (New York: Onstage Press, 2014), 121. This article uses the published version of *An Octoroon*, as well as the recording of a performance of the Sarah Benson-directed production, recorded June 6, 2014, and housed at the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library. I will also refer to instances from the Theatre for A New Audience production of the same play. TFANA and Soho Rep's productions were both directed by Sarah Benson, the artistic director of Soho Rep.

BJJ: So for a while I was thinking maybe I could actually just set this place on fire with You inside—

PLAYWRIGHT: bring you as close to death as possible.

BJJ/PLAYWRIGHT: That would be amazing.

BJJ: And then, of course, rescue each of you one by one,

PLAYWRIGHT: And then perform the rest of the show out on the street.

BJJ: But that would be crazy

PLAYWRIGHT: And Soho Rep. doesn't need that.

BJJ: And also I would only be able to do this show once.

[2] While the omission of Salem Scudder lessens the number of characters that Jacobs-Jenkins had to account for, his dismissal had other consequences, particularly that Zoe is less universally cared for. In *An Octoroon*, Zoe is beloved of the Hero and the Villain, but in *The Octoroon*, with Scudder's feelings of protectiveness toward her, there is a greater sense that she is a desirable commodity. Scudder's presence in Boucicault's original, as a well-meaning, but ultimately harmful presence on the plantation—partly to blame for Peyton's financial woes—is an indication of the “paternalistic, racist myth of a genteel plantation culture, threatened more by a villainous Yankee than by its own inherent injustices.” Harley Erdman, “Caught in the ‘Eye of the Eternal’: Justice, Race, and the Camera, from *The Octoroon* to Rodney King.” *Theatre Journal* 45, no. 3 (October 1993): 335. This kind of specific regional nuance is of less importance in Jacobs-Jenkins' worldview.

[3] Although *The Octoroon*'s plot hangs on photographic evidence that Scudder's camera provides, BJJ and Playwright point out that twenty-first-century audiences are no longer impressed or even swayed by this type of evidentiary material. BJJ explains that “we've gotten so used to photographs and moving images that we basically have learned how to fake photographs, so the kind of justice around which this whole thing hangs its actually kind of dated.” (Jacobs-Jenkins, 120.) While we can still be shocked by the photograph of the Shipp and Smith lynching, the audience is less impressed by the evidence the photograph of M'Closky provides.

[4] Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre & Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa

City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), ix. This monograph includes an excellent history of the American engagement with the melodramatic form.

[5] Ibid., 228.

[6] Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xiv.

[7] Bruce A McConachie, "Out of the Kitchen and Into the Marketplace: Normalizing 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' for the Antebellum Stage," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 3, no. 1 (1991): 11.

[8] Saidiya Hartman begins her seminal work, *Scenes of Subjection*, with a similar observation. Viewing the consequences of a slave's body, ravaged by violence, she writes that "Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering." Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

[9] Mark Mullen, "The Work of the Public Mind," *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 27, no. 2 (Winter 1999), 100.

[10] David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater & Culture: 1800-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 190-1.

[11] Mullen argues that the very visibility of the slaves was Bouicault's nod to an anti-slavery position, "The Work of the Public Mind," 98.

[12] Dana Van Kooy and Jeffrey N. Cox. "Melodramatic Slaves," *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 470.

[13] Dion Bouicault, "The Octoroon." In *Early American Drama*, edited by Jeffrey H. Richards (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 471.

[14] Douglas A Jones, *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 140.

[15] Van Cooley and Cox, "Melodramatic Slaves," 462.

[16] Ibid., 462.

[17] Jeffrey D. Mason, "Staging the Myth of America," in *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 15.

[18] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 137.

[19] Ibid., 43.

[20] For an excellent discussion of the difficulties of slave narratives and their staging, see Jones, *Captive Stage*, 139-141.

[21] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 57.

[22] Ibid., 45.

[23] Ibid., 131.

[24] Tom Sellar, "Pay No Attention to the Man in the Bunny Suit." *Village Voice*. 28 September 2015. <http://www.villagevoice.com/arts/pay-no-attention-to-the-man-in-the-bunny-suit-7189537>.

[25] Pete threatens Minnie: "Drop dat banana fo' I murdah you!" and "It's dis black-trash, new Mas'r George; day's getting too numerous round; when I gets time, I'm gonna have to murdah some of 'em fo' sure!" (Jacobs-Jenkins., *An Octoroon*, 51, 52), while Paul threatens to "gib it to" Wahnotee if the boy finds the Indian drinking rum (ibid., 60), while Wahnotee destroys George's camera and drags M'Closky offstage (ibid., 81, 128).

[26] Ibid., 47-9.

[27] Ibid., 83.

Minnie: I couldn't read that sign out front, because I can't read.

Dido: I can't read it either. You know it's illegal for us to read.

Minnie: Yee-uh, but I was hopin' you wuz one of them secret reading niggas. You know, like Rhonda.

Dido: Rhonda can read?!

Minnie: Shh, girl! It's a secret!

[28] Ibid., 50.

Minnie: Haven't she heard these slave catchers got these new dogs nowadays that can fly and who are trained to fuckin drag yo' ass out of trees and carry you back? And then, even if you can outsmart these flying dogs, once you free, what you gonna do once you free? You just gonna walk up in somebody house and be like, "Hey. I'm a slave. Help me." That kind of naiveté is how niggas get kilt.

[29] Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 119.

[30] McConachie, "Out of the Kitchen and Into the Marketplace," 15.

[31] Mason, "Staging the Myth of America," 119.

[32] Jones, *The Captive Stage*, 141.

[33] *Ibid.*, 142.

[34] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 46.

[35] *Ibid.*, 66.

[36] When Zoe approaches Dido to ask her for poison at the end of the play, she clearly doesn't recognize Dido, whom she calls "Aunty" and "Mammy." Zoe invents an entire history between them: "my own dear Mammy, who so often hushed me to sleep when I was a child" (*Ibid.*, 133), although Dido did not grow up on the Peyton plantation, and is in fact the same age as Zoe (*Ibid.*, 134). Zoe cannot see Dido as an individual, but purely as a stereotype. In Minnie's eyes, this ignorance arises from Zoe's choice to align herself with the white characters, in her words "hang out wit all these damn white people all the damn time" (*Ibid.*, 134).

[37] *Ibid.*, 100.

[38] *Ibid.*, 106.

[39] *Ibid.*, 102.

[40] *Ibid.*, 102.

[41] *Ibid.*, 138.

[42] While this article focuses on Dido and Minnie's ability to transverse the generic conventions of melodrama, the male characters also engage in temporal crossing. BJJ/Assistant/Playwright, in their various cross-racial guises, step out of character and transition seamlessly between the play and the frame.

[43] Dora Sunnyside, the daughter of the neighboring plantation owner and Zoe's friend (and rival), also does not move between the framing device and the main story. While this article is primarily focused on race rather than class, it might be worthwhile to consider how these two characters are united in class status.

[44] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 56.

[45] Jules Zanger, "The 'Tragic Octoroon' In Pre-Civil War Fiction." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1966): 66.

[46] Merrill and Saxon, "Replaying and Rediscovering," 131.

[47] Mullen, "The Work of the Public Mind," 110.

[48] Lisa Merrill and Theresa Saxon. "Replaying and Rediscovering The Octoroon." *Theatre Journal* 69, no. 2 (June 2017): 130.

[49] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 76-7.

[50] *Ibid.*, 77.

[51] *Ibid.*, 25. This type of open-ended yet specific stipulation is used for all of the actors and characters of color. It is also odd that the only explicitly mixed race character is asked to own and represent her identity in a way that no other character, including those who put on cross-racial make-up technologies, are asked to.

[52] For the male characters, race is significantly more fluid. Although BJJ suffers as a "Black Playwright" — as his work is prejudged as a reflection of current racial issues or a retelling of African folktales, a situation he describes in the metatheatrical prologue "The Art of Dramatic Composition" — he is able to put on whiteface make-up and "become" white and much more socially mobile. While Assistant's use of blackface, or Playwright's use of redface do not afford them privileges (Paul is killed, while Wahnotee is nearly lynched), the two actors do not seem bothered by their transformations.

[53] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 48.

[54] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 64.

[55] The music for the TFANA production was composed by César Alvarez and played by the onstage cellist, Lester St. Louis. While the Soho Rep and Theatre for a New Audience productions had constant musical accompaniment as well as a particularly evocative closing song, no specific musical directions are mentioned in the script. There is often a stark division between what is described in the stage directions and what appears on stage in Jacobs-Jenkins' plays. We find this intentional vagueness throughout *An Octoroon*, including, as we shall see, Jacobs-Jenkins' descriptions of his tableau: "*Maybe he starts to make a grave—sobbing and digging his hands? I don't know*" (*ibid.*, 81). However, this desire to leave the creation of the theatrical world up to the director is also included in his 2010 debut, *Neighbors*, at the Public Theater. *Neighbors* grapples with theatre history in much the same way as *An Octoroon*, re-engaging with the minstrel tradition rather than melodrama. Particularly fascinating are the stage directions in *Neighbors* that describe minstrel interludes, including many traditional characters like Sambo, Zip Coon, Topsy, and Mammy. These interludes are drawn in excruciating detail, describing outlandish physical and sexual situations. Sambo's interlude, for example, includes an insanely large penis, which ropes a watermelon, and which he chews through. Jacobs-Jenkins, *Neighbors*, 358. *Neighbors*' stage directions are incredibly detailed, while those of *An Octoroon* are more suggestive. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, "Neighbors." In *Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun*, edited by Rebecca Ann Rugg and Harvey Young (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 307–403.

[56] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 67.

[57] *Ibid.*, 81.

[58] *Ibid.*, 80.

[59] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 215.

[60] Lisa Merrill, “‘May She Read Liberty in Your Eyes?’: Beecher, Boucicault and the Representation and Display of Antebellum Women’s Racially Indeterminate Bodies,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 133.

[61] Mullen, “The Work of The Public Mind,” 104. For further information on the performance history of slave auctions, see Jason Stupp, “Slavery and the Theatre of History: Ritual Performance on the Auction Block.” *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 1 (March 2011): 61-84.

[62] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 106.

[63] *Ibid.*, 106.

[64] Merrill and Saxon, “Replaying and Rediscovering,” 151.

[65] Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 110. In the Theatre for a New Audience production, this conflict became an extended scene, and a display of physical skill and comedic timing from Austin Smith, the actor who played BJJ/George/M’Closky. Smith rolled around on the ground before the auction block—where Zoe stood, gasping in horror—fighting himself. The characters shouted encouragement, and at one point, Dora kicked over George’s knife, which had gotten lost in the scuffle. The severe emotional shift, from a side-splitting scene to one of extreme pathos, was felt extensively in the audience, and carefully cultivated.

[66] *Ibid.*, 111.

[67] Interjections with phrases such as: “Playwright: Anyway, Pete’s like,” and commentary such as “This is actually a hole in Boucicault’s plot. Not mine.” *Ibid.*, 119.

[68] *Ibid.*, 122.

[69] *Ibid.*, 122.

[70] *Ibid.*, 113.

[71] The actors’ choice not to acknowledge the photograph is echoed in the stage directions. While Jacobs-Jenkins requires a lynching photograph, he does not specify an incident, or even a date range, that the production should employ, *Ibid.*, 222. He leaves the choice to the director and designers.

[72] Matthew Wilson Smith, “Victorian Railway Accident and the Melodramatic Imagination,” *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 508.

[73] Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation: Or, the Spectacular, the Shocking, and the Scandalous in*

*Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Anthem Press, 2003), 219.

[74] Lynn M. Voskuil, "Feeling Public: Sensation Theater, Commodity Culture, and the Victorian Public Sphere," *Victorian Studies* 44, no.2 (2002): 250.

[75] *Ibid.*, 115-120.

[76] *Ibid.*, 128.

[77] *Ibid.*, 128.

[78] Although approaching this scene from a different argument, Merrill and Saxon also pay close attention to Dido and Minnie's final exchange, noting that it allows the audience to "refocus their attention on the material conditions and lives of ordinary black women rather than the eponymous octoroon." Merrill and Saxon, "Replaying and Rediscovering," 152.



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Esther Kim Lee  
Kim Marra  
Ariel Nereson  
Beth Osborne  
Jordan Schildcrout  
Robert Vorlicky  
Maurya Wickstrom  
Stacy Wolf

**Table of Contents:**

- "Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something': Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and the Reconstruction of Melodrama" by Rosa Schneider
- "Pageants and Patriots: Jewish Spectacles as Performances of Belonging" by Rachel Merrill Moss and Gary Alan Fine
- "Are We 'Citizens'? Tony Kushner's Deweyan Democratic Vision in *Angels in America*" by Courtney Ferriter
- "Edward Albee's Sadomasochistic Ludonarratology in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" by Tison Pugh

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