

Excavating American Theatrical History: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *Neighbors*, *Appropriate*, and *An Octoroon*

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In creating his plays Branden Jacobs-Jenkins has repeatedly chosen to rewrite, adapt, or otherwise appropriate earlier theatrical styles or dramatic texts. Three of his plays, in particular, *Neighbors*, *Appropriate*, and *An Octoroon*—described by one critic as a “trilogy of highly provocative and fantastical explorations of race in America”^[1]—radically excavate and revise historical styles of performance or dramatic literature to explore ideas of blackness and racial attitudes in contemporary America. In *Neighbors* Jacobs-Jenkins updates blackface minstrelsy; in *Appropriate* he borrows, or appropriates, characters, situations, and motifs from “every play that [he] liked” in the genre of American family drama in order to “cook the pot to see what happens”;^[2] and in *An Octoroon* he adapts Dion Boucicault’s nineteenth-century melodrama *The Octoroon* as his own “meta-melodrama.” Jacobs-Jenkins has commented that these three plays “are all kind of like me dealing with something very specific, which has to do with the history of theater and blackness in America and form.”^[3] In a more recent interview Jacobs-Jenkins sharpens his earlier ideas about theatrical form in a striking image that will inform the rest of this essay; he says that he thinks of “genre or old forms” as “interesting artifacts that invite a kind of archeology of seeing.”^[4]

Neighbors, *Appropriate*, and *An Octoroon* enable the multiple-layered seeing that Jacobs-Jenkins is talking about because they require comparative viewing across the adapted and adaptive works themselves and across the cultures or historical periods that produced them. The diverse ways in which Jacobs-Jenkins excavates “old forms” in these three plays both reveal and create new layers of historical meaning that call for new ways of seeing and thinking about America’s racial heritage.^[5] Jacobs-Jenkins’s innovative work makes possible a fresh and experiential interracial discussion of race relations in America—a discussion that is much needed in the present tense political climate. At the same time his plays push the boundaries of what adaptation can accomplish and offer further refinements to the current discourse on adaptation theory.

Adaptation has increasingly become a major object of study by literary scholars. In the mid-twentieth century, much of the pioneering work consisted in studies, both practical and theoretical, of the adaptation of novels into film. Since 2000, scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders have extended the discussion to adaptations of other literary genres, myth, visual art, history, and biography in multiple media. In *A Theory of Adaptation* (first published in 2006) Hutcheon defines an adaptation as “an extended, announced, deliberate revisitation of a particular work of art.”^[6] While adaptations often entail changing the medium or genre of the source text, they may include any intermedial or intramedial, intergeneric or intrageneric updating or other reworking of an earlier work. The process of adaptation may entail retelling stories, reimagining characters, changing geographical and temporal contexts. It may include “transmotivation,” “transfocalization,” or “transvalorization”—terms used by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), an important theoretical work on the relation

between “hypertext” (adaptation) and “hypotext” (adapted work) that anticipated by a couple of decades the recent surge in adaptation studies.^[7] Often transmotivation, transfocalization, and transvalorization work together. Adaptation is a creative, interpretative, and political act. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) Sanders notes that while adaptations serve to perpetuate and confirm the canonicity of adapted works, they also frequently subvert the assumptions of their source texts or reinterpret them from a contemporary political perspective to make them “fit,” in a quasi-Darwinian sense, for new cultural environments.^[8] An adaptation may criticize either the assumptions of the adapted text or the adapter’s own society or both. Jacobs-Jenkins’s plays variously demonstrate how adaptation operates creatively in producing new works and also critically and politically, not in this instance by reinterpreting the adapted texts, but by exposing how their damaging and supposedly outdated racial assumptions continue to inform contemporary racial attitudes. It is in the interstices between adapted work and adaptation, or to use Jacobs-Jenkins’s archeological metaphor, in the stratigraphy, that the important cultural and political work of adaptation takes place.

Neighbors, *Appropriate*, and *An Octoroon* are all intrageneric adaptations; that is, they are plays that adapt other plays, or in the case of *Neighbors* other performances, in the same dramatic genre. Intrageneric adaptation has received less theoretical attention than intergeneric or intermedial adaptation. It is, however, precisely the similarities in formal attributes (and in dramatic adaptation, in styles of performance)—not just resemblances in events or characters—between adapted work and adaptation that enable the complex layered seeing advocated by Jacobs-Jenkins. This “archeology of seeing” goes beyond the “oscillation” between texts that Hutcheon suggests is characteristic of audience members’ reception of adaptations; rather it entails what she calls their “palimpsestuous” experience as layers of text are “multilaminated” onto one another.^[9] Following Hutcheon, Jane Barnette notes that a palimpsest “can be read simultaneously or sequentially—that is, (to an extent) one can isolate layers for consideration, or take in the entirety of the palimpsest at once,” and, importantly, she reminds us that the “stage palimpsest will necessarily” be based more on “image and sound” than on the words in the play text.^[10] Simultaneous “tak[ing] in” implies the audience’s experiential engagement with what they see and hear; “consideration” of separate layers (as in archeology) requires Brechtian critical distance and analysis. *Neighbors*, *Appropriate*, and *An Octoroon* call for both kinds of reading.

While all three plays perform similar kinds of cultural work, in each play Jacobs-Jenkins adapts a different historical form of theatrical entertainment and adopts correspondingly different kinds of innovative adaptive strategies designed to manipulate audiences into a self-conscious recognition of their own complicity in the racial assumptions he excavates. *An Octoroon* most closely adheres to, though it also transcends, Hutcheon’s definition of an adaptation as “an extended, announced, deliberate revisitation of a particular work of art.” *Neighbors* and *Appropriate* expand the parameters of adaptation in other ways, the former by adapting and recontextualizing an historical form of popular entertainment, the latter by adapting not a particular play, but an entire dramatic subgenre. I will discuss the three plays separately in order to bring out their distinctive qualities as intrageneric dramatic adaptations.

Asserting that he was not afraid of black images that would generally be found offensive, in the earliest play in the “trilogy,” *Neighbors* (2010), Jacobs-Jenkins adopts tropes from the nineteenth-century blackface minstrel show that are uncomfortably crude and undeniably racist.^[11] By exaggerating the embodiments of blackness and the comic and musical routines characteristic of the minstrel shows to the point of an absurdity so explosive that laughter becomes problematic, Jacobs-Jenkins launches a savage satiric attack on racist stereotypes. At the same time by theorizing and teaching his audience about the

history of blackface entertainment through the dialogue of the minstrels themselves, Jacobs-Jenkins invites a more dispassionate Brechtian evaluation of the emotionally charged minstrel show devices he depicts. Finally, by placing his minstrel characters in a contemporary context and eliciting empathy for them as human beings and as artists, Jacobs-Jenkins opens up a yet more complicated and difficult way of seeing his nineteenth-century source material while confronting audiences with the ways in which the minstrel stereotypes continued to operate in popular culture and populist politics throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Like stratigraphic layers in archeology, the layering of past and present in *Neighbors* requires complex seeing.

First performed at the Public Theater in New York in 2010, and subtitled “an epic with cartoons,”^[12] *Neighbors* depicts what happens when the Crows, a family of minstrels played by actors in blackface, move in next door to the Pattersons—Richard, a black classics professor, Jean, his white wife, and Melody, their teenage daughter. The Crows, to the best of my knowledge, have always been played by black actors in blackface, although a note in the text states, “the ethnicity and/or gender of the actors playing the Crows is not specified.”^[13] The play combines dramatic realism in the scenes involving the Pattersons with satirically exaggerated blackface minstrelsy. The Crows—Mammy, Zip Coon, Sambo, Topsy, and Jim Crow—play updated versions of the infamous parts suggested by their names. Zip Coon, “very well-dressed,” sporting a top hat, and walking “*jauntily*” and “*dandily*” (250, 230, 238) is the classic dandy of nineteenth-century minstrel shows; Mammy, “ample” of bosom (301) and forceful of manner, channels Hattie McDaniel’s character in *Gone with the Wind* (310), while Topsy is both “picaninni” and a version of Josephine Baker. The Crows wear black paint, have huge red lips, and, except for Jim, and Zip in his conversations with Jean, speak with the caricatured dialect and malapropisms of their nineteenth-century originals. For much of the play Jim Crow refuses to take on the eponymous role of his late father, though by the end he too performs his part in a rousing version of the minstrel song and dance number “Jump Jim Crow,” his new-found talent inspired apparently by the admiration of Melody.^[14]

Jacobs-Jenkins uses Melody and Jean to introduce the audience to the Crow family as people rather than “cartoons.” A romantic relationship develops between rebellious Melody and shy Jim Crow, beginning with the “*awkward tenderness*” of the moment when Jim gently removes an eyelash from Melody’s face (232). Meanwhile Zip Coon suavely charms Jean, encouraging her to talk about herself and taking an interest in her poetry in contrast to Richard’s obsession with his own career and status. Richard is horrified by the Crow family’s moving in next door. They represent for him his worst nightmare about how his white neighbors might perceive him despite his education and professional, middle-class standing: “People will see them and . . . think we’re related!” (250). His intolerance alienates his wife and daughter, who turn to the Crows for love and support.

The Crows have been on “hiatus”—the word is used repeatedly (231, 235, 242)—after the death of Jim Crow, Sr. for an uncertain period of time, suggesting that they may have come *literally* from the nineteenth century, and are, like Pirandello’s *Six Characters*, in search of their life on the stage in the form of their much-vaunted “comeback” (261). Certainly, they belong to a different theatrical world and tradition than the Pattersons. Throughout the play the Crows rehearse and quarrel about who should do what in their upcoming show. In parallel scenes the Pattersons, themselves relatively new to town, enact the realistic drama of modern marital and generational conflict inflected by anxieties over social and professional status in a new job, new school, and new neighborhood. Interspersed among the Crows’ comically fraught rehearsal scenes and the Pattersons’ emotionally fraught domestic scenes are two lectures on Greek tragedy given by Richard to his students and four “Interludes,” in which Zip, Sambo,

Mammy, and Topsy each in turn performs a grossly exaggerated version of the specialty acts typically included in minstrel shows.^[15] Zip struggles to transport an armful of musical instruments, drops them, and with his pants falling down finally succeeds in carrying a bugle in his anus. Sambo is chased repeatedly across the stage by a lawnmower, loses his grass skirt, and uses his long “*firehose penis*” to have sexual intercourse with a watermelon, which he then eats (273). After setting a pile of leaves on fire with a cigarette, Mammy puts out the fire with milk spurting from her enormous breasts, with which she also feeds two white babies, twirling them around in the air from her appendages. The emphasis on huge body parts, especially eyes, lips, and feet, was characteristic of representations of black people in minstrel shows.^[16] Jacobs-Jenkins takes these grotesque depictions to a new level, savagely satirizing white obsession with black male sexuality and white appropriation of black female fecundity.^[17]

The representations of minstrelsy in *Neighbors* send ambiguous—or multilayered—messages to the play’s audiences, who have responded accordingly with embarrassed, confused, and uncertain laughter or have not known whether they should laugh at all. As reported by one reviewer of Company One’s production of *Neighbors* in Boston in 2011, for example, the cast “keeps you uncertain of whether you’re expected to laugh or cringe, engage or retreat, and sends you off wondering why you reacted in whatever, inevitably complex ways you did.”^[18] Another reviewer of this production commented that “it feels like we should applaud [the Crows’] shtick as members of the fictional audience, but not as the actual audience.”^[19]

Jim Crow’s song and dance, while not one of the formal “Interludes,” is a case in point. Jim’s performance, so admired by Melody that she gives the dazed Jim a blowjob, seems, according to Jacobs-Jenkins’s stage directions, designed to be genuinely remarkable and worthy of the theatre audience’s admiration as well as Melody’s. At the beginning of his performance, dressed in “*straw hat, striped suit, and enormous bowtie*,” Jim looks “*ridiculous*,” but also “*amazing*” (285). Caught up into his act, Jim is “*like a hurricane unleashed*,” “*the most incredible thing you have ever seen in your entire life*,” even though he also shares characteristics with his minstrel forebears—“*eyes bugged out, limbs loose, moving, dancing, mo’ coon than a little bit*” (288). Jacobs-Jenkins here invites audiences to engage in an act of complex seeing, requiring them simultaneously to cheer Jim for his newfound expertise and to censure his embodiment of his nominal stereotype, to admire aesthetically what they must also condemn historically. But this is not all. Jacobs-Jenkins introduces Jim’s real feelings. He is “*humiliated*” by what he has to do (285). He is able to perform only by becoming “*almost like a man possessed*” (288). And at the end of the act he holds a musical note so long that the cookie jar holding his father’s ashes explodes, “*releasing an enormous cloud of ash*,” whose haze “*should remain present*” for the rest of the play (289). Jim’s brilliant performance contains so much pain and anger that it breaks open his family’s theatrical past with lingering consequences. At the end of the play the Crow Family Minstrels do not give us the “comeback” show that their rehearsals have perhaps led us to expect but something much more radical.

Topsy’s “Interlude” late in the play (labeled “Interlude/Interruption” [309] to mark its difference from the other Interludes) contributes in a different way to Jacobs-Jenkins’s creation of an “archeology of seeing” in *Neighbors*. In the form of a “stump speech” (in minstrel performances a ridiculous lecture replete with malapropisms on a topical subject^[20]), Topsy talks to the audience about what she hopes they have been enjoying so far. While respecting her family’s traditional show pieces, Topsy feels they are too “commercial.” She sees herself as a more forward-looking “artist” and expresses her own ideas about how art should deal with “the shared human experientence.” She presents to the audience “summa the stuff” she has been working on, which turns out to be “*the history of African Americans*

onstage” crammed into three spectacular minutes of music, video projections, dance, etc., etc. (depending presumably on the resources of the theatre). The effect, according to the stage directions, is supposed to be “*absolutely nothing less than utter, utter transcendence*” (310).

At this point the play celebrates the history of African-American entertainment from Josephine Baker, channeled by Topsy in her diamond-studded halter top and banana skirt (309), to artists such as Sister Sledge, Beyoncé, and others, whose songs may be incorporated here or may have been used throughout the play as in the New York production of *Neighbors*.^[21] At the same time, as Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* notes, Jacobs-Jenkins’s contextualization of the performances of these later artists within Topsy’s act suggests that they too can be seen as just another form of minstrelsy.^[22] Jacobs-Jenkins’s final direction for Topsy, “*And maybe it ends with her masturbating with a banana. In front of a strobe light*” (310), comically undercuts the “*utter, utter transcendence*” he has just described, but it does so in such a way as to mock (give the finger—or the banana—to) what has been historically a largely white and often exploitative entertainment industry rather than the artists themselves. By opening up the “old form” of the minstrel show, Jacobs-Jenkins exposes old meanings and layers new ones onto them. In talking directly to the audience about the show they are watching, Topsy serves an educational function, metatheatrically drawing attention to Jacobs-Jenkins’s work of theatrical excavation. In this respect her role anticipates that of the authorial figure BJJ in *An Octoroon*, who teaches his audience about melodrama.

More literally educational are Richard’s lectures on Greek tragedy, which can be seen as his form of performance, or his interludes. In the first lecture Richard explores the origin of tragedy in our lives, suggesting that it comes from choices we have made in the past that “haunt” us “deep into our very present” (240). In his second lecture—on Euripides’s *Iphigenia at Aulis*—Richard layers his own experience as a black man in America onto the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia. Richard explains that the origin of Agamemnon’s tragedy lies in events that occurred before the action of the play begins. By boasting that he was as good a hunter as the goddess Diana, Agamemnon had “the gall to get ‘uppity’” with the gods (291). As a punishment Diana denies him wind to sail to Troy and requires the sacrifice of his daughter to appease her. Richard, however, blames the sacrifice not on the gods (standing in for white people in his mind) but on the demands of Agamemnon’s “uncouth, country-ass soldiers with no self-control, sitting in the port raping women and drinking all the time and ain’t got no jobs and don’t talk Greek good” (292)—clearly, for Richard, a version of the Crows. Richard then conflates Iphigenia’s willingness to sacrifice herself with what he sees as Melody’s defection to the Crows. (During the lecture the audience can hear Melody giving her blowjob to Jim Crow.) Richard believes that Agamemnon, “a new breed of Achaean,” should have resisted and saved his—Richard, distraught, slips and says, “my”—daughter (292, 293). By layering African-American history onto Greek myth, Richard constructs an alternative “archeology of seeing” to Topsy’s—and Jacobs-Jenkins’s—excavation of the minstrel show that is the play’s main focus.

While the minstrel show provides the bedrock of his dramatic archeology, Jacobs-Jenkins also exposes the later cultural and political stereotypes of blackness that have been layered onto the tropes of minstrelsy. This cultural stratigraphy is especially apparent in the sequence late in the play in which the Crows encourage Jim not to be nervous in the upcoming show because, Mammy says, the audience “luvs evathang we does” (317). Topsy, Sambo, and Mammy (Zip is busy fighting Richard) recite a litany of what white people readily enjoy about black performance, staged or otherwise. They begin with the repertoire of minstrel shows and the comic roles played by black characters in the early films and

television programs that succeeded them, move on to the repertoire of contemporary cultural stereotypes, and conclude with the repertoire of protest: “They luvs when we dance,” “When we guffaws and slaps our thighs lak dis,” “When we be misprunoudenencing wards wrongs en stuff,” “When we make our eyes big and rolls em lak dis”; “When we be hummin’ in church and wear big hats and be like, ‘Mmmm! Testify!’,” “When we ax all sad and be like, ‘Dat’s de bluez’,” “When we say stuff lak, ‘My baby mama!’”; “They luvs it when we soliloquizing like, ‘The white maaann!’,” “‘The white man put me in jail!’,” “‘I can’t get out the ghettooooo!’,” “‘Respect me, white maaaaan!’,” “‘Cause I’m so angrrrryyyy!’” (317–18). All of these historically situated stereotypes, Jacobs-Jenkins implies, are based in white views of black performative behavior deriving ultimately from the minstrel shows. The kind of dramatic excavation practiced in *Neighbors* is thus a form of both pedagogy and political protest.

The protest becomes most explicit at the end of *Neighbors* when the Crows finally put on their show. Instead of performing themselves, they put the (real) audience on display: “*We watch them. They watch us. We watch each other*” (319). Channeling perhaps Peter Handke’s *Offending the Audience*, the Crows work to make the theatre audience, laminated onto their own dramatic audience, conscious of itself specifically as an audience and as consumers of black entertainment wittingly or unwittingly complicit in the stereotypes they have witnessed: “*the family point to people in the audience and whisper together, sometimes mockingly, sometimes out of concern. Maybe they giggle*” (319). In this finale Jacobs-Jenkins deprives his audience of their collectivity and requires them to question their own individual reactions to his play. The Crows’ uncomfortable, not to say embarrassing, interrogative gaze anticipates that of the zanier Br’er Rabbit, who wanders through *An Octoroon* slyly inviting the audience of that play to reflect upon their own and each other’s responses. The audiences’ self-reflections that Jacobs-Jenkins so carefully constructs in response to all three of his plays constitute a further layer in his “archeology of seeing.”

After the conclusion of their “show” the Crows take a curtain call, but that is not the end. There is a coda, which members of the audience leaving the theatre (according to Jacobs-Jenkins’s stage directions) might or might not see. Melody, looking “*different now*,” meets Jim at the stage door and asks him how he feels, and “*the actor playing Jim Crow starts to tell her how he really feels*” (319). In this moment Jacobs-Jenkins blurs illusion and reality by introducing the actors as actors and by inviting any spectators present (or at least readers) to imagine what the attitude of the twenty-first century actor playing Jim Crow might “*really*” be towards the part he has played. Unlike historical excavations, which lead archeologists ever deeper into the past, in *Neighbors* Jacobs-Jenkins excavates upwards into the present, reaching his deepest layer in the feelings of a putative contemporary actor beneath those of a reluctant performer beneath those of a minstrel character.

The archeology of *Appropriate* (2013) works in a rather different way. Jacobs-Jenkins’s excavations in this play are broad rather than deep and as much literary as theatrical or performative. In *Appropriate* Jacobs-Jenkins layers his own work on top of familiar topoi from the genre of American family drama. Such plays, with their focus on “family dysfunction and buried secrets,”^[23] include Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*, Horton Foote’s *Dividing the Estate*, and Tracy Letts’s *August: Osage County*. In writing in this well-worked vein of white family drama, Jacobs-Jenkins aimed to produce a play in which, he says, blackness is “invisible” yet still “charge[s] the room.”^[24]

Appropriate is about a white family—overbearing, divorced sister (Toni), conventional businessman

brother and his Jewish wife (Bo and Rachael), prodigal brother and erstwhile sex offender (Franz), his much younger New Age fiancée (River), and various children. The family return after their father's/grandfather's death to the old family home in Arkansas: a decaying mansion with ancestral and slave graveyards on the property of what was once a plantation. Bo hated the plantation with its bugs and its "endless stories" about Civil War ancestors. But Toni says, "I always liked Grandma's stories. Though I can't remember any of them now. . . . This place has history—our history."^[25] If the plantation clearly symbolizes America's history, the members of the Lafayette family represent its contemporary cultural geography. Toni returns from Atlanta, Bo and Rachael from New York, and Franz and River from Portland. According to Jacobs-Jenkins, Toni represents the "New South" with its feeling of being "betrayed by the rest of the country"; the West represents new possibilities, enabling Franz to "reinvent" himself; and New York connects Bo (with his smart phone) to a "bigger world" and "forward momentum."^[26]

While atmospheric cicadas make symbolic noise in the background, the family members quarrel over long-standing grievances and over their inheritance, which, to their horror, includes an album filled with photographs of lynchings. The unseen photographs of lynchings in *Appropriate* anticipate the even more profoundly shocking real-life photograph of a lynching that audiences do see in *An Octoroon*. Over the course of the play the album is passed from one family member to another, eliciting various "white" responses (including "shock, disgust, curiosity, fascination, disregard, aversion") as each of them has to try to find a way to deal with what it represents about their father, their family history, their own racial attitudes—and whether or not they can sell the photos for a substantial sum as collector's items.^[27] The family's various responses are "white," Kee-Yoon Nahm explains, because they are the reactions of people who can in no way share in the experiences documented by the photos.^[28] In the end Bo is prevented from selling the photos because Franz feels called to "cleanse" himself and his family by jumping into the nearby lake, taking the photos with him: "I took everything—all my pain, all Daddy's pain, this family's pain, the pictures—and I left it there. I washed it away" (97). Franz's desire for redemption is another "white" response; Nahm reminds us of those "not included in the healing ritual."^[29] The play's ending suggests that while some personal progress may be possible in healing family rifts, especially for younger members of the family, only time can cleanse the house of its racial past by demolishing it. In the play's final sequence, representing an indeterminate period of time marked by stylized blackouts followed immediately by the lights coming up again, the audience bears witness as the house, established by now as a representation of America, is casually inhabited by various strangers and literally falls apart.

Appropriate bears many of the generic markers of American family drama. But Jacobs-Jenkins's adaptive strategy in this play is less explicit than it is in *Neighbors* or *An Octoroon*, in which he incorporates explanations of the genres or texts he adapts—in the Crow family's comments on their work in *Neighbors* and in educational addresses to the audience from dramatist BJJ and Dion Boucicault himself in *An Octoroon*—for the benefit of those who might not be familiar with his sources. His comments in interviews on the generic affiliation of *Appropriate* suggest that Jacobs-Jenkins assumed that audiences would already be sufficiently familiar with American family drama to interpret this play's complex stratigraphy without further pedagogical intervention on his part.^[30] In *Appropriate*, contrary to Hutcheon's exclusion of "short intertextual allusions to other works" from consideration as adaptations,^[31] Jacobs-Jenkins works primarily through such brief allusions to adapt, not a particular prior text, but a whole genre. He alludes both to tropes common across American family drama—a genre characterized by its content and its realism rather than by any particular structural features—and to specific

details from well-known plays. This strategy produces a general sense of familiarity that, as reviewer Erin Keene, observes, “creates a comfort zone for audience members who are then periodically shocked out of their complacency—we know these people, we know this genre—by the reemergence of the album.”^[32] The broadly familiar content of *Appropriate* is punctuated, too, by more precise allusions that Jacobs-Jenkins chooses to italicize and engage with in order to render visible within the parameters of the white American family play a discourse about blackness.

In one way Jacobs-Jenkins puts his whole play in quotation marks through his opening and closing sequences that stand outside stage time and outside the realism usually associated with American family drama. At the beginning the “*incessant chatter*” of cicadas “*fills and sweeps the theater in pulsing pitch-black waves*” (13), assaulting the audience’s senses in an almost Artaudian manner for what seems like an unbearably long time; at the end alternating darkness and light represent the passing of many years as the house falls apart and the cicadas fall silent. In between these striking bookends Jacobs-Jenkins follows his predecessors in his chosen genre from O’Neill to Letts in depicting—sometimes with an exaggeration so subtle that it barely puts a dent in the ostensible realism of his presentation—family secrets, unhappy marriages, sibling rivalry, and conflicts between parents and children fueled by drugs or alcohol. The play’s opening sequence, however, invites the audience to adopt a critical stance to what they are about to see, especially in those moments when Jacobs-Jenkins’s layering of a new meaning over an old motif makes itself most sharply felt, giving *Appropriate* its revisionist edge.

Appropriate opens with the initially unexplained arrival of Franz and River jumping through a window into a “*very disorderly*” living room cluttered with old and new furniture as cicadas hum in the background (15). It is an opening that comically echoes the odd, unexpected homecoming of Vince and his girlfriend, Shelly, who enter an equally bizarre and decrepit living room to the incessant sound of rain at the beginning of act two of *Buried Child*. Franz and River are startled by the waking of a figure on the couch, who turns out to be Rhys, Toni’s son, just as Shelley is startled by Dodge, Vince’s grandfather, whom she arouses from sleep. The next time we see River, she has taken over the kitchen as Shelly eventually does to make bouillon for Dodge. While the “text” that *Appropriate* adapts is the genre of American family drama as a whole, *Buried Child*, itself “a veritable patchwork of allusions to well-known family plays,” will, in fact, prove to be the most significant single analog for Jacobs-Jenkins’s play.^[33]

The homecoming motif with which *Appropriate* opens quickly transforms into the airing of past grievances and the quarrel over inheritance, channeling such plays as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Dividing the Estate*. Toni complains that she has always done most of the work; Rachael believes that her father-in-law was anti-Semitic. Though Toni denies this accusation and is shocked when later Rhys refers to Rachael as “the Jew bitch,” her own unreflecting anti-Semitism is apparent when she thoughtlessly says that she is not “some kind of shylock” (77, 34). Rachael makes a point of excusing both her father-in-law’s anti-Semitism and what she sees as his racial prejudice because “he cannot be held responsible for how he may have been brought up to feel or think about other people” (40, 42). The motif of anti-Semitism furthers the play’s evocation—and excavation—of the closed, racist cultural environment that enabled lynchings and is an inheritance the Lafayettes would like to disown.

The debt-ridden, lost plantation over which the family quarrels evokes *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Dividing the Estate*, as well as the play that lies behind both of them, *The Cherry Orchard*. Jacobs-Jenkins quotes from Lopakhin’s speech after he buys the estate on which his “father and grandfather

were slaves” as an epigraph for his own play (11). Familiar character types, too, reappear in *Appropriate*, further establishing the play’s generic affiliation with the American family drama that Jacobs-Jenkins set out to adapt for his own purposes. The dead patriarch has counterparts in Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Beverly in *August: Osage County*, both of whom are absent (dying or dead) for much of their respective plays. Underscoring the link, Toni sarcastically refers to her brother as “Beauregarde ‘Big Daddy’ Lafayette” (35). Toni’s diatribes may be more unrelenting than Violet’s in *August: Osage County*, but the two matriarchal figures engage in similarly vitriolic attacks against members of their family. And in both plays verbal conflict degenerates into physical violence.

More significant than these echoes is the familiar symbolic equation of the family home with America. In *August: Osage County*, for example, Barbara conflates the decay of home and family with the decay of America: “This country, this experiment, America, this hubris: what a lament, if no one saw it go.”^[34] In *Dividing the Estate* when family members, no longer able to depend on money from their land, contemplate getting jobs at “Whataburger,” schoolteacher Pauline comments, “That’s what they say America is becoming, you know, a service economy.”^[35] And in *Buried Child* when Shelly tells Vince that his home is “like a Norman Rockwell cover,” Vince replies, “It’s American.”^[36] This “American” house with its fraught relationships and dark secrets is explicitly Vince’s “inheritance” (128), willed to him by his grandfather, Dodge. As Thomas P. Adler observes, Shepard displays a “peculiar power in his highly symbolic family problem plays of allegorizing the American experience, of deflating the myth of America as the New Eden.”^[37] Jacobs-Jenkins transforms Shepard’s implied equation of literal and symbolic inheritance—embodied in *Appropriate* in the photo album of lynchings—into an explicit and particular indictment of America’s racial and racist history and its present-day consequences.

Jacobs-Jenkins nods most explicitly towards his “sources” in American family drama when Rachael, trying to draw her squabbling in-laws back to the topic of what to do about the photo album, says, “Can we sit around being casually dysfunctional later and focus for one second?” (59). Despite the discovery of the explosive contents of the album, not to mention a jar of body parts—more collector’s items—and a “pointed white hood” (103) in which the youngest child, Ainsley, unwittingly dresses up, the Lafayettes find themselves distracted from dealing with their history by their constant need to attack and occasional attempts to reconcile with one another. Into the familiar dramatic context of this white family’s absorption in its own dysfunction Jacobs-Jenkins inserts the photo album as a reminder of the family’s and America’s deadly legacy of racism. Through this strikingly original use of the photo album, Jacobs-Jenkins achieves his objective of “writing a ‘black’ play—a play dealing with blackness in America—that has no black characters in it.”^[38]

Photographs, unsurprisingly, figure in many plays about families. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* only an unseen photograph of Belle Reve denotes Stella’s past for the people she now lives among in New Orleans, and they are not much impressed. Her neighbor, Eunice, describes the plantation house matter-of-factly as a “great big place with white columns”; Stanley boasts that he pulled Stella “down off them columns,” and she “loved it.”^[39] In Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog* a “raggedy family photo album” (13), its photos also unseen, represents the uncertain history of brothers Linc and Booth and symbolizes as well the absence of African Americans from American history.^[40] The photo album in *Appropriate*, by contrast, belies the apparent absence of blackness in the play by embodying and giving it an explosive motivating power that forces the white characters to confront a legacy of racism that they prefer not to acknowledge.

The most significant precursor of Jacobs-Jenkins's deployment of the photo album in *Appropriate* occurs in *Buried Child*. In Shepard's play Shelly inquires about photographs, again unseen by the audience, that she has found upstairs—photos of a woman with red hair, a woman holding a baby, a farm, corn. She tells the family patriarch, Dodge, that they represent his past: "Your whole life's up there hanging on the wall." It is a past that Dodge refuses to recognize: "That isn't me! That never was me!" (111). He does acknowledge, however, that his wife, Halie, has a "family album" that can explain "the heritage . . . all the way back to the grave" (112). The unseen album, telling its symbolic story of a "long line of corpses" (112), of incest and infanticide, prefigures the more shocking album of lynchings and dead black bodies that mesmerizes the Lafayette family in *Appropriate*. The photograph album in *Appropriate* is particularly shocking because these photos are to be understood, not only as symbolic representations, but as literal artifacts of American history. The album is deeply embedded in the action of the play as the characters try to figure out what it means and what to do with it. As an object, the album is constantly presented to the audience's view and its unseen contents to their imagination. As a symbol, the album suffuses the consciousness of both characters and audience.

The photo albums in *Buried Child* and *Appropriate* reveal what has been kept hidden. In both plays the "buried secrets" are discovered to be dead bodies. In *Buried Child*, Halie's and Tilden's murdered baby (apparently drowned by Dodge, as Franz tries to "drown" the photos of lynchings) has been literally buried in the soil behind the house. At the end of the play Tilden enters "*dripping with mud*" and carrying "*the corpse of a small child*" consisting mainly of "*bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth*" (132). Jacobs-Jenkins repeats this striking visual image towards the end of *Appropriate* when Franz enters "*soaking wet,*" carrying "*a pile of wet paper pulp—the remains of the photo album—a mess*" (108) that he has rescued from the lake. The precise resemblance of the two visual images creates a palimpsestic layering that enables the audience to see the human reality of the black flesh and bones that the now pulpy photos represent.

By excavating one of the most memorable stage images in the drama of the American family and layering his own meaning on top of it, Jacobs-Jenkins italicizes his original contribution to the genre. He has written an American family drama about blackness in America that has no black characters in it but in which their absence pervades and powers the play. Shepard's dark vision of American plenty (the harvest of corn, carrots, potatoes that grow where the murdered baby was buried) rising out of the family's (symbolically America's) destructive past informs and transforms into Jacobs-Jenkins's vision of an America falling apart, undermined by its legacy of racism.[\[41\]](#)

The image of Franz holding the sodden remains of the photos of dead black people laminated onto Shepard's image of Tilden holding the remains of the dead baby elicits especially clearly what Jacobs-Jenkins calls an "archeology of seeing." The meaning of this moment in *Appropriate* lies in the stratigraphy, and especially in the gap between layers that provides space for interpretation.

The whole of *An Octoroon* (first produced in 2014 and remounted in 2015 by Soho Rep in New York) works through an even more radical process of layering and drawing attention to the gaps between layers to produce this kind of multiple seeing. As in *Neighbors*, Jacobs-Jenkins shines a light on the politics of the play's stratigraphy by explaining directly to his audience the features of the genre he is adapting. The technique is explicitly pedagogical and in *An Octoroon* inventively meta-adaptive as the contemporary playwright BJJ—a stand-in for Jacobs-Jenkins—is joined by the Playwright—the author of the source play "Dion Boucicault"—in teaching the audience how

they should respond to the adaptation.

In *An Octoroon* Jacobs-Jenkins excavates and adapts both a specific play text whose racial content would otherwise preclude performance in the twenty-first century and the now unfamiliar genre of nineteenth-century melodrama to which it belongs, including the theatrical/performative features of that genre: sensational plot, stereotypical good and bad characters, mix of comedy and pathos, spectacle, tableaux, and mood music.^[42] Jacobs-Jenkins retains most of Boucicault's main characters and substantial amounts of his dialogue as well as his plot. In the main plot George, the white hero, falls in love with a beautiful "octoroon," Zoe, who poisons herself rather than succumb to the white villain, M'Closky, who has bought her; in the subplot, photographic evidence demonstrates that M'Closky, not Native American Wahnotee, has murdered slave boy Paul in order to steal the document that would save George's plantation and prevent Zoe from being sold. But as well as preserving much of Boucicault's work, not least his artistic focus in manipulating his audience's emotions, Jacobs-Jenkins incorporates his own words with Boucicault's, transforms melodramatic techniques into Brechtian techniques, and uses racially cross-cast actors in whiteface, blackface, and redface, inviting audiences to join him in excavating the play's different levels of meaning and to see them simultaneously. Even more thoroughly than in *Neighbors* and *Appropriate*, adapted work and adaptation bleed into one another.

Since I have discussed Jacobs-Jenkins's adaptation of *The Octoroon* at length elsewhere, I shall confine my remarks in this essay to a brief examination of the ways in which in *An Octoroon* the playwright extends to almost every feature of the play the archeological techniques he develops in *Neighbors* and *Appropriate*.^[43] In all three plays Jacobs-Jenkins adds innovative techniques to the toolbox available to theatrical adaptation and further wrinkles to adaptation theory. Most distinctively in *An Octoroon* and with far-reaching dramaturgical consequences, Jacobs-Jenkins racially cross-casts several of the characters. Both the white hero, George, and the white villain, M'Closky, are played by the same black actor in whiteface. In the auction scene he has to fight himself over Zoe. The superimposition of hero and villain upon one another suggests that the moral difference between them is less clear-cut than melodramatic stereotypes would have it and illustrates, as Lisa Merrill and Theresa Saxon note, "the uncomfortable similarity between desire to own, master, or marry" Zoe.^[44] The Native American Wahnotee is played by a white actor in redface. And the slaves Pete and Paul, according to Jacobs-Jenkins's textual directions, are to be played by a Native American actor (or an actor who can pass as Native American) in blackface. This use of make-up reverses the nineteenth-century theatre's casting of white actors in blackface to play the enslaved characters and comments ironically on racist stereotypes and the theatrical convention that perpetuated them.

The device of racial cross-casting inevitably creates a gap between actor and character, superimposing the stylization of Brechtian distance on the stylization of melodramatic stereotyping. Through such Brechtian techniques as cross-casting and meta-commentary from the play's internal playwright, BJJ, Jacobs-Jenkins ironizes Boucicault's story and the racist attitudes of his characters. When a black actor in whiteface makes a racist remark (George's reference to "the folksy ways of the niggers down here," for example), the line is necessarily italicized and held up for the audience's critical inspection.^[45] Similarly, the old slave Pete (in blackface) clearly *performs* his role as loyal house slave. At the beginning of the play, upon hearing the approach of white people, Pete drops his normal conversational voice and "*transforms into some sort of folk figure*" speaking the dialect constructed by Boucicault: "Drop dat banana fo' I murdah you!" (19).^[46]

Jacobs-Jenkins further makes *The Octoroon* “fit” for its twenty-first century theatrical environment through the adaptive processes of transmotivation, transfocalization, and transvalorization described by Genette. This strategy is most apparent in his depiction of the enslaved female characters, who are little more than comic props in *The Octoroon*. In scenes added to Boucicault’s play Jacobs-Jenkins humanizes Dido, Minnie, and Grace by giving them “distinct backgrounds and personalities” and voices, desires, and agency of their own.^[47] Their voices (borrowed from the dialect of contemporary sitcom) are the most vibrant and compelling in the play. About their apparently imminent sale, for example, Dido says, “This is about the worst damn day of my life! It’s even worse than the first time I got sold!” And Minnie replies, “Yeah, I didn’t wake up thinkin’ this was where my day was gonna go” (41). The gap between tone and content is at once disturbingly funny and appalling. Even more pointed is Minnie’s advice to Dido, “I know we slaves and evurthang, but you are not your job” (58), an anachronistic cliché that reminds us that Dido, in fact, has no life outside her job. Through the familiarity of the contemporary comic idiom Jacobs-Jenkins induces the audience to laugh—in effect, at slavery—and then to question their own and other audience members’ laughter.

As well as giving vigorous contemporary voices to Dido, Minnie, and Grace, Jacobs-Jenkins replaces their unquestioning loyalty to their owners in Boucicault’s play with aspirations and dreams of their own. Grace wants to escape—she is co-head of the “Runaway Plannin’ Committee” (40)—and Minnie and Dido at least want to choose the nature of their servitude, supposing that if they can persuade Captain Ratts to buy them to work on his steamboat, they will enjoy a life of romantic adventure. Minnie imagines “coasting up and down the river, lookin’ fly, the wind whipping at our hair and our slave tunics and shit,” being admired by the “muscle-y” men on the boat, and eating “fresh fish” instead of “these fattening pig guts” (42). The women’s fantasy, however, will prove ephemeral. The steamboat blows up, and as I have remarked elsewhere, “The two women are trapped inside Boucicault’s plot just as Tom Stoppard’s reimagined Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped inside *Hamlet* and Dido and Minnie’s real-life counterparts were trapped in the institution of slavery.”^[48] Nonetheless, as Merrill and Saxon cogently observe, by focusing on Dido and Minnie’s hopes and fears for themselves instead of on Zoe’s tragic death in the play’s last scene and by granting them critical insights into their condition, Jacobs-Jenkins “forces today’s audiences to refocus their attention on the material conditions and lives of ordinary black women rather than the eponymous octoroon.”^[49]

Jacobs-Jenkins similarly reconfigures and overlays Boucicault’s sensation scene with a more relevant one of his own. In act four in place of—or actually in addition to—Boucicault’s innovative use of the new art form of photography and his spectacular exploding steamboat (offstage in *An Octoroon*), Jacobs-Jenkins provides for his audience a stunning contemporary sensation: a blown-up photograph of a real-life lynching. BJJ explains, with the help of Boucicault, how melodrama works and how it has been necessary for *An Octoroon* to adapt some of the melodramatic features of the earlier play. Where Boucicault cleverly uses a photograph of the real murderer of Paul to prevent a miscarriage of justice, Jacobs-Jenkins has to go further to produce a similarly sensational effect for his contemporary audience. The blown-up photograph of a real-life lynching—against which background George makes an impassioned defense of Wahnotee against the “wild and lawless proceeding” of “lynch-law” (51)—is profoundly shocking but also positions spectators as complicit in the voyeuristic gaze of the photograph’s “enthralled white gawkers.”^[50]

While this is the most disturbing moment in the play, there is no ambiguity about the kind of horrified response called for by the photograph of the lynching. The numerous comic episodes, however, involving

Pete, Dido, Minnie, and Grace, scenes in which Jacobs-Jenkins induces the audience to laugh at slavery almost before they are aware, produce more subtly disquieting—because more questionable—effects. Reviewer Chase Quinn observed that the audience at Soho Rep was in an “unceasing state of anxiety,” as each audience member was left “to negotiate for him or herself” when and how much to laugh.^[51] Jacobs-Jenkins’s well-attested concern with evoking strong and complicated individual responses from his audiences adds a new wrinkle to adaptation theory.^[52] For his own political purposes, in *An Octoroon* he adapts not only his source play and the melodramatic genre in which it is written but also the swiftly changing responses that genre typically elicits, allowing, as Rosa Schneider notes, “a twenty-first-century audience to feel some of the same effects as their nineteenth-century counterparts.”^[53]

Following Boucicault, Jacobs-Jenkins skillfully manipulates how his audience responds from moment to moment. Boucicault puts his audience on a thrilling emotional roller-coaster for its own sake as is typical of melodrama; Jacobs-Jenkins abruptly alternates not only pathos with laughter and laughter with horror but also emotional engagement with critical detachment to produce in his contemporary audience a Brechtian self-consciousness about their own and other spectators’ reactions. Effectively, he adapts melodrama’s audience for his own meta-melodramatic and political purposes. Checking on the audience’s reactions is a whimsical giant Br’er Rabbit (clearly an authorial figure and originally played by Jacobs-Jenkins himself) who wanders through the show at will, staring at the spectators (much as the Crows stare at their audience at the end of *Neighbors*). Br’er Rabbit’s gaze is designed to ensure that spectators take note of their own and each other’s responses to racist stereotypes presented as comic. In doing so, Br’er Rabbit—or the dramatist himself—assesses the political impact of Jacobs-Jenkins’s adaptation.

Neighbors, *Appropriate*, and *An Octoroon* all attest to Jacobs-Jenkins’s fascination with “genre or old forms” as “interesting artifacts.” But it is his detailed, scholarly knowledge of minstrel shows, American family drama, and nineteenth-century melodrama that enables him to manipulate these forms and the audience responses they typically generate to elicit an “archeology of seeing.” Jacobs-Jenkins’s sensitivity to and command over the forms he appropriates are apparent in the tropes of the plays themselves, in the characters’ own commentary on the genres they are inhabiting, especially in *Neighbors* and *An Octoroon*, and in the playwright’s numerous comments in interviews on the generic affiliations of his work.^[54] Because Jacobs-Jenkins appreciates the works and genres he adapts—even at some level the black minstrelsy of *Neighbors*^[55]—he encourages audiences similarly to appreciate and to enjoy his own versions of them. But as audiences laugh (or squirm) at the Crows’ outrageous minstrel show turns, or speculate knowingly about the quarrels of the Lafayettes, or weep for Zoe and laugh at the performances of Minnie, Dido, and Pete, Jacobs-Jenkins simultaneously compels contemporary spectators to confront the racial assumptions he has excavated along with the dramatic forms that contain them and to worry about their own and each other’s complicity in the continuing legacy of those assumptions.

In *Neighbors*, *Appropriate*, and *An Octoroon* Jacobs-Jenkins puts his own adaptive versions of the minstrel show, the American family play, and Boucicault’s melodrama into an edgy but productive dialogue with the forms that he excavates. The tension between the old forms and the new meanings layered onto them generates uneasy and uncertain laughter that engages audiences in a much-needed, if in the theatre implicit, dialogue of their own about racial attitudes in contemporary America.

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[1] Jeff Lunden, “One Playwright’s ‘Obligation’ To Confront Race And Identity In The US,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 16 February 2015. Transcript.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/16/383567104/one-playwright-s-obligation> (accessed 11 February 2019).

[2] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, quoted. in Ben Brantley, “A Squabbling Family Kept in the Dark,” *New York Times*, 16 March 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/17/theater/in-appropriate-branden-jacobs-jenkins-subverts-tradition.html?r=0> (accessed 12 August 2015).

[3] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, quoted. in Lunden, “One Playwright’s ‘Obligation’.”

[4] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, “An Archeology of Seeing. An Interview with Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Lila Neugebauer,” *Signature Theatre*.
<http://www.signaturetheatre.org/News/An-Archeology-of-Seeing.aspx> (accessed 19 May 2017). Jacobs-Jenkins is speaking here of *Everybody* (2017), his adaptation of the medieval morality play *Everyman*.

[5] Suzan-Lori Parks anticipates Jacobs-Jenkins’s use of an archeological metaphor for a slightly different purpose. In her 1994 essay “Possession,” she argues that it is necessary to “dig for bones” in order to locate and recreate “unrecorded” African-American history. “Possession,” *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 4.

[6] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. with Siobhan O’Flynn (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 170.

[7] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

[8] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). Hutcheon also notes the Darwinian implications of the term “adaptation.” *A Theory of Adaptation*, 31.

[9] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xvii, 6, 21.

[10] Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg’s Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018), 55, 62.

[11] Jacobs-Jenkins grew up in a home full of “black memorabilia” such as “mammy dolls” and “Colored Only” signs, according to Laura Collins-Hughes in “Provocative Play Sees the Faces Behind the Blackface,” *The Boston Globe*, 16 January 2011.

http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/01/16/neighbors_exposes_racial_history_on_stage/ (accessed 5 December 2016).

[12] Charles Isherwood, “Caricatured Commentary: Minstrel Meets Modern,” *The New York Times* 9 March 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/10/theater/reviews/10neighbors.html> (accessed 1 May 2017).

[13] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *Neighbors. American Next Wave: Four Contemporary Plays from HighTide Festival Theatre*. (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), 222. Subsequent references are indicated in parentheses.

[14] For the history and content of nineteenth-century minstrel shows see Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), especially 25–57; and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). The earliest minstrels were white performers in blackface, but there were also troupes of African-American performers.

[15] See Toll, *Blackening Up*, 55.

[16] See *ibid.*, 67.

[17] On white obsession with black male bodies in minstrel shows, see Lott, *Love and Theft*, 3, 9.

[18] Jason Rabin, “Stage Review: ‘Neighbors’ at Company One,” *Blast Magazine*, 14 January 2011. <http://blastmagazine.com/2011/01/14/stage-review-neighbors-at-company-one/> (accessed 27 April 2017).

[19] Nancy Grossman, “Company One Wants You to Meet the ‘Neighbors,’” *Broadway World*, 17 January 2011. <http://www.broadwayworld.com/boston/article/Company-One-Wants-You-to-Meet-the-Neighbors-20110117> (accessed 5 December 2016).

[20] Toll, *Blackening Up*, 55–56.

[21] See Isherwood, “Caricatured Commentary.” At one point in the published text Jacobs-Jenkins calls for a rearrangement of Sister Sledge’s “We Are Family” (263).

[22] Isherwood, “Caricatured Commentary.”

[23] Jacobs-Jenkins quoted in Amy Wegener, “About *Appropriate*,” *Appropriate. Humana Festival 2013 The Complete Plays*, edited by Amy Wegener and Sarah Lunnie (New York: Playscripts, Inc., 2014), 146.

[24] Jacobs-Jenkins quoted in Margaret Gray, “Spotlight Shines Brighter on ‘Appropriate’ Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-branden-jacobs-jenkins-20150927-story.html> (accessed 27 April 2017).

[25] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *Appropriate. Appropriate/An Octoroon*. Theatre Communications Group:

New York, 2019), 73–74. Subsequent references are indicated in parentheses.

[26] Jacobs-Jenkins quoted in Wegener, “About *Appropriate*,” 147.

[27] Kee-Yoon Nahm, “Visibly White: Realism and Race in *Appropriate* and *Straight White Men*,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 27, no. 2 (2015).

<http://jadtjournal.org/2015/04/24/visibly-white-realism-and-race-in-appropriate-and-straight-white-men/> (accessed 30 December 2016).

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] See notes 2 and 23.

[31] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 170.

[32] Erin Keane, “Review/Family Secrets Fester in ‘*Appropriate*,’” *89.3 WFPL News Louisville*, 20 March 2013. <http://wfpl.org/review-family-secrets-fester-appropriate/> (accessed 30 December 2016).

[33] Stephen J. Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 159.

[34] Tracy Letts, *August: Osage County* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008), 123–24.

[35] Horton Foote, *Dividing the Estate. Three Plays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 76.

[36] Sam Shepard, *Buried Child. Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 41. Subsequent references are indicated in parentheses.

[37] Thomas P. Adler, “Repetition and Regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*,” in Matthew Roudané, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 112.

[38] Verna A. Foster, “Meta-melodrama: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins Appropriates Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*,” *Modern Drama* 59, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 286.

[39] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire. The Theatre of Tennessee Williams. Vol. 1* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 249, 377.

[40] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (New York Theatre Communications Group, 2001), 13. For the details of this argument see Verna A. Foster, “Suzan-Lori Parks’s Staging of the Lincoln Myth in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 24–35.

[41] Bottoms suggests that *Buried Child* “is dealing metaphorically with America’s collective tendency to bury the intolerable memories of its bloody history of slavery and genocide, and so forth” (*The Theatre of Sam Shepard*, 176). Adler adds that “the nation’s guilty past” in *Buried Child* might be “racism, or religious and ethnic prejudice, or . . . the Vietnam War.” “Repetition and Regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*,” 121.

[42] On nineteenth-century American melodrama, including its depiction of slavery, see Rosa Schneider, “‘Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something’: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and the Reconstruction of Melodrama,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2018).

[43] Foster, “Meta-melodrama.”

[44] Lisa Merrill and Theresa Saxon, “Replaying and Rediscovering *The Octoroon*,” *Theatre Journal* 69, no. 2 (2017): 151.

[45] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2015), 20. Subsequent references are indicated in parentheses.

[46] In Definition Theatre Company’s 2017 production of *An Octoroon* in Chicago, Pete and Paul were played by an African-American actress in blackface, producing an even more pointed Brechtian comment on the absurdity of Boucicault’s racist and gendered characterizations.

[47] Schneider, “‘Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something’.”

[48] Foster, “Meta-melodrama,” 299.

[49] Merrill and Saxon, “Replaying and Rediscovering *The Octoroon*,” 152.

[50] Chase Quinn, “Laughing (and Crying, and Laughing Again) about Slavery,” *Hyperallergic* 24 February 2015. <http://hyperallergic.com/185346/laughing-and-crying-and-laughing-again-about-slavery/> (accessed 20 May 2015).

[51] Ibid.

[52] See Foster, “Meta-melodrama,” 300–01.

[53] Schneider, “‘Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something’.”

[54] For Jacobs-Jenkins’s knowledge of American family drama see Wegener, “About *Appropriate*,” 146. For his research into Boucicault’s aesthetic principles and into melodrama see Foster, “Meta-melodrama,” 286, 290, 293 and Schneider, “‘Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something’.”

[55] See Collins-Hughes, “Provocative Play Sees the Faces Behind the Blackface,” and note 11 above.



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