ELASTIC MELODRAMAS:
ABJECTION AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEATER

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2020

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ELASTIC MELODRAMAS: ABJECTION AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEATER

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Cornell University 2020

My dissertation, "Elastic Melodramas: Abjection and Self-Authorship in African-American Theater," highlights the transformative role of abjection in African American melodrama. The concept of the abject – a state of being "cast off" from society – was initially developed as a dilemma of self-representation by the French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva. Abjection later emerged as a critical concept in the Black Studies canon. It was radically rethought by Frantz Fanon, who argued that Algerians suppressed by French colonial rule were abject figures, and later through the critical discussions of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. More recently, it has been championed by theorists like Darieck Scott to describe Black queer subjects who enact agency from a place of marginalization. I use the abject as a means of analyzing dramatic literature, specifically African-American melodrama. My work builds upon previous uses of the abject in critical theory and performance studies, which posits the category as a private reaction to a horrible sight. In melodrama, which depends on an exchange of affect between the performers and the audience, the abject becomes public. On stage, we see who is cast off, and can thus mobilize empathy and ultimately, transformation. In my account, the idea of the abject has an elasticity that refers to a character's ability to see freedom beyond the embodiment of white power, harnessing the courage to reshape the contours of an antiblack world. It is the 'othered' bodies on stage - female, disabled, displaced, sick, and poor - who push to imagine a

new form of black subjectivity, an Afro-futuristic space beyond abjection. In my dissertation, key authors of plays produced over a century of writing for the American theater are discussed, from Angelina Weld Grimké to Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. I ultimately end with a coda on Black melodrama on primetime television, emphasizing that melodrama is a multimodal category, existing on screen and stage.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristen Wright previously earned an MA in Africana Studies from Cornell University, an MA in African-American Studies from Columbia University, and a BA in Theater Studies and Political Science from Yale University. Her work exists at the intersections of African-American drama (from the 19th century to the present), Black performance studies, and critical theory. She has contributed a chapter on Adrienne Kennedy to the Gale Researcher's American Literature volume, a performance review to *Texas Theatre Journal,* and co-wrote an article on graduate education for *Theatre Topics.* Her article on Suzan-Lori Parks' "Elements of Style" is forthcoming from the *Routledge Anthology of Women's Theatre Theory & Dramatic Criticism.*

Kristen has been a Member-at-Large for the Performance Studies Focus Group of the Association for Theatre In Higher Education (ATHE) since 2017, and also served as the Representative to the Committee on New Paradigms in Graduate Education and on the Graduate Student Caucus of the American Society For Theatre Research (ASTR). Her article "'The Killing of My Mother I Claim Myself': Adrienne Kennedy's Electra and Orestes, Aeschylus' Oresteia, and the Question of Justice," won the 2016 Marvin Carlson Award for Best Student Essay in Theatre and Performance from Cornell's Department of Performing and Media Arts. Her First-Year Writing Seminar, "Staging The Black Family," won the Fall 2018 Information Literacy Sequence Prize from the John S. Knight Institute For Writing In The Disciplines. Kristen is also a playwright and dramaturg, and her plays APPLE CORE, MISS ANNE, THE SHIRT (CIVILITY), and JAMAL FROM EMPIRE were produced as a part of Cornell's 10 Minute Play Festival. In the Fall of 2020, she will become a Postdoctoral Associate in the Humanities Scholars Program in the College of Arts & Sciences at Cornell

University.

Dedicated to my mother, Charlyne Wright

and Amy Grace Greene (1990-2002)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who have assisted me along the way. I present an (unranked) list.

1. I would like to begin by thanking my advisor, Sara Warner, and my three minor members: Shirley Samuels, Samantha Noelle Sheppard, and Farah Jasmine Griffin for guiding my journey as a doctoral candidate.
2. The Africana Studies and Research Center has been my home for the past five years, and I would like to acknowledge Olufemi Taiwo, Siba Grovogui, Riche Richardson, Treva Levine, Renee Milligan, and especially, Donna Pinnisi for her energy and organization.
3. Thanks to Oluwamayowa Anjolaoluwa Ayobami Ayoka Ojelabi-Willoughby, Bwesigye Mwesigire, Zifeng Liu, and Kevin Quin for the probing conversations (Bam), hot pot dinners (Zifeng), Zoom sessions, chicken tikka dinners, hilarious Twitter conversations and A-exam paper commentary (Kevin), for opening your space in Goldwin Smith and keeping me on task (Bwesigye), and general camaraderie. Also thanks to Jasmine Jay, Sarah Then Bergh, Gary Slack, and the PMA and English graduate students and faculty who have offered support over the years.
4. My father, Frederick Wright, for diligently engaging with both my academic and creative work.
5. Adrienne Kennedy, for inspiring me to write and think and responding promptly to my emails.
6. The 10 Minute Play Festival was a central part of my experience at Cornell, and I would like to acknowledge the four people who have directed my work:

Nick Fesette, Elaigwu Ameh, Sam Blake, and Allen Porterie, who is the most brilliant undergraduate I have ever met. An additional thanks to every person who has acted in my shows!

7. I would also like to thank the broader theater and performance community that I have built through ATHE, ASTR, and PSi, and the members of the ATHE Performance Studies Focus Group.
8. The Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University was a home away from home and an important milestone in my intellectual development. Thank you to Sharon Harris, Rich Blint, and the late Marcellus Blount.
9. Thank you to Ember Jones, Dyan Cannon, Mary Hadley, Billy Lim, Jessica Williams, and Brittaney Graham for their many years of friendship and encouragement. And thanks to the many other people who shaped my upbringing in Houston: Dee and Jack Rafferty, Carol Howell, Dr. James L. Pool, Pam Pool, Linda Lightfoot, Joe Angel Babb, Amy Steele, and Dennis Draper (and everyone at the Alley Theatre).
10. Thank you to my aunts, uncles, and cousins in the Allston and Wright families.
11. And finally, I would like to thank my mother, Charlyne Wright, for her unconditional love and support.

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INTRODUCTION: SHEER MELODRAMA

In his article “American Playwriting and the Now New,” Todd London describes Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ 2014 play *An Octoroon* as "sheer melodrama" (London 292). London’s use of ‘sheer’ is meant to evoke melodrama stripped down to its essential elements, “characterized by polarized words, gestures, and moral absolutes, the world of the is subsumed by "an underlying manichaeism . . . putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface" (Brooks 4). But even though melodrama is viewed as a rigid battle between good and evil, London’s use of the word ‘sheer’ evokes many other things. Sheer connotes a plot that is transparent and thin, but it is also a denotation of excess and thrill. Despite its transparency and rigidity, it is also an elastic term. It can be used to describe something that changes course quickly. I am thinking of the hairpin turns contained in melodramas, those shocking reversals of course that make the viewer question the basic elements of the plot. While London intended for sheer melodrama to emphasize the vacuousness and simplicity of *An Octoroon’s* plot, in fact, the word – and the world of melodrama - is quite capacious.

Melodrama is also a genre that reckons with antiblackness. Linda Williams defines it "the primary way in which mainstream American culture has dealt with the moral dilemma of having first enslaved and then withheld equal rights to generations of African Americans" (Williams 44). Susan Gillman codified the term “American Race Melodrama,” which describes the situation of the Black family and the trauma

surrounding interracial contact. “The national,” Gillman continues, “and, indeed, global scope of racial conflict at the turn of the century is thus contained in the tragic race melodrama, which defines race as a problem primarily limited to the individual” (Gillman 242). But melodrama’s reckoning with antiblackness extends beyond Williams’ conception of mainstream – meaning white – culture. The Black feminist and/or queer authors writing melodramas in the 20th and 21st centuries are writing back to ‘mainstream culture,’ stretching assumptions commonly associated with melodrama, enacting self-authorship, and grabbing the moral dilemma by the horns. And though Gillman locates the American race melodrama as reducing antiblackness to an individual problem, these writers reckon directly with the broader structural issues that lead to individual collapse.

Self-authorship is an elastic gesture, and Black women use melodrama to reflect upon the never-ending search for freedom in the afterlife of slavery. In *Father Comes Home From The Wars (Parts 1, 2, &3)* (2015), playwright Suzan-Lori Parks demonstrates how enslavement has conscribed Black lives, forcing individuals to demean themselves and compromise their communities for the mere taste of freedom. Harvey Young describes Parks’ work as "theatrical reenactment to access experience of select historical figures" and a way of "activating black memory" (Young 183). This activation gives "voice to embodied experiences” (183). These negotiations over freedom are a form of elastic melodrama. Parks mobilizes sentiment to reveal the agonizing choices faced by enslaved people. Freedom stretches ahead along the horizon, but the fear of reprisal by racist violence caused Black people to retreat within ourselves. Gestures to mitigate the searing effects of antiblack violence are

part of what Soyica Colbert calls "self-repair" (Colbert 200). Self-repair is meant to address "the immediate social and physical deaths that correspond to the failures and losses" of antiblackness (200). But in seeking to protect oneself from antiblack violence by rejecting fugitivity, one can see freedom recede further and further into the shadows.

Thus, elastic melodrama is a genre that stretches the moral arc of traditional 19th century American melodrama to articulate a radical Black and queer feminist politics while snapping back to assume the shape of traditional melodrama as form and genre. And though London's use of "sheer" is intended to satirize the shallowness of melodrama, it is the excesses of sheerness that reveal the horror and the stakes of abjection – of being cast off from society. Sheerness is multimodal and is typified by African-American playwrights' ability to bend and stretch genre. Adrienne Kennedy flirts with the cinematic, and Suzan-Lori Parks is primarily known as a playwright, but also wrote the screenplay for the 1996 comedy *Girl 6.* Parks has also adapted novels for the screen, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Native Son.* Tyler Perry writes melodramas in multiple dramatic genres (theater, film, and television). And Donja Love, Jeremy O. Harris, and Michael R. Jackson have queered melodrama in a multitude of ways. Love leans into sentiment with works like *Sugar in Our Wounds,* Harris embraces the abject in *Slave Play,* and Jackson combines both – along with the deeply self-referential Usher (who represents both Jackson's own time as a Broadway usher and the R&B star Usher Raymond), which revels the elasticity of self-authorship and autobiographical narrative. Through these explorations of sheerness, abjection is

revealed. And melodrama provides a vehicle to move through the violence of being a Black person cast off by society.

This project intervenes in several fields, particularly Black Studies, Theater and Performance Studies, and African-American literature. *Elastic Melodramas* is consumed by the big theoretical questions that have emerged from the Black Radical Tradition, and is influenced by the Black feminist scholarship of Christina Sharpe, Saidya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye, and Black theorists of the abject like Frantz Fanon and Darieck Scott. My dissertation engages Theater and Performance Studies through an engagement with the work of historians of melodrama like Peter Brooks and Linda Williams. While Williams, particularly, moves her melodramatic lens to film by the 1950s, I show that the stage melodrama is still a vital form in the 21st century. And as my objects of study are African-American plays, I also engage with previous work by Harvey Young, Soyica Colbert, and Koritha Mitchell. And finally, my project is rooted in African-American literature, employing the close reading methodologies that are employed in literary criticism. I close read plays as one would read a novel or a poem, with attention to questions of staging and production.

Speaking of close reading: *Father Comes Home From The Wars* is a Black riff on Homer's *Odyssey.* It traces the journey of Hero, an enslaved man in the antebellum South. Hero leaves the plantation on which he resides to serve as a Confederate body man for the master of the plantation, the Colonel. After his 'service,' the Colonel will grant Hero his freedom. Transformed by his experience in battle, Hero renames himself Ulysses, a reference to both the Civil War General (and subsequent President)

Ulysses S. Grant and Homer's text. Hero returns to his relationship with Penny, an enslaved woman who is being courted by Homer. Homer is an enslaved man with much more radical politics that Hero who has previously attempted to escape the plantation. Hero amputated Homer's foot on the Colonel's orders, which has caused an irreparable breach between the men. Like the 'mamas' in her essay, Penny uses her place of marginalization – she has been cast out of a monogamous, heterosexual union with Ulysses - do to create a new female social subject by seizing her liberation at the end of the play.

In her seminal 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers argues that Black women can use their position on the margins of society as a site of power. Because of black women's 'vestibular' position in society – they are not confined to the strict gender roles which constrain white women – they are able to create a new, liberated female social subject. Penny's awakening – her first step towards reclaiming her subjectivity - begins when Ulysses shows her a woman's photograph. He tells her that "her name's Alberta. The Missus will bring her over here in a couple of days" (Spillers 148). Ulysses jocular discussion of 'The Missus,' makes it seem as though the plantation mistress is his own wife. Now that the Colonel is deceased, Ulysses assumes his metaphorical place as the new white man in charge on the plantation. The structure of his second sentence also emphasizes Alberta's position as chattel, as othered black female flesh. She is being brought to the slave quarters, not coming of her own volition like a free woman. Though Parks never specifies how Alberta and Ulysses met, it would not be surprising if their union involved coercive tactics from Ulysses.

When Penny expresses shock at this revelation, Ulysses attempts to explain his behavior away with the following statement:

> ULYSSES. You and me, Penny, we don't have no kids. Can't right? You're still just as pretty still just as strong, but I was thinking it would be good to have children. I was thinking – I know you'll understand. You're good and true like that. Alberta, she'll help you around here. When planting time comes she'll do her part and work right along beside you. And with Homer heading out, we'll need an extra hand. She'll be a help to both of us. (149)

With this monologue, Ulysses has reduced Penny to the labor that she does – planting – and discards her for the labor that she cannot do – giving birth. When Penny asks where Alberta will sleep, she is quickly silenced by Ulysses (149). Penny is no longer a complex woman with her own desires and valid concerns, but a piece of property who is supposed to serve her new master quietly and faithfully.

Yet, despite this humiliation, Penny does not resolve to leave right away. Homer offers to leave "now," but Penny is not yet ready to choose fugitivity. She explains herself:

> PENNY. Not me. No. And crying isn't gonna help. Why I thought I deserved something, I'll never know. I'll go inside and make the house ready. For you and your new bride. You can count on me, Old-Hero, to do at least that.

Penny's initial decision to stay seems cowardly and a subversion of her desire for freedom. By staying to prepare a home for Hero and Alberta, Penny seemingly

contorts herself into the ideal woman in order to protect her position in Hero's hierarchy of partners. But her behavior is more complicated than this. Harvey Young would refer to Penny's initial decision to remain as "standing still," which complicates notions of diaspora as "pure movement" (Young 27-28). Penny is a Black subject who returns the Hero's gaze by performing an idealized image of herself. She resists the idea of having her own "black body exhibited for others" by become a "black body exhibiting [herself]" (Young). In this moment, Penny chooses to cope with her trauma by retreating into herself and returning to the normal rhythm of her life, a sad recognition of a life in which black women are the 'mules of the world,' to quote Zora Neale Hurston. Calling Ulysses 'Old-Hero' is an attempt, though futile, to evoke a memory of a time when he valued her and felt more connected to his community.

After Penny (temporarily) decides to stay on the plantation and prepare for Alberta's arrival, her exit is followed by the ruminations of the chorus of Runaway Slaves. Second asks, "But where is Freedom, really?" Later, First responds, saying "Will I say, at the end of the day, "God, I wish I'd stayed home?" (151). Freedom does not happen as soon as the Emancipation Proclamation is issued – it is a constant process of questioning, negotiating, and searching for one's place in society. The description of the plantation as 'home' is jarring, but there is a kernel of truth to it. Hero, Homer, the late Old Man, Penny, and even Odyssey Dog have all built lives there. Leaving does not only come with the fear of being punished by patrollers, it comes with the fear of not being able to comfortably rebuild one's life after freedom.

Yet, speaking of a moment 'after freedom' is premature. Freedom is a liminal state that must be negotiated from within a position of conscription. When Homer asks

Ulysses if the Colonel ever freed him, Ulysses simply replies, "No, he didn't" (155). Their exchange continues:

> ULYSSES. He didn't give me my freedom. *(Rest)* Not even with his dying breath. In spite of all his promises. And what beautiful promises they were. With every day they grew fuller and riper…

Hero continues to compare the broken promise of his freedom to an unattainable feast. And despite his grand posturing as a distinguished white soldier with many resources, the Colonel reminds him that he is an enslaved black man at the bottom of the mountain. The Colonel was his master, and Hero had no wishes that his master was obligated to fulfill.

> HOMER. I'd always, just by being myself, I'd always be somehow reminding him / Of his Faults against me. And so, to make it all right, to make it bearable, so I could find a way to breathe / I went and I cut out my soul. I cut my soul out of myself. And I gave it up to him. Or I lost it. You're lucky. You're going to a better place.

When Homer reiterates the importance of freedom, Ulysses asks him "How do you know?" twice. Homer reiterates that he knows "in [his] heart" that freedom is better than enslavement, and a broken Ulysses attempts to stab him (156). While it is generous of Ulysses to think that the Colonel was menaced by his presence – I imagine that the Colonel saw Ulysses merely as property and felt no obligation to him. But this realization is too heavy for Ulysses to bear, so he dissociates as a strategy for coping with enslavement and wants to kill Homer – to make Homer feel his emptiness – for continuing to believe in a liberated future.

It takes courage and imagination to chart a path to a world where black people can seek freedom from conscription, where they can seek liberation (Danquah 3). As Carole Boyce Davies argues, one can "[attempt] a "re-mapping of boundaries" and a renegotiating of connections" (67). In *Father Comes Home From The Wars (Parts 1, 2, &3),* it is the characters on the margins of the story – Homer, Penny, and the Runaway Slaves – not our Hero - who have the courage to remap the boundaries of their world. And it is often the most marginalized people who push to imagine a new form of black subjectivity beyond abjection. Though Parks reveals that the paper that Ulysses dangled over the slaves' heads was in fact the Emancipation Proclamation, Odyssey Dog reminds him that "The Runaways, they still got to run" (159). A piece of paper is just that. One must take literal steps to enact freedom.

"Elastic Melodramas: Abjection and Self-Authorship in African-American Theater," explores the spaces where American melodrama stretches genre. "Elastic Melodramas" is an interdisciplinary project that draws upon trauma, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, Black feminist embodiment and spectacular displays. The concept of the abject– a state of being "cast off" from society – was initially developed as a dilemma of self-representation by the French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva. Abjection later emerged as a critical concept in the Black Studies canon. It was radically rethought by Frantz Fanon, who argued that Algerians suppressed by French colonial rule were abject figures, and later through the critical discussions of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved.* More recently, it has been championed by theorists like Darieck Scott to describe Black queer subjects who enact agency from a place of marginalization. Scott invokes Sharon Holland by arguing that first sexual revolution

occurred under the auspices of slavery. He encourages his audience to reshape how they think of power as something that is not egocentric, but "empowered" (Scott 270). This ‘empowerment’ is a way of attempting “to meet the challenge of the defeat already imposed on us (the defeat that makes us) by the problem of history" (270). Similarly, my project draws upon Christina Sharpe’s concept of ‘wake work’ - how do we live the specter of violence and natal alienation that Orlando Patterson referred to as Black death?

I use the abject – abjection from the human, which challenges the liberal rights-based discourses which have shaped American life - as a means of analyzing dramatic literature, specifically African-American melodrama. My work builds upon previous uses of the abject in critical theory and performance studies, which posits the category as a private reaction to a horrible sight. In melodrama, which depends on an exchange of affect between the performers and the audience, the abject becomes public. On stage, we see who is cast off, and can thus mobilize empathy and ultimately, transformation. In my account, the idea of the abject has an elasticity that refers to a character’s ability to see freedom beyond the embodiment of white power, harnessing the courage to reshape the contours of an antiblack world. It is the 'othered' bodies on stage - female, disabled, displaced, sick, and poor - who push to imagine a new form of black subjectivity, an Afro- futuristic space beyond abjection.

Most American scholarship on melodrama focuses on novels, including adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and more recently television. But my lens is focused on 20th and 21st century dramatic literature, as live performance allows for an immediate and embodied exchange of affect between actor and audience that is not as

urgent in other genres. My dissertation chapters chart a genealogy of Black melodrama from Angelina Weld Grimké through Adrienne Kennedy to Suzan-Lori Parks and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. I ultimately end with a coda on Black melodrama on primetime television, emphasizing that melodrama is a multimodal category, existing on screen and stage. I show that Black feminist dramatists employ melodramatic structures to transform abjection into a site of liberation and creative self-authorship. These authors reshape the trajectory of American literature and history through a transformation of the melodramatic. The past is rewritten, thus scripting different futures.

Chapter One, "Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* and the Elasticity of American Race Melodrama," expands upon Susan Gillman's work on 19th century interracial American melodrama, using one Black family as a as unit of study: the Lovings in Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1920). I demonstrate how Rachel formally combines two 19th century forms; first, the anti-lynching drama, and subsequently, the melodrama. My discussion of anti-lynching melodramas builds upon Koritha Mitchell's work. Mitchell understands lynching as a form of "antiblack political terrorism," and argues that anti-lynching dramatists combated this terrorism by placing emphasis on the dignity of the black body and refusing to replicate the violence of lynching (Mitchell 97). Though Mitchell argues that lynching itself is a kind of theater (with 'typical' characters like the Black rapist), depicting that is not the primary concern of anti-lynching dramatists. In *Living With Lynching,* Mitchell is less concerned with the spectacle of lynching, but the work of the lynching play: How did Black people survive amidst the violence? By leaning into family life. Lynching

dramas depicted family life when white supremacy said there was none. As a form of elastic melodrama the anti-lynching play was an expansive form that resisted and reconfigured the violence that Black people experience, from traumatic episodes to daily aggressions.

American race melodrama clashes against the terrorizing spectacle and embodied terror of the anti-lynching play, and the combination of these two categories results in an abject frisson. Reading Rachel's refusal to marry and bring Black children into an anti-Black world through Lee Edelman and José Muñoz's scholarship on queer reproductive futurity, I explore the ways in which the protagonist's grief over the loss of her family is expressed - through sound, through gesture, and through embodied vocality. Rachel does not have any mode of legal redress to account for the lynching of her father and brother, so she expresses her sadness through voice and movement. By grounding the melodramatic form in 19th century tropes, we can better understand the crisis of color the continued in the 20th century. This crisis reverberates in performance in the 21st. Rachel provides one roadmap for understanding and mobilizing melodrama's elasticity, and its cathartic powers to avoid replicating the antiblack violences of the past.

Chapter Two is titled "Traumatic Repetition in the Contemporary Work of Adrienne Kennedy." In sharp distinction to Grimké's *Rachel*, the characters of Adrienne Kennedy are haunted by the seemingly inescapable traumatic repetition of the abject. I use the scholarship of trauma theorist Christina Sharpe, Harvey Young, Soyica Colbert, and Cathy Caruth to trace the perverse pleasures of repeating trauma. Chapter 2 closely examines an unpublished essay by Kennedy

titled “On Seeing Leave Her To Heaven.” This essay is a reflection on Kennedy’s childhood love of the 1945 film noir Leave Her To Heaven. I also spend this chapter engaging the February 2018 production of Kennedy’s newest work, *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box* (at Theatre for a New Audience). By focusing on her own reactions to her childhood experiences, Kennedy performs an act of self-authorship that redirects Black creative energy from trauma to truth.

Chapter Three is titled “Big Hand Coming Down on Me”: Abjection and Elasticity in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *In The Blood.*” Whereas Kennedy’s focus is on Black girlhood, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks directs our attention to mothers, revealing melodrama’s affective potential at any age. Chapter Three is a close reading of Parks’ play *In The Blood*, which is an adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 Gothic melodrama novel *The Scarlet Letter*. In his chapter, I engage in an elastic reading, asking the reader to stretch beyond defeat and imagine a place where Black single mothers are not subject to structural violence. Hester, the protagonist of *In The Blood* and a single mother of five, creates soup out of thin air to feed her children. Through this act of imagination, Hester reclaims melodrama as a radical, transgressive form and enacts a feminist praxis of survival out of deprivation. What would it be like if Black women and Black single mothers did not have to constantly dodge the weight of structural barriers that press upon them? In Parks’ play, these barriers are symbolized by crushing hands and feet. What can Hester tell us about ways to tap into the potential of marginalized Black women? The audience sees Hester struggle internally and externally with the weight of being cast off from society, and

ultimately, the structural violence that she experiences causes her to murder her eldest son in a fit of rage. But before she commits this act, she demonstrates valiant resistance. This resistance reveals to the audience a blueprint for future iterations of Black womanhood in which vulnerable women do not have to stretch themselves to the breaking point to avoid suffering.

Chapter Four is titled "Self-Authorship In The '19TH Century' Melodramas Of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins." Returning to this dissertation's point of origin, 19th century melodrama, Chapter 4 explores Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' play *An Octoroon* (an adaptation of Dion Boucicault's 1859 drama *The Octoroon*). Like Parks, Jacobs-Jenkins is a contemporary Black author engaging the past to discuss the present. Whereas the former engages with the tragic dimension of melodrama's fallen woman trope, Jacob-Jenkins employs humor as a destabilizing force, rendering the abject utterly silly and shifting what abjection looks like on stage. Skin – that marker of race - is the site at which humor is located. Jacobs-Jenkins fabricates a historical past that mocks the people who enslaved Africans and renders enslaved people in a refreshing, contemporary light.

My dissertation ends with a coda, "Four Women," that discusses the lingering energy of melodramatic tropes in mass media, embodied most potently in nighttime soaps like *Scandal*, *How To Get Away With Murder*, *Empire*, and *Power*, all of which feature – not at all coincidentally – Black female protagonists. These protagonists possess great glamour and professional power but have complicated personal lives that place them at odds with society's vision of Black female respectability. Scandal's

Olivia Pope is having a sexual relationship with the married President of the United States. Murder's Annaliese Keating struggles with alcoholism. And Cookie Lyon, the matriarch of Empire, is literally cast off from society. She returns from a 17-year prison stint in the show's pilot. Their struggles subvert the trope of the strong Black woman and bring attention to the structural issues that conscript Black women's lives. In addition to having Black women at their center, these shows are characterized by sharp plot twists and vigorous emotionalism, in essence, melodrama. The Black woman protagonists of these three shows are all in positions of great power and influence but are also subject to acts of extreme violence (thus reinforcing their abjection, which is not a fixed state). the prevalence of television melodramas with Black female leads show how the 19th century continues to echo into the 21st century across media, thus signifying the melodrama's ability to stretch temporally.

Chapter One: Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* and the Elasticity of American Race Melodrama

Introduction: Defining 'American Race Melodrama'

The topic of the family is central to Susan Gillman's essay "The Mulatto, Tragic or Triumphant? The Nineteenth-Century American Race Melodrama," from *The Culture of Sentiment,* in which she introduces the term 'American race melodrama.' According to Gillman, the latter term emerges from "the situation of the black family—almost always of an interracial genealogy—and specifically on the issue of "race mixture," as a means of negotiating the social tensions surrounding the formation of racial, national, and sexual identity in the post-Reconstruction years" (Gillman 222). Thus, melodrama is revealed as the Black family - which contains gradients of whiteness - attempts to negotiate its place in an antiblack world. Though her objects of inquiry are mid-late 19th and early 20th century work, Gillman emphasizes that the melodramatic negotiations of Black families are ongoing: "Both the polarization and the revelation of hidden conflict are essential to the fundamentally unresolved conclusion of the race melodrama, a genre that grapples with still-unresolved racial issues" (Gillman 223).

I will further extend Gillman's formulation. I argue that the dramas of color and class reflected in Gillman's essay continue to be performed in drama of the 20th and 21st centuries. Furthermore, American race melodrama does not simply have to be about the frisson between Black and white – it can reflect the tensions within one Black family unit. In this paper, I will use one Black family as a as unit of study: the Lovings in Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1920), I will demonstrate how *Rachel*

formally combines two 19th century forms: the anti-lynching drama, and the melodrama. Rachel's refusal to marry and bring Black children into an anti-Black world can be read through the scholarship of Edelman and Muñoz on queer reproductive futurity. And the ways in which her grief over the loss of her family is expressed - through sound, through gesture, through embodied vocality, can be further examined through the work of Moten and Musser. By grounding the melodramatic form in 19th century tropes, we can better understand the crisis of color the continued in the 20th century and reverberates in performance in the 21st. Through this analysis, we can better understand and mobilize melodrama's cathartic powers to avoid replicating the antiblack violences of the past.

Rachel and the Characteristics of Anti-Lynching Melodrama

Rachel was first produced in 1916 in Washington, D.C., and the critic Tamsen Wolff characterizes it as "one of the first successful straight plays written by and for African-Americans" (Wolff 175).[1] The play was ultimately published in 1920. It is a melodrama which "begins…and wants to end, in a "space of innocence" (Brooks qtd in Williams 28). The entirety of *Rachel* takes place in the Lovings' modest apartment, the 'innocent space' and "domestic sphere" which serves as both place of confinement and a place of refuge from the white supremacist world throughout the play (Roberts 92). It also contains several conventions of the anti-lynching play, including the use of fear - "a convention in anti-lynching drama" - as an engine of the plot (Wolff 175). In *Rachel,* surprise exists as a site of dread, and the "big secret" of the lynching of

[1] Wolff also mentions that *Rachel* was staged by the NAACP's Drama Committee "before being produced in non-commercial venues for mostly Black audiences in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston" (238).

Rachel's father and older brother is revealed in the first act, so the audience is primed to "dread any further revelation or surprise" (175). Containing elements of both anti-lynching plays and melodramas, I characterize *Rachel* as an 'anti-lynching melodrama.' Grimké begins the play with extensive stage directions describing the apartment's shabby chic interior, emphasizing the Lovings' poverty, but also situating them as a proud and noble family. Most of Act I details an average day in the life of the family, further emphasizing the play's realistic underpinnings. Melodrama also "focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue. Recognition of virtue orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to melodrama's function" (Williams 29). Grimké establishes the virtuousness of the Loving family not only by establishing them as a hardworking, lower-middle class family, but also through the story of Mr. Loving's lynching.

Though *Rachel* is an anti-lynching melodrama, lynching is not represented onstage by showing the murders of Rachel's father, Mr. Loving, and her brother, George. Instead, the play "[stages] the Black maternal body" by allowing the story of the lynching to be recounted by Mrs. Loving at the end of Act I (Wolff 171). This story serves as the play's inciting incident and sparks Rachel's personal unraveling. Grimké's attempts to enmesh the Lovings in a tapestry of respectability and responsibility begins with a coalition with white womanhood that is forged offstage. She connects "the difficulties of African-American motherhood" to "the national problem of lynching," mobilizing motherhood and affect to create an interracial coalition (Roberts 92). Grimké saw motherhood as a common bond that would united Black and white women "underneath their skins" (92). If white women could see the

toll that "their prejudice" and the prejudice of their male relatives has on the "souls of the colored mothers," it could be used as a tool to evoke sympathy, and ultimately, action from white women (92). Mrs. Loving's recounting of the story is compelling due to its sheer horror, but also because of her spotless integrity and position as a kind of Virgin Mary, whose virtue makes her an appealing and unblemished protagonist indented to arouse the sympathy of skeptical white women. Yet, she is not "frozen in a perpetual Mother-Child idyll," but as a Black woman, she is "forced to exist in time, watching her child suffer and even die like the Biblical Mary" (Roberts 110). Though I agree with Roberts' assertion that Grimké's labor is intended to "meld national citizenship onto familial ties," I cannot think of any moment in world history where appealing to the sentimental nature of white women was enough to get them to care about the welfare of Black children. But Grimké's faith in white womanhood to do the right thing could be shaped by her knowledge of her abolitionist white great aunts, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké.

At the end of Act I, Mrs. Loving tells her two surviving children the story of how their father – a newspaper editor – was lynched himself when he attempted to report on the lynching of an innocent Black man. Her other son was also lynched when trying to defend his father. In another parental allegory, Roberts connects Mr. Loving to Angelina Weld Grimké's own father, Archibald. The elder Grimké served as American Consul to the Dominican Republic from 1894-1898, and often felt as though his more radical opinions were silenced by the moderating demands of his position as a representative of the United States (Roberts 97). And when Mr. Loving refuses to moderate his opinions, "[the] lynching moves beyond the realm of threat

and becomes a physical method of silencing him, with his death functioning to remove him from a position in which he can speak in defense of the race" (97). In *Rachel,* Grimké uses the melodramatic form to speak on behalf of her father-surrogate Mr. Loving, who refused to be silenced at the expense of his own life.

The Biblical metaphors also continue when Mrs. Loving discusses the death of George, her son. Roberts compares George's death to Christ's crucifixion, the moment when George was "hanged on a tree" calling upon images of Christ on the cross (5:30 qtd in Roberts). The Biblical allegory of Mary and Jesus is reflected in Mrs. Loving and George, but with deadly real-life consequences (Roberts 110). This challenges the universalizing politics that Archibald was expected to enforce as an emissary of American empire – in which the Madonna-child connections move "away from the ideal and toward an intense reminder of rampant Black tragedy" (Roberts 110). Ultimately, Mrs. Loving remarks: "Always remember this: There never lived anywhere -- or at any time -- any two whiter or more beautiful souls. God gave me one for a husband and one for a son and I am proud" (Grimké 32). Mrs. Loving's equation of her late husband and son with 'whiteness' reinforces a simplistic and anti-Black dichotomy where proximity to whiteness is good and Blackness is bad. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the salvation of Black people will only occur in Heaven, and the positioning of the elder Loving men as martyrs seems to emphasize that fact that Black people have no earthly recourse for the violence that they experience.

However, the response that Thomas, Rachel's brother, has to this revelation complicates the situation. Barely concealing his rage, Thomas begins: "When I think -- when I think -- of those devils with white skins -- living somewhere today -- living

and happy -- I -- see -- red! I -- I -- goodbye!" (Grimké 33). In Thomas' imagination, whiteness is not something aspirational, but flesh that conceals evil beneath. White people may be able to exist comfortably for the time being, but Thomas' rage – symbolic of the rage of young people whose eyes are opening to injustices – promises that white comfort is temporary. His sister, Rachel, takes Thomas' threat further, refusing to engage with evil entirely:

Then, everywhere, everywhere, throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts -- pain. Oh, I know this is true -- for this is the way I should feel, if I were little Jimmy's mother. How horrible! Why -- it would be more merciful -- to strangle the little things at birth. And so this nation -- this white Christian nation -- has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful -- the most holy thing in life -- motherhood! Why -- it -- makes -- you doubt -- God! (Grimké 35)

Though Rachel is subsequently chastised by her mother for blaspheming God, she has articulated the central dilemma of the play. What must Black women do when your children's futures are being constantly smothered by the blanket of white supremacy? The fear that this condition provokes keeps mothers awake at night and ruins their ability to take pleasure in watching their children grow up. Rachel's outburst is evocative of Margaret Garner,[2] whose spirit is repeatedly invoked throughout the play. Grimké intends to show how white supremacy – the white

[2] Margaret Garner was an escaped enslaved woman who killed her young daughter in 1856 instead of potentially having her return to a life of bondage.

supremacy of a supposedly Christian people - has destroyed Black motherhood to the extent that mothers would rather kill their children than allow them to live in an antiblack world.

Borrowing again from Brooks, Williams argues that "melodrama borrows from realism but realism serves the melodrama of pathos and action" (Williams 38). This tenet is most strongly evoked during the interaction between Rachel, Mrs. Lane, and Ethel. Grimké evokes realism when Mrs. Lane tells Rachel about Ethel's experiences as a victim of racist bullying in a predominately white school. Sadly, this is an experience that many Black children will have. But the embodied horror of Ethel's experience – her constant trembling and unwillingness to eat or interact with Rachel – are meant to stimulate melodramatic pathos in the reader, alerting Grimké's audience to the physical carnage that white supremacy wreaks on the most innocent Black children and spurring the action that Rachel will take at the end of the play. Recounting her daughter's degradation, Mrs. Lane begins: "Ethel naturally moved slowly. The teacher called her sulky and told her to lose a part of her recess." Later, "the teacher then proceeded to give a lesson about kindness to animals. Funny, isn't it, *kindness* to *animals*?" (Grimké 70) Mrs. Lane's comment prefigures two contemporary discourses: Ethel's timidity is misinterpreted as 'sulkiness,' signifying the ways in which anxiety and/or depression in Black girls are misinterpreted by white people as rudeness.[3] Mrs. Lane's sarcastic question can also be connected to white Americans' excessive concern about animal welfare. While serious, outrage about

[3] Morris, Monique W. *Pushout: the Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools.* New York: The New Press, 2016. Print.

animal abuses often exceeds anger regarding the extrajudicial killings of Black people by police, signifying that animal life is still more important than Black life in the white imaginary.

Furthermore, Mrs. Lane ends Ethel's melodramatic story with the idea that life is becoming harder for Black people. *Rachel* takes place during a historical moment that Charles Chesnutt identifies as "post-bellum, pre-Harlem," during which the gains that were made on behalf of African-Americans under Reconstruction were steadily undermined.[4] Considering the circumstances, Mrs. Lane argues that it would be "kinder" to kill any other Black child than bring her into a racist world, continuing the echoes of Margaret Garner's decision in Grimké's text. Mrs. Lane also emphasizes that Rachel should not only fear for the safety of black children who are already in her life but should never marry or start her own family (Grimké 70-71). Though shaken by Mrs. Lane's disclosures, Rachel still maintains a sliver of optimism about the future of black life in the United States until her beloved charge discloses that the neighborhood boys called him a nigger. This revelation horrifies Rachel and sends her into the fugue state of horror that she will embody for the duration of the play.

The penultimate characteristic of melodrama is its "infamously simplistic moral stereotyping" (Williams 39). Good characters are unambiguously good. Likewise, bad characters are transparently evil. Linda Williams also emphasizes that melodrama is not a mode of address limited to 19th century stage plays, or soap operas, but an "evolving mode of storytelling crucial to the establishment of moral good" by

[4] McCaskill, B. & Gebhard, C. *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

attuning an audience to the suffering of the virtuous (Williams 12). In melodrama, moral stereotyping becomes a way of resisting the 'pornotrope,' a concept coined by Hortense Spillers in her seminal 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Pornotroping "embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning" (Spillers 67). According to Amber Musser, the pornotrope "violently [reduces] people to commodities[5]…undergirded by violence and the assumption of possession" (Location 232). Though the concept of the pornotrope has been used to articulate the sexual assault and exploitation of Black women, it can also be used to describe a general sense of disempowerment. By affirming the fundamental goodness of the Lovings – Grimké is attempting to elevate them beyond the realm of the pornotrope and cast them as the moral center of the play. In *Rachel,* the suffering of the Lovings is more acutely felt because they are "good" Black people. Tamsen Wolff argues that Grimké "relied on, and racially inverted, the prevailing eugenic idea of better and fitter individuals" (Wolff 173). And directly quoting Grimké herself, the author "drew my characters, then, deliberately from the best type of colored people" (173). The assumption, of course, is that the only the most morally upright and desirable African-Americans are able to evoke the sympathy from white women needed to end lynching in the United States. Grimké draws sharp lines between morally upstanding middle class African-Americans (particularly, the Lovings) and immoral whites. While, again, none of these white characters appear onstage, Grimké

[5] The use of the word 'commodities' is influenced by Fred Moten, via Karl Marx.

makes the audience acutely aware of the ways in which they conscribe the Lovings' opportunities for upward mobility:

THOMAS. (*Slowly; as though thinking aloud*): I hear people talk about God's justice – and I wonder. There, are you, Ma. There isn't a sacrifice -- that you haven't made. You're still working your fingers to the bone -- sewing -- just so all of us may keep on living. Rachel is a graduate in Domestic Science; she was high in her class; most of the girls below her in rank have positions in the schools. I'm an electrical engineer -- and I've tried steadily for several months -- to practice my profession. It seems our educations aren't of much use to us: we aren't allowed to make good -- because our skins are dark (Grimké 52).

Like Rachel, Thomas also questions how a compassionate God can forsake his most obedient servants. The constant antiblackness to which he is subject as an intelligent Black man unable to live his life to the fullest has caused a crisis of faith. He is sharply chastised by Mrs. Loving – who describes the loss of God as "black," but also acknowledges that each person "has to work out his own salvation" (Grimké 53). Mrs. Loving's evocation of 'salvation' refers to the paths that her children must make for themselves in life, but also has religious connotations, particularly of being 'saved' by one's faith in God. Despite their impeccable educational credentials, the Lovings' 'darkness' – a mark, a curse - prevents them from having the same professional success as their white peers. If they were given the same opportunities as white people, they would seize upon the middle-class American dream that their educations promised them. By foregrounding their credentials, Grimké is engaging in a kind of respectability politics which emphasizes that the Lovings' accomplishments

make them worthy of safety and respect. They are not the downtrodden and inferior 'niggers' of the white imaginary, embodied by the unseen white boys who hurl that epithet at Jimmy.

Williams also characterizes melodrama as "a broad aesthetic mode…[with] interpenetrating narrative cycles" (Williams 12). Thomas is the image of righteous Black rage – the constant grind of antiblackness resulting in his crisis of faith. But John Strong – Rachel's suitor – is a funhouse mirror version of Thomas who has resignedly accepted his lot in life. Strong represents an alternate narrative possibility for Black men in which they quietly accept subservience instead of raging against their circumstances. Grimké contrasts Thomas' outrage and straight-backed dignity against the quiet resignation of John Strong, Rachel's suitor, who works as a waiter. Despite having more ambitious aspirations for his life, John concedes that he is "an artist, now, in my proper sphere" (Grimké 57). The patrons that he serves tip him well, "extremely well," he asserts, and "the larger the tip, the more pleased they are with me. Because of me, in their own eyes, they're philanthropists. Amusing, isn't it?" (57) With this sarcastic quip, Grimké emphasizes that service work is the only type of employment that will allow John – or any other Black person - to support himself. As Thomas has already asserted, white-collar work is off limits to Black people. The idea that service work is an inherently inferior form of labor is reflective of Grimké's classism, though people should be able to find work in the field for which they are trained. However, her quip about 'philanthropists' is prescient, signifying the ways in which philanthropy is rooted in noblesse oblige. Upper-middle class and wealthy people can give a waiter a large tip and feel as though they are helping a low-income person

without doing anything to remedy structural inequality. And despite his outrage, Thomas' desire to make a living exceeds his reluctance to do service work, and he agrees to go work with John. Unlike Rachel, Thomas is willing to adjust to the subservient life that is expected of him as a black man.

"Too Late/In The Nick of Time:" Temporality and Queer Reproductive Futurity

Finally, Williams argues that "melodrama's recognition of virtue involves a dialectic of pathos and action – a give and take of "too late" and "in the nick of time" (Williams 30). This quality is embodied fully during the final confrontation between Rachel and John. Strong proposes to Rachel seemingly in the nick of time, offering her a home and family where she can recover her joy and delight in Black children. However, it is too late, because Rachel has already decided to reject the domestic, fearing that the life and family she might build for herself would be snuffed out by white supremacy. Roberts characterizes Rachel's refusal to have kids as the 'scandal' of the play. He situates this refusal as a greater scandal than the dual lynchings that serve as the inciting incident of the play. Rejecting John's marriage proposal turns Rachel into the "Madonna figure to reject the Annunciation scene and thereby stymieing the birth of a Child-Lord. This is a scandal aimed at what Angelina called "one of the most conservative elements of society," the "white women of this country," whom she hoped to mobilize as a means of counting a coup in the domestic battle against race prejudice" (Roberts 112).

Rachel's refusal to marry and have children continues a lineage in the Loving family – and of Black families across the Diaspora – of parenthood and family interrupted. The threat of racist violence is trans-generation and sabotages future

Black parenthood. Lynching and other forms of racist violence perpetuate the sacrifice of the Black family, which is illustrated in the Biblical metaphors that Roberts creates throughout his text. Grimké's invocation of a Black family marked by the tragedy of lynching is intended to appeal to stoke pathos in white women who will shudder at the horror of potentially losing their own children. Grimké is lodging an emotional appeal to conservative white women who will see their worst fear – the collapse of the family – reflected in the dual tragedies that Mrs. Loving and Rachel experience. But, will white women connect the tragedy of the Loving family to the potential tragedies that might befall their own families? Do white women care about the absent Black children that have been lost to lynching and its aftermath?

Grimké strains the limits of affect here[6], especially because white women's families will never experience the terror of lynching. Furthermore, there were white women present in those lynchings, a part of the public spectacle witnessing the desecration of the Black body. In *Sensational Flesh,* Amber Musser coins the term "brown jouissance," a "reveling in fleshiness, its sensuous materiality that brings together pleasure and pain (Musser Location 156). Brown jouissance is also "project of recovery and survival" that emerges when one must find "permutations of selfhood that exceed the "I" as a result of "black and brown maternal absence" (Musser Location 3382). Musser is speaking of the child who is abandoned by a maternal figure, but the search 'recovery,' 'survival,' and an identity beyond oneself can also be

[6] Grimké's use of affect also recalls Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* which used the story of an enslaved mother to provoke sympathy in white women.

traced to Rachel. There is pleasure in rejecting motherhood, in absenting yourself from motherhood for the sake of a greater purpose.

In "The Future is Kid Stuff," the first chapter in Lee Edelman's anti-reproductive futurity polemic *No Future,* the author argues "that queerness names the side of those not "fighting for the children," in a world where cisgender, heterosexual people feel compelled to procreate and organize the world around the needs of the child (Edelman 3). For Edelman, queerness is located in "the place of the social order's death drive: a place, to be sure, of abjection" (Edelman 3). But can one be queer and still fight for the children? Grimké was a queer woman, who created another in the image of herself, another woman who would 'queer' expectations of her as a marriageable woman of childbearing age. In *Rachel,* the titular character rejects the compulsion to procreate, but her rejection of reproductive futurity is intended to prevent a future where a Black child will be harmed. Rachel must cast off her own personal goals and dreams of family – she must abject herself - to create a world where no more Black children can be sacrificed in order to preserve the social order. It is her love of Black children – not a desire to destroy things for destruction's sake - that contributes to the 'social order's death drive.'

Edelman regards differences in the understanding of the social order's elasticity as the difference between conservatism and liberalism. Conservatives "[imagine] the wholesale rupturing of the social fabric, whereas liberalism conservatively clings to a faith in its limitless elasticity" (Edelman 14). Edelman's analysis reduces political understanding to a simple Democratic/Republican binary, excluding a Third Way. This Third Way is not the moderate, Clintonesque policy of

the 1990s, but a radical way represented by Rachel, in which the existing social fabric – a fabric that enforces the deaths of Black children – must be ruptured and rendered anew. According to Edelman, “queers…bear the bad tidings that there can be no future at all" (Edelman 30). But by narrating the deaths of George and Mr. Loving at the very beginning of the play, Grimké reveals to her audience that the bad tidings are already here. Grimké tells us, yes, there is ‘no future’ for Black children in a society that mandates Black death. Elasticity is not unlimited and trying to exist as Black bodies in a social order that does not allow them to thrive will stretch them to the breaking point.

Furthermore, Edelman posits the ‘specter of the Child’ as a “totalizing” category disconnected from the lived experiences of children. The “image of the Child,” he continues, is a “coercive universalization…not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children [and] serves to regulate political discourse - to prescribe what will count as political discourse" (Edelman 11). Edelman is correct that Grimké’s image of the Child in *Rachel* shapes the titular character’s politics. However, this image is not divorced from the lived experiences of children. It is cultivated and reinforced as Rachel hears of the lynching of her older brother, and sees how white supremacy has demolished Ethel’s self-esteem, and threatens to erode the safe haven she has created for Jimmy in her home. By absorbing these experiences, Rachel takes the 'image' of the Child, and makes it haptic, tactile, and embodied.

Edelman argues that "the social order” preserves “a notional freedom more highly valued that the actuality of freedom…which might…put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due." (Edelman 11). Edelman’s conception of the social

order as a nanny state that protects children from consequences does not apply to Black children in Mrs. Loving's living room, or the present day. The social order exists to destroy Black children at the expense of fortifying white supremacy. Thus, the 'notional freedom' that Edelman posits is not a safety net that prevents children from experiencing real life, but a horizon[7] that suggests a future moment in which Black children are free to exist without enduring the slings and arrows of white supremacy.

But Edelman continues, asserting that if "there is *no baby* and in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organizations, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (Edelman 13). In *Rachel*, *no baby* is a gesture that might result in the destruction of the present white supremacist conditions under which Black people exist. But it does not foreclose the potential for a greater, improved future. And Rachel is not refusing to create a family because she dislikes children. Her choice emerges through her great love of Black children, and her decision not to bring them into a world that will harm and kill them is agonizing. We must understand Rachel's decision as a kind of "brown jouissance," returning to Musser's term invoked earlier, which borrows from Lacan. The use of 'jouissance' implies a type of pleasure mixed with pain. Though there is pleasure in rejecting the mandate to produce more Black children who will be killed by society, it is ultimately an act that is performed at great expense to Rachel's

[7] I am riffing on Muñoz here, whom I will engage in greater detail shortly.

personal happiness. Rachel's personal sacrifice allows room for the potential undoing of white supremacy and reorganization of social life in a way that affirms Blackness.

Many of the critiques I have made of Edelman are further elaborated upon in Jose Muñoz's monograph *Cruising Utopia*, in which the latter argues that Edelman's "antirelational approach to queer theory [is a] romance of the negative," a "mode of ontological certitude…often represented through a narration of disappearance and negativity" (Muñoz 11). For Muñoz, queerness is not about one's individual rejection of the future, but a mode of "collectivity" that is "primarily about futurity and hope" and is "always on the horizon" (Muñoz 11). Furthermore, Muñoz argues that Edelman's approach rejection of futurity[8] is shaped by his deployment of *straight time.* This category "tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life" but Muñoz conceives of "queerness as something that is not yet here" (Muñoz 22). Rachel's choice to decline marriage and family is also a rejection of the foreclosing natures of disappearance, negativity, and "straight time." Instead, her choice functions as a protest that opens a horizon of possibilities and envisions a future in which subsequent generations of Black women do not have to make the same choice.

But despite the promise and hope that the future represents, Muñoz argues that one must experience loss to access it. Accepting this loss is "to accept queerness - or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and

[8] Muñoz agrees with Edelman's rejection of the cult of the Child, hence my use of "futurity," not "reproductive futurity."

entitlement" (Muñoz 73).[9] Furthermore, "to be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path" and "to accept the way in which one is lost is to be also found and not found in a particularly queer fashion" (Muñoz 73). Of course, this "veering away" manifests in Rachel through her rejection of John Strong's marriage proposal and the family that they would subsequently produce. Rachel is plunged into despair when she must confront the magnitude of her choice, but this despair also illustrates why it is urgently necessary to chart a new path.

Muñoz also articulates the "loss of privilege" that occurs after one rejects the "heteronormative order" (73). Though it is difficult to think of a young Black woman living in the early 20th century as a person of privilege, part of Rachel's appeal to white women – as constructed by Grimké – is her pure-hearted virtue and earnestness, qualities that make her a desirable partner for marriage. She is also a part of a close-knit family that has endured despite generations of trauma. By refusing to create a family of her own, Rachel turns her back on the nest that might – and a strong emphasis on might – insulate her from future incidents of misogynoir. By relinquishing her own possessions, Rachel begins to find herself in a queer way, beyond the strictures of a husband and children.

Muñoz argues that Edelman's "antirelational" politics should be replaced with the idea of "queer utopia." The latter is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality. The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness

9 Muñoz also traces a "a salient reverberation between queerness and racialization" (73)

of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support" (Muñoz 91). Though it is unlikely that Muñoz was thinking of early 20th century anti-lynching dramas as he conceived of his idea of "queer utopia," Rachel creates a "queer utopia" in Mrs. Loving's home, in the naturalistic space inhabited by all those misfit Black bodies, a space that Grimké relates in such elaborate early-20th century detail at the beginning of the text. This space is reinforced through the everyday choices that Rachel makes to love and support her mother, brother, and the children for which she cares. These people comprise her support system. Her refusal to marry and reproduce is also a refusal to abandon caring for the family that she already has, the nucleus of people that has endured the aftermath of the lynchings of Mr. Loving and George.

Muñoz also critiques Edelman for encouraging queers to "give up hope and embrace a certain negation endemic to our abjection within the symbolic" (Muñoz 91). This negation results in "jouissance that at once defines and negates us [and shapes the] social is inoperable for the always already shattered queer subject" (91). Muñoz's analysis of Edelman's tendency to dwell in negation at the expense of futurity his correct, but he underestimates the generative possibilities provided by embracing the abject. I return to Musser's definition of "brown jouissance," which posits that an "excess of embodiment" results in a synthesis of "pleasure and pain" (Musser Location 156). The queer, Black subject exists in excess of the social order, which results in violence that is shattering and traumatic. However, this excess can also be

ecstatic[10]– reveling in one's otherness and can exist as a place from which a new world emerges.

Muñoz continues to critique Edelman's conception the Child, arguing that though the latter articulates that "future of the child as futurity is different from the future of actual children," his "monolithic figure of the child" is still white (Muñoz 95). Muñoz anticipates Edelman's rebuttal, asserting that the latter "predicts that some identitarian critics (I suppose that would be me in this instance, despite my ambivalent relation to the concept of identity) would dismiss his polemic by saying it is determined by his middle-class white gay male positionality" (95). Muñoz subsequently says that Edelman's attempts to "inoculate" himself from criticism will not work. That is true. But Edelman's positionality was essential to shaping the telos of his argument. To borrow language from Muñoz, he literally cannot see beyond his own personal horizon as a gay white man. Muñoz continues, asserting that Edelman falsely equates "futurity to normative white reproductive futurity." While "that dominant mode of futurity is indeed "winning," it gives one an even more compelling reason to "call on a utopian political imagination" that will summon a "not-yet" where queer youths of color actually get to grow up" (95-96). And this is essential: Grimké's *Rachel* is a clarion call to envision a future where Black youth will one day, grow up.

Embodied Vocality and the Freedom Drive

[10] To refer to another Muñozian concept.

Melodrama is defined by its use of sensation to communicate the unspeakable. Though Grimké uses language to express Rachel's rejection of reproductive futurity, Rachel's rejection also has an embodied component. This embodiment can be further understood by an examination of two concepts coined by Fred Moten: "freedom drive" and subsequently an "erotics of the cut." Moten characterizes the "freedom drive" as a "black performance" that emerges from "political, economic, and sexual objectification" and "indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout…graphic (re)production" (Moten 7). The freedom drive is an impulse that pushes the Black actor to create a space beyond the condition of their marginalization. Thus, the condition of abjection is absorbed in order to be transcended, and reproduced, in the case of Grimké's play, through art. For Moten, "blackness is only in that it exceeds itself; it bears the groundedness of an uncontainable outside. It's an erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation. Blurred, dying life; liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive" (26). Moten's discussion of "excessive blackness" laid the intellectual groundwork for the excess materiality embodied in Musser's conception of "brown jouissance." As Musser unites pleasure and pain to create the conception of jouissance, Moten's conception of the "cut" is also a dance of opposites – sensual and violent. A marginalized identity is excessive and a stigmatized identity is also a bulwark against the oppression of outside. Moten's monograph is an extended riff on jazz, and it is through "death" and "dying" that jazz musicians like Cecil Taylor composed and played. Likewise, Rachel's protest results in the loss of the family she

may have had with John Strong, but also charts a new, independent path for herself and her people.

These theoretical provocations manifest in Rachel through music. The "songs in *Rachel*" reveal "the space that the singing voice can open up" and "how the act of singing can register the presence of a Black woman mourning motherhood" (Wolff 176). For Grimké, music functions as a "kind of pained soundscape for the play" in the form of "diegetic songs…heightened language, broken speech patterns, and Jimmy's weeping" (176). The Black woman's singing voice and the sounds of mourning a trauma make up the gap that the traumatic stories of Mrs. Loving and Mrs. Lane cannot fill. When reflecting in *In The Break* on the uses of the jazz singer Billie Holliday's voice, Moten argues that it breaks "the signifier's logic," asking: "What does it mean to surrender the lyric?" While Wolff is arguing that sounds of mourning do not need to be legible to be understood, Moten is questioning the purpose of legibility. Instead of seeking to understand "a voice that resists reading and writing," Moten encourages audiences to experience "a repetition of suffocated desire and lost object, of transference and drive" (Moten 104). Within this repetition is what "the audience…[wants] to hear and what they already know" (104). Thus, the sounds of mourning are not necessarily meant to be understood, but to call upon some deep feeling tucked inside the audience member, something that they 'already know.'[11]

In creating *Rachel,* Grimké also draws upon what she 'already knows.' Anne Anlin Cheng argues that over the course of the play, Rachel converts herself from

[11] Amber Musser describes this as "extra-linguistic" (Location 136).

"being subjected to grief to being a subject speaking grievance" (Cheng qtd in Roberts 99). In tracing Rachel's transformation from a girl overwhelmed by the horror of her family's traumatic past, to a an actualized, individuated woman making a deliberate choice to reject reproductive futurity, Grimké is re-tracing her own trajectory from the outraged daughter of a diplomat - hamstrung by his obligation to empire[12] – to an outspoken anti-lynching critic. Grimké also traces a connection between her father's diplomacy and Mr. Loving's anti-lynching activism – the real and fictional daughters of these men will continue the work that their fathers were unable to complete in their lifetimes.

And the "voice" that these women represent is not just verbal, aural, or elusive of comprehension. It is also embodied physically. According to Musser, "thinking with voice and witnessing is important because it highlights the elements of fleshiness" (Location 2066). Thus, voice and witnessing unite to emphasize the subject's materiality. Rachel's "morbid," psychologically unbalanced state" is the result of the violence that she witnesses in her real life, an expression that is first voiced then transformed corporeally[13]. Both Rachel and Mrs. Loving experience, according to Wolff, "hallucinations and delusions," but are they really delusions? Or are they simply the psychosomatic products of living in an anti-Black world, occurring in the realm of the visual? Once example of these hallucinatory revelations is Mrs.

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[12] Roberts: "the United States deployed an elite group of Black citizens to nations and colonies of color, where they were tasked to perform as (in Archibald's words) silenced representatives rather than speaking reformers (99).

[13] Rachel's "hysterical" responses are consistent, suggesting not "individual neurosis" but "deep ambivalence about a compulsory, idealized maternal position" (Wolff 173).

Loving's observation that Jimmy looks exactly like George. For Wolff, "the boy's body" initially "suggests the chance for a new beginning, once marked by racism," however, his resemblance to George instead "suggests instead the horrifying possibility, if not inescapability, of history's repeating itself" (Wolff 175). Everywhere she turns, Mrs. Loving witnesses the face of her lynched son in the faces of other young black children, hoping against hope that they will not meet the same fate. It is telling that she is also the first to witness Rachel's literal and metaphorical collapse. She recounts to John a disturbing story of how she found Rachel unconscious next to a smashed vase of roses, initially fearing that her daughter was dead. Speaking of the event in her own words, Rachel finally says:

Ever since I fell here -- a week ago -- I am afraid -- to go -- to sleep, for every time I do -- my children come -- and beg me -- weeping -- not to -- bring them here -- to suffer. Tonight, they came -- when I was awake…And John, -- dear John -- you see -- it can never be -- all the beautiful, beautiful things -- you have -- told me about (Grimké 111).

Rachel's fall represents the literal and metaphorical shattering of her psyche. This rupture has resulted in visions – visions that echo the hallucinations that Harriet Tubman experienced after being struck in the head by an overseer's rock.[14] Rachel is haunted during sleep by images of the children that will be crushed by the weight of white supremacy, and now, these visions have become so totalizing that they also haunt her when she is awake. This weight has prevented Rachel from enjoying the

[14] Larson, Kate Clifford. *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero.* New York: Ballantine, 2004. Print.

joys that life has to offer, particularly a home and family with a man who is eager to commit to her. Rachel's decision could be read as a queer, empowering rejection of cisgender, heterosexual domesticity, and her refusal of salvation - to echo Mrs. Loving's earlier comment – through marriage and family is part of what makes the play feminist. However, Grimké leaves the audience with a despondent Rachel, her love of children destroyed by her fear of white supremacy.

Conclusion: An Individual Tragedy?

Expanding upon Susan Gillman's work on American race melodrama, I argue that *Rachel* is an anti-lynching melodrama, and Grimké uses sentiment to alert white mothers to the horror of a family ripped asunder. Rachel's refusal to marry and bring Black children into an anti-Black world can be read through the scholarship of Edelman and Muñoz on queer reproductive futurity. And the ways in which her grief over the loss of her family is expressed - through sound, gesture, embodied vocality, and visualized through the lens of jouissance, can be further examined through the work of Moten and Musser. By understanding how melodrama is constructed, the public can better understand mobilize melodrama's cathartic powers and avoid replicating the antiblack violences of the past. Peter Brooks describes melodrama as "the quest for a hidden moral legibility," and Grimké starkly reveals how racism circumscribes the lives of their African-American characters. (Brooks qtd in Williams 18).

Though *Rachel* does not contain white characters, the aftereffects of white supremacy are ever present. The offstage hand of whiteness shapes the choices of the characters, particularly Rachel's decision to reject marriage and motherhood. As

Gillman argues, “the individual, not the community, is the fundamental social unit of the race melodrama in its tragic mode” (Gillman 242). But despite attempts to reduce melodrama to a series of individual choices, once must understand that these actions occur within a broader sociopolitical context. Thus, *Rachel* “bends” the form, using individual choices as a lens through which to look at white supremacy (Gillman 231). Melodrama may begin in a space of innocence, but to reckon with the racial violences of the past – and particularly, how those violences have shaped Black families, we must move to a space of knowledge.

Traumatic Repetition in the Contemporary Work of Adrienne Kennedy

In a speech before a 2016 reading of Adrienne Kennedy's new play *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box,* director Evan Yionoulis recalled an earlier conversation she had with Kennedy. During the conversation, the playwright argued that the violent antiblackness that her grandson, Canaan Kennedy, experienced in his Williamsburg, Virginia high school was very similar to her experiences as an undergraduate at Ohio State University in the 1950s, chronicled in her 2007 play *The Ohio State Murders.* Cathy Caruth would apply a Freudian lens to a Kennedy's predicament, arguing that "repetition [is] at the heart of catastrophe" and also "emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 2). Caruth's work on trauma and psychoanalysis addresses the trauma caused by the Holocaust, but it can also be placed in conversation with Black critical theorists like Christina Sharpe. Sharpe demonstrates that to be in the wake is simply to be alive – to be conscious - negotiating blackness in an antiblack world that is shaped by the precarity and abjection of black people.

Sharpe continues, arguing that "to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's yet unresolved unfolding." *To be* "in" the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might provide another way of theorizing, in/for/from what Frank Wilderson refers to as "stay[ing] in the hold of the ship" (14). Kennedy's fascination with traumatic repetition is also an exemplar of Soyica Colbert's "theater of repair," in which trauma is transformed into communion.

I contacted Adrienne Kennedy in early 2017. She sent me several emails, her correspondence mirroring her richly elliptical dramaturgy. One of those emails contained an unpublished essay titled "On Seeing *Leave Her to Heaven.*"[15] Kennedy is the greatest living Black playwright, and I will present three examples of the ways in which trauma is transformed in her plays. I will begin this talk by discussing how Kennedy transforms a drowning scene from the 1945 crime noir film *Leave Her to Heaven* into a darkly pleasurable encounter with her first crush on a lake. Second, I will reflect on a scene of infanticide in *The Ohio State Murders.* And third, I will discuss *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box*. But what does traumatic repetition feel like? Can it be thrilling and pleasurable? I argue that traumatic repetition is a multivalent, capacious experience that reaches multiple affective registers for Kennedy. She experiences pleasure when she defies her uptight, respectable parents to be with her crush Freddy Jamison even though he rows her to a dangerous part of the lake. But traumatic repetition also contains horror: in *Ohio State Murders,* the writer Suzanne Alexander is cold when she gives a lecture about the murder of her twins at the hand of their white father. And in *He Brought He Heart Back in a Box*, Kennedy shows her audience a Black girl who is overwhelmed by traumatic memories in her efforts to solve her mother's death, treating each memory like a puzzle piece that has been lost to the horrors of Jim Crow. These melodramas use memory as an anchor through which Kennedy mobilizes her emotions. Through her work, Kennedy reveals that trauma is an elastic category that can be stretched to produce both pleasure and horror. Trauma is shaped and retransformed through infinite repetition, as Black

people navigate the afterlife of slavery, and Kennedy uses the melodrama as a tool to explore the mobilization of Black affect in the modern and contemporary era.

So, who is Adrienne Kennedy? The playwright Adrienne Kennedy was born in 1931 in Pittsburgh, and spent her formative years in Cleveland and Montezuma, Georgia. She came to prominence after participating in a playwriting workshop organized by the late Edward Albee at the Circle in the Square Theater. During this workshop, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* – the one-act play for which Kennedy is best known – was developed, later winning the 1964 OBIE Award for Best Play. Kennedy would become associated with Amiri Baraka and other artists associated with the Black Arts Movement, which sought to resist the hegemony of the European-American aesthetic in the performing and visual arts. Kennedy's elliptical, abstract, and horror inflected dramaturgy is ich with contradictions. It draws portraits of the interior lives of Black women but is also preoccupied with the specter of whiteness and the ways in which the violence committed by white men against Black women is repeated. Unlike previous scholars who are concerned with form and symbolism in her work, I am engaging her work alongside Black feminist theory and situating her within a larger melodramatic canon. Though there are themes that recur throughout Kennedy's career - trauma, isolation, misogynoir - her contemporary work is increasingly looking back, trying to reconstruct a way out of the cyclic horror of repeating trauma. She is a recipient of the Obie Award for Lifetime Achievement and was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame in 2018.

Re-Performing *Leave Her to Heaven*

Leave Her to Heaven is a film adaptation of a 1944 novel by Ben Ames Williams. The 1945 film is categorized as a film noir, a term used to describe Hollywood crime dramas of the 1940s and 1950s that are shaped by their deployment of cynicism and sexuality. However, the term "film noir" was not coined until the 1970s. At the time that many of these films were released, they were simply known as "melodramas," signified by their deployment of heightened emotion. Further revealing the elasticity of melodrama as a category, the critic Peter Labuza argues that film noir is a subversion of melodrama, creating a "feeling of displacement" in its viewers. *Leave Her to Heaven* was shot in Technicolor, a coloration process that was primarly associated with movie musicals like *The Wizard of Oz.* The use of Technicolor adds another layer of floridity to *Heaven,* heightening its emotionality and further subverting the traditional Black and White versions of the genre.

The film was directed by John M. Stahl, who was one of the co-founders of MGM Studios and one of the original 36 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Stahl also directed another classic melodrama, the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life,* which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. *Leave Her to Heaven* was an enormous commercial and critical success. It grossed over 5 million dollars in 1946 and received positive reviews from *Variety* and the *New York Post* that focused primarily on the performance of Gene Tierney, a star actress of the 1940s. It is one of director Martin Scorsese's favorite films, and was nominated for five Academy Awards, winning for Best Cinematography, Color.

The 1945 film follows the story of Richard Harland (Cornel Wilde), a novelist who meets Ellen Berant (Gene Tierney), a beautiful socialite, on a train.[16] Both parties are immediately enamored of each other, and Ellen's attraction to Richard is largely based on his resemblance to her deceased father. Though Richard is immediately enamored of Ellen, he is also suspicious of her confidence and independence, which is intended by the filmmakers to foreshadow the physical violence she will later enact. When Ellen spends a full day exploring the grounds of a New Mexico ranch alone, Richard expresses concern that she has skipped an entire day's worth of meals and doesn't return until after dark. The threat posed by water – signaling Kennedy's later fascination with the film - is a recurring motif. In the first scene involving water, the viewer sees Ellen swimming to Richard. She ominously creeps towards him, a shadow just beneath the water. Richard is dutifully working on his next novel. Ellen wears a plunging, lime green bathing suit, thus signaling her dangerous sensuality.[17]

Despite her courtship with Richard, Ellen is still engaged to Russell Quinton (Vincent Price), an ambitious attorney. Upon seeing her naked hand, Richard asks what happened to her engagement ring. Ellen simply says that she "took it off," thus signaling her disregard for monogamy to a conservative 1940s audience. Meanwhile, during this sequence, her angelic adopted - as if to emphasize that she does not share her older sister's tainted, evil blood - younger sister Ruth Berant (Jeanne Crain) appears overhead, pruning roses and tending to home and hearth like an appropriately

[16] Kennedy has also written about fraught train journeys, particularly in her one-act *The Owl Answers* (1965). Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* is also a mid-20th century African-American drama about a murderous white woman on a train.
[17] In this scene, Ellen resembles the infamous shark from *Jaws* (1975).

feminine woman. As Ellen's manipulative behavior increases, Ruth begins to increasingly replace her has a wife surrogate. Richard even dedicates his novel to her, referring to Ruth as "gal with the hoe." This appellation signifies her love of gardening, but also represents her position as a wholesome counterpart to her "hoe" sister, who can not even break off an engagement with one man before entering a new relationship with another. But before Ellen's life begins to unravel, and she is replaced by Ruth in a never-ending cycle of repetition, she does end her engagement with Russell. At the end of the film's first act, she and Richard kiss and embrace, with Ellen saying "I'll never let you go…never, never, never…" to Richard as the screen fades to black.

Adrienne Kennedy's lingering fascination with this film is directly connected to her lifelong fascination with the cinematic. In her play *A Movie Star Has To Star in Black and White,* cinema becomes a lens through which Kennedy deconstructs the formation of celebrity. Hilton Als refers to Kennedy as a "film scenarist," and Kennedy has frequently filtered herself through the lenses of white early 20th century film stars. In *Movie Star,* the audience is confronted by Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager,* Jean Peters in "Viva Zapata!," and Shelley Winters in *A Place in the Sun.* In an interview with the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, she emphasizes the importance of Bette Davis to her dramaturgy because the latter woman had "violent feelings."

Kennedy's obsession with *Leave Her to Heaven* is rooted in the its famous drowning scene, in which Ellen Berant – a manipulative socialite played by Gene Tierney - refuses to assist her husband's disabled younger brother Danny – played by Darryl Hickman - as he drowns in a lake at Richard's estate, called Back of the Moon.

Ellen’s neglect is intended to remove the final obstacle that prevents her husband from giving her his undivided attention. Ellen, wearing a white coat and dark sunglasses, rows Danny in a boat away from shore. He asks Ellen if she thinks he can swim across the lake, and Ellen encourages him, knowing that it will lead to his death. Offering false encouragement, Ellen encourages Danny to keep going even though he says he is “winded” and complains that the water is too cold. Finally, he is submerged for the first time, reappearing to scream “Ellen, help me!” Ellen stares at him with an icily downcast glare, waits until he is submerged for the final time, and then screams "Danny!" in false panic. She then removes her white coat to reveal a blue one-piece bathing suit and jumps in. Ellen’s husband hears her screams from the shore and jumps in after her. Of course, it is too late to save his brother.

Frustrated that Danny's death has launched Richard into a depression instead of bringing them closer, Ellen goes to her sister Ruth for comfort and advice. Ruth tells her older sister that she must become pregnant to give Richard his own child to love. Ruth is established as a maternal, self-sacrificing foil to the selfish, conniving Helen. After becoming pregnant, Helen calls the baby a "little beast," but says that the virtuous Ruth would “love it.” While sitting at her vanity, Helen has a revelation that lights up her eyes: she will cause a miscarriage by throwing herself down the stairs. Ellen’s eyes gleam as she removes her shoes before intentionally tumbling down the stairs, functioning as the apotheosis of her existence as a cold, manipulative sociopath. Because of her flat, melodramatic characterization, the audience is intended to view her as a villain who is leading a good man by the nose instead of a woman who is struggling to cope with the trauma of her father's death. Ellen recreates her father’s

death through a series of traumatic repetitions - Danny, the miscarriage, and ultimately, her own death. Richard eventually realizes that she was responsible for his brother's death, and vows to leave Ellen. When she realizes she cannot live without her father surrogate Ellen poisons herself, but not before framing Ruth. Ellen knows she has lost Richard's love forever, but the framing is her last spiteful act towards her sister, an attempt to create a traumatic repetition and control the narrative from beyond the grave. Richard returns to Ellen's bedside right before she dies, holding her hand as she fades away. However, he coldly removes it before the scene transition, thus marking a traumatic reversal of their earlier embrace, an embrace that persisted into the blackout.

In the subsequent trial about Ellen's death, Ruth is tried and acquitted for her murder. The trial is a space where multiple revelations are made about the relationship between Richard and Ruth, including that Ruth did uncredited labor on Richard's latest novel while Ellen recovered from her miscarriage. It is briefly mentioned that Richard served two years in prison for withholding information about Ellen's crimes, but those years pass in the blink of an eye, and the final shot of the film is Richard rowing across the lake at Back of the Moon and into the arms of Ruth, who is patiently waiting on the dock. When Ruth and Ellen had their previous confrontation about the gravity of Ellen's crimes, Ruth accused her of making "a shadow of Richard" with her "love." Likewise, Ruth – who bears an uncanny resemblance to Ellen – functions as her sister's shadow throughout the play. Was Ellen paranoid, or was her sweet sister clamoring to take her place as Mrs. Harland? But these threads are not explored in *Heaven,* which reduces its leads to archetypes of good and evil. Like conventional

melodrama, the 'good sister' triumphs and order is restored. Yet Richard has another young, beautiful bride, thus repeating his initial meeting with Ellen at the beginning of the film. Who is to say that she will not show the same possessive characteristics that her sister displayed once she is married to Richard? And though Gene Tierney inhabits the role of the femme fatale with glee, the film stretches into tragedy. Ellen must destroy others - and ultimately, herself - because her father's death has pushed her into feeling as though she must seize upon whatever men remain in her life.

How does Kennedy intervene in this discourse? Kennedy's transformation of Ellen's story in "On Seeing *Leave Her To Heaven"* can be understood using Rebecca Schneider's theory of "re-performance." By literally rescripting the central narrative of the film, Kennedy is re-performing the plot. Schneider writes about the discomfort in this term, using it as a frame through with to discuss the limits of live performance and the inability of performance artists to recreate an original work. "Reperformance," she begins allows "what had been lost to time" to return (Schneider 129). Schneider leaves room for affect, arguing that "scriptive things…are pitched, already, for the jump of affect, for reperformance across bodies, as a call is pitched for a response" (Schneider 135). Thus, instead of a direct body-to-body transmission, there is an exchange of affect that marks the teenage Kennedy's first viewing of *Heaven.* Kennedy's reperformance is unafraid to dwell in the abject, transforming the repetition of trauma into a source of pleasure. In the first paragraph of her essay, she claims that "the murder of Danny on the lake is one of my favorite murder scenes" (Kennedy 1).

For Kennedy, *Leave Her To Heaven* is not a parable of the wickedness of womanhood. The traumatic repetitions of the film are transformed by Kennedy into

memories of carefree childhood experiences of Lake Erie, where she often "wondered what was on the opposite side of that water" (1). Thus, Kennedy rescripts water as a place of imagination and curiosity, not a site of terror. She connects several details from the film to her own childhood. The rowboat in which Ellen paddles Danny to his death is like the ones at "Centerville Mills camp" (1). She recalls watching her "mother [sit] on the porch and read the book *Leave Her to Heaven*" (1). And most poignantly, Kennedy connects the doomed Ellen-Richard romance to her own adolescent flirtation with a boy named Freddy Jamison.

Freddy Jamison appears twice in Kennedy's 1987 biography *People Who Led To My Plays* – which is styled as a glossary of Kennedy's memories. Freddy Jamison is a recurring figure in Kennedy's reinscriptions of the traumatic, and she recalls a moment when a 13-year-old Jamison "offered to take [her] out on the lake. I was close to eleven; I was quite crazy about him and was enchanted to go out on the lake with him" (2). Freddy rows the 11-year-old Kennedy out to the "Icebox…a dark, shaded byway" that usually signals to campers that it is time to turn around and head back to shore. After entering the Icebox, Freddy asks Kennedy to get out of the boat, which confused her at the time. Despite her attraction to Freddy and desire to be alone with him, Kennedy holds "onto the sides of the rowboat tightly. [She] was afraid" (3). In Kennedy's imaginary, these repetitions are not just traumatic, they are also fraught with tensions between fear and pleasure. Kennedy both reflects and complicates Danny's desire to see if he can swim across the lake, combined with the fear of realizing his limitations. Despite her attraction to Freddy Jamison, Kennedy knows that she will literally be plunged into danger if she leaves the boat. Re-performing the

story allows her to summon the affective thrill that she experienced as a child without risking death.

Kennedy chronicles two more elliptical encounters with Jamison, also involving water. The first is several years after their trip to the Icebox. A 17-year-old Freddy calls Kennedy out of the blue and invites her to meet him at "105th Street and Drexel" (4). She is 15. Kennedy is headed out the door but is stopped when her mother threatens to "jump in Lake Erie" if she leaves. As a young camper, the water is a source of nascent sexual awakening for Kennedy. However, the reaction of Kennedy's mother is both an expression of hysterical, exasperated motherhood, and projection of fear and anxiety at the fate that Kennedy might befall if she runs off with a dangerous man. At this point, Freddy has allegedly been to jail, thus heightening the sense of danger surrounding him for a respectable young woman like Kennedy. Thus, the protagonists of Kennedy's reperformance of *Leave Her To Heaven* have been both gender and race swapped. This swapping is part of Kennedy's affective re-performance of the film. Ellen Berent's femme fatale is transformed into a bad boy, and the Kennedy takes the place of the naïve Richard. Yet, unlike Ellen's depiction in the film, Kennedy doesn't simply portray her childhood crush as a transparent avatar of wickedness. She mentions that his stint in jail was preceded by the death of his parents "in an automobile accident" (3). Unlike Ellen, his trauma is acknowledged. Kennedy's final encounter with Freddy takes place during a less complicated time, when they were both under the age of 10. Kennedy's father tells Jamison to walk his daughter back to their lake house, when they see a "blue swimming pool" on the path back (5). Recalling her foiled teenage plan to meet Freddy, Kennedy argues that

“sometimes I think my life ended on that afternoon” (6). Her mother’s intervention potentially saved her from experiencing violence at Freddy’s hands, but also ended the cycle of thrilling repetitions, those twin shivers of trauma and pleasure. Kennedy ends her essay with a brief reflection on her days teaching at Stanford University, where the “dead” Lake Lagunita is located. Before her classes, Kennedy would travel to the “edge of the pit and stare,” trying once again to reperform those traumatic repetitions (6).

The Ohio State Murders

The reperformance of trauma is a recurring theme in Kennedy’s work, especially her late plays. Adrienne Kennedy's play *The Ohio State Murders* was commissioned by Ohio's Great Lakes Theater Festival in 1992. It is part of her Alexander Plays series, which focus on the life of Suzanne Alexander, a fictitious, famous African-American female writer. In *Murders,* Alexander has returned to her titular alma mater to give a talk on "the violent imagery in her work" (Kennedy). Kennedy's work is a play within a play – embedded within Alexander's talk are flashbacks to the misogynoir that she experienced at Ohio State. Geography is positioned as a site of danger, a place where trauma is re-summoned. Suzanne recalls that she would "write down locations in order to learn the campus" and that "the geography made me anxious" (Kennedy). Alexander is revisiting campus as a site of traumatic repetition. Most significantly, she recalls the ravine that was located "above the university was a residential district” (Kennedy). Suzanne “never saw this ravine until the two days I visited Bobby at his house (the ravine was where the faculty

lived). A year and a half later one of my baby twin daughters would be found dead there. That was later" (Kennedy).

It was Suzanne's visit to Hampshire's home in the ravine that would be the first domino to fall in a sequence of events that would ultimately lead to her own undoing. Kennedy's fear prevents her from going to the Icebox, but Suzanne goes to the ravine and experiences the consequences – sex, pregnancy, and ultimately, filicide. The geography of Ohio State and its surrounding environs continues to intimidate: "Sorority Row…appeared like a citadel" (Kennedy). And Suzanne recalls reading the following in a book on symbolism: "A city should have a sacred geography never arbitrary but planned in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine that the society upholds" (Kennedy). The citadel, of course, is intended to keep undesirable African-American women away from the feminine social bonding ritual that is the white sorority. This is the "sacred geography," the dividing line that establishes which people have access to resources, and which people do not. As Ta-Nehisi Coates argued, the "ghetto is public policy." Geography is simply used to reify the race and class distinctions that already exist.

But even though the geography of Ohio State is rigid and oppressive, Suzanne finds multiple ways to escape it. She is as cinephile, and the visual becomes a medium through which her trauma is processed. She recalls which films were popular during the early 1950s on campus, particularly the "music from *A Place in the Sun,* that movie with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift based on Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy*" (Kennedy). This film - and the incidental music from it - are used to orient the audience temporally, and the allusion to *American Tragedy* connects

literature to the visual and the aural. Film also functions for Suzanne as a roadmap towards resisting the oppression that she experiences at Ohio State. She recalls watching *Battleship Potemkin* with her friend Iris Ann. A summary of the film describes it as the story of "the mutiny on a battleship" (Kennedy). Several other phrases in the summary describe the "massacre on the Odessa Steps…the storming of the Winter Palace [and] the dismemberment of the Tsar's statue…" (Kennedy).

The film excites Suzanne, and one can draw a connection between the crew of the *Potemkin* rebelling against Imperial Russia, and Suzanne's desire to destroy her own sacred geographies at Ohio State. This energy – both chaotic and cleansing – likely guides Suzanne's return to Ohio State to give her lecture, clearing a path through which old trauma can be burned down and supplanted by healing. Going to the movies allows Suzanne to flirt with revolutionary themes, but the act of seeing films allows her to physically leave the social violence of Suzanne's nearly all-white dorm. Her white dormmates held parties that involved "music from Broadway musicals, *Oklahoma, Carousel*" (Kennedy). Suzanne and Iris Ann are not permitted to experience this sociality in person. Thus, they create their own aural/visual escape through watching movies.

Though cinema is often deployed in *The Ohio State Murders* as a temporary balm against persistent white supremacist violence, it is also a means through which Suzanne is able to connect with other Black people who show her that there is life beyond the university campus. David Alexander, her boyfriend and later fiancé, reveals during their courtship that his younger sister Alice's "favorite movie star was Bette Davis, who she could not only imitate but also made herself copies of Davis's

dresses from *Dark Victory, Now Voyager,* and *The Letter*" (Kennedy). Suzanne is also a fan of Bette Davis, and this connection between Suzanne and Alice bodes well for Suzanne and David's later marriage. Kennedy presents the audience with a kind of repetition here - Suzanne is a slightly older version of Alice - but repetition that is grounded in Black community and sociality rather than reliving trauma. Alice "crocheted a white bib" for Suzanne's daughter Carol, who was still alive at the time (Kennedy). Alice's gesture displays a kindness and consideration that is not available to Suzanne within the violent white confines of Ohio State.

As the white-only dorm parties reveal, Suzanne's trauma is also discursive. Black students allowed to attend Ohio State, but are excluded from major aspects of university life. Suzanne recalls the menacing specter of Patricia "Bunny" Manley, a white girl who lived in her dorm. If Patricia and the other white girls in the dorm saw Suzanne or Iris Ann "coming down the corridor they would giggle and close their door" (Kennedy). Suzanne's experiences of being excluded from university social life by Bunny are so painful that it causes her to consider Bunny a suspect once Suzanne's twins are murdered. The levels of interpersonal white supremacist violence that Suzanne experiences are so pervasive that they cause her to become paranoid – or is she simply displaying a legitimate wariness about her surroundings?

But antiblackness on campus is not simply the domain of a handful of mean-spirited girls – it extends into the classroom as well. Suzanne recalls that she "didn't know there were no "Negro" students in the English Department. It was thought that we were not able to master the program" (Kennedy). Despite these institutional barriers, Suzanne persists in her attempt to become an English major, taking a trial

course that is required of students who are interested in the major. Despite writing excellent papers, her white male professor (not Hampshire) gives her "Cs on every paper" (Kennedy). When Suzanne attempts to go to her professor's office hours, she is told that he is unable "to see any more students that quarter" and is told to "make an appointment with his assistant" (Kennedy). Refusing to see a student is a clear dereliction of duty from a faculty member. It is not that Black students are incapable of "mastering" the program - the issue is that white English faculty and staff - from professors to administrators - conspire to deliberately ensure that there will be no Black English majors. In describing how Suzanne is relegated to working with a teaching assistant, Kennedy makes a secondary point about how graduate and contingent laborers are placed in the breach to do the work that tenured faculty are uninterested in doing.

Kennedy also shows her audience that it is not only Suzanne who suffers. Her best friend, Iris Ann, is also swept up by the tide of antiblackness at Ohio State. Suzanne states that “before she dropped out of Ohio State, Iris Ann wanted to be a music major. She had been first violinist in her high school orchestra" (Kennedy). Iris Ann clearly has an aptitude for playing the violin, but that aptitude is not nurtured in an environment in which Black people are able to occupy space but are unable to thrive. Placed in this circumstances, Black students experience a crisis of confidence and their talent is suffocated. The marginalization of Black female students also extends to other aspects of student life, including the quality of the treatment that they

receive at the health center.[18] Suzanne's sadness and fear about the murders of her children manifests itself physically. She "wound the plastic pink curlers in [her] hair so tightly that [her] head bled" (Kennedy). She makes an appointment at the university health center where "the white intern tried to examine my head and at the same time not touch my scalp or hair" (Kennedy). As Kennedy has previously revealed, white men have no issues touching Black women when it gives them pleasure but ignore the health of Black women.

But despite the violence that Suzanne experiences on campus, her journey is shaped by the unspoken knowledge of older Black women who try desperately to protect her from harm. This unspoken knowledge, of course, is shaped by trauma that the women have witnessed and experienced in their own lives. After she becomes pregnant, Suzanne leaves Columbus to live with her Aunt Louise in New York City. Suzanne's babies - twin daughters - are born in the city. She recalls that her "aunt begged [her] to stay in New York. I didn't know why but I wanted to return to Columbus" (Kennedy). Aunt Louise's reticence is not an allusion to any supernatural knowledge that BW possess, but an acknowledgement of the cyclical nature of trauma. What happens once will happen again. But even though Suzanne doesn't understand her own desire to return to Columbus, it is likely motivated by a desire to see her struggles as a single mother acknowledged by Hampshire. Little did she know, Hampshire's form of accountability would manifest as violence. Upon Suzanne's return to Columbus, arrangements are made for Suzanne to stay in the home of a

[18] One can draw a line between Suzanne's poor treatment and the inadequate care that many Black women experience in hospitals today, especially women who are delivering children.

Black woman named Mrs. Tyler. Upon seeing Suzanne and her daughters, “Mrs. Tyler asked [her] no questions. She knew" (Kennedy). What did Mrs. Tyler know? It could be obvious that the father of her twins is a white man. Mrs. Tyler might even specifically know that the father of Suzanne’s children is Hampshire, especially if he has a reputation for targeting women of color. Kennedy later says that he was "briefly married to an Indian woman,” which lends credence to the latter theory (Kennedy).

Suzanne’s pregnancy functions as a traumatic flashpoint in her life. The initial trauma of the pregnancy causes a cascading breakdown of her interpersonal relationships, thus leading to a series of compounding, repetitive traumas. In *The Ohio State Murders,* Kennedy reveals the inherent repetition of trauma as trauma begets more trauma. When Suzanne tells Robert that she is pregnant with his baby, he replies that they were "only together twice. You surely must have other relationships. It's not possible" (Kennedy). Two people only need one sexual encounter to conceive, and Robert knows this. He is slut-shaming Suzanne in order to avoid accountability.

And to compound the trauma of being rejected by the father of her children, Suzanne experiences an invasion of privacy at the hands of Miss Dawson, the head of her dorm.

Suzanne recalls that "Miss Dawson…read my diaries to the dormitory committee and decided I was unsuitable" (Kennedy). Granted, this was a different time in the history of the university, in which residence life staff were expected to act *in loco parentis*. But in addition to her pregnancy and Blackness, Suzanne’s journals and interest in music, film, and Black intellectual production are pegged as 'radical' in a way that will be disruptive to the whiteness and hegemony of student life. Suzanne

also says that her parents were "humiliated" by her pregnancy (Kennedy). Instead of being angry at the power differential that resulted in Robert's exploitation of their daughter, they are upset at her for being pregnant. Even when Suzanne is around people who don't know her personally, she is still marked by the stigma surrounding single motherhood, recalling that "sometimes Mrs. Tyler's neighbors shunned me" (Kennedy). As a single mother who is being violently stalked by the estranged father of her children, Suzanne is extremely vulnerable. Yet, because she has not done the respectable thing – having children after marriage with a Black man – she is subject to the recriminations of her community.

In addition to the social ostracization that she experiences, Suzanne is a voracious reader of literature. The trauma explored in the play is embedded in the texts that she reads and hears, and Kennedy invokes the Western canon to reflect upon the enduring nature of sin. Suzanne recalls the "repetitive phrases" in Robert's *Elizabethan World Picture: "*Chain of being / Sin / the Links in the Chain / the Cosmic Dance" (Kennedy). Suzanne's journey in the play involves negotiating a series of linked traumas, written on the page like a stanza of a poem in the afterlife of slavery. But whose sin is it? Fragments of Robert's lectures are embedded within Suzanne's lecture. In a discussion of King Arthur one day, Robert invokes the phrase "Spotless, he is destroyed by sins of my doing!" (Kennedy). This quote reflects Robert's preoccupation with sin - a preoccupation that foreshadows his complete undoing. It is presumably a close reading of King Arthur's grief over the death of Sir Gawain. But Kennedy invites the audience to further examine the close reading. Hampshire is clearly racked by guilt over his complicity in Suzanne's pregnancy and subsequent social ostracization.

Despite his public attempts to ignore Suzanne, he describes her as “spotless,” an acknowledgement of her intelligence and potential that was destroyed by his “doing.” Because he cannot publicly reconcile his desire for a Black undergraduate woman he tries to physically distance himself from her.

Murder scenes are another recurring fascination of Kennedy’s, particularly the murders of Black women at the hands of white men. Hampshire’s ruminations on sin culminate in murder. Suzanne recalls that "Robert Hampshire kidnapped and murdered our daughter. She was the one called Cathi. He drowned her in the ravine" (Kennedy). Hampshire attempts to cleanse himself of the sin that has emerged from his sexual relationship with Suzanne. But in doing this, he has made Suzanne's trauma material. The children were conceived in Hampshire’s home near the ravine. Cathi, who Hampshire murders first, is killed by the ravine, thus bringing her life full circle. But Suzanne doesn’t immediately know that her children were killed, and theories of the murder unspool in fragments, evidence of the ways in which trauma fractures the memory. Suzanne recalls driving her children to the river, during which she briefly fell asleep "and awoke to the sound of someone running away from, the car, someone who may have been looking in the window." She further observes that "the car door was open, the white bassinet lay on the seat. But Cathi was gone" (Kennedy). Though she doesn't know it yet, that person, of course, is Hampshire. His running away is clear evidence of his cowardice - he is desperate to get rid of his biracial children, but too timid to kill them in front of their mother. Finally, having murdered Cathi, Hampshire goes to Mrs. Tyler's house to kill Carol while Suzanne is at work. He falsely presented himself as a researcher to gain access to the home.

The denouement of Hampshire's murders reveals the ways in which trauma is sublimated. Suzanne discusses how "the university protected Robert Hampshire" and that "nothing of the story came out in the papers" (Kennedy). However, "there were stories that a white professor had wandered into the Negro section of Columbus and was killed" (Kennedy). A white man is transformed into a victim, even though he was the source of the trauma. Furthermore, entire communities are also complicit in the sublimation of trauma. Suzanne discusses how her father "had also put pressure on the papers to bury the tragedy. He convinced them it was best for me" (Kennedy). Though it was likely good that Suzanne did not have to experience the scrutiny of the press, or a public, invasive trial, her father's instinct to suppress the story was also an attempt to preserve his own standing in the community. Having a daughter who got pregnant by her white professor who later murdered their twin babies and then himself affects his own standing as a respectable, middle-class Black man. Similarly, Mrs. Tyler - who was shoved to the bottom of a staircase by Hampshire - and her son "stuck to the story that a researcher had come to the house [and] had gone into a fit of insanity" (Kennedy). Kennedy doesn't specify whether they were compensated or pressured for their silence, but their story muddies the waters.

If anything, Suzanne's public lecture is intended to unmuddy the waters, providing clarity, honesty, and a way through trauma. "Before today," she begins the final sentences of her lecture, "I've never been able to speak publicly of my dead daughters. Good-by, Carol and Cathi. Good-bye…" After a pause, she ends with a chilling sentence: "And that is the source of the violent imagery in my work. Thank you" (Kennedy). Repeating the trauma of her experiences at Ohio State and the

circumstances surrounding the death of her children has finally allowed Suzanne to excise the trauma of that moment. But yet, the violence of the twins' murder continues to circle in perpetuity in Suzanne - and Kennedy's writing - thus revealing that trauma never fully escapes us.

Violent Repetitions in *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box*

Yet, despite Kennedy's pleasure-seeking tendencies, there are some traumatic repetitions that are shaped not by intraracial community, but by interracial trauma. Kennedy's dramaturgy is deeply visual, and during her curtain speech before the 2016 reading of *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box,* director Evan Yionoulis showed the audience an image to connect them to the play. It was of the Fort Valley School (now Fort Valley University) in Montezuma, Georgia, which Kennedy's mother attended. This school is the basis on which the "colored" boarding school of the first scene is modeled. At the top of the show, Kay, a teenage Black girl and resident of the boarding school stands in the wings of the boarding school's theater with Chris Ahearn, her secret white boyfriend and the scion of the most powerful family in the community. A production of Christopher Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris* is currently being performed onstage, and the walls are lined with dark drawings of Dante. Chris tells Kay that his father has Black children, but his mother insists that they will never receive his inheritance: the "peach orchards" that are a foundational portion of the Georgia landscape. Kennedy's own grandfather was a white peach farmer, and she connects the Ahearn family legacy of land ownership to the rapes that enslaved Black people laboring on the land owned by their white blood relatives. But Chris, of course,

doesn't wrestle with this legacy, instead crowing that "Grandfather started the first bank in town."

Geography is an important part of *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box,* shaping the contours of the play and the mobility of its dual protagonists. In the 2018 Off-Broadway production of *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box* at Theatre for a New Audience, a miniature display of Montezuma, Georgia – now transformed in another traumatic repetition of Kennedy's into the fictional town of Montefiore, Georgia – was on display in the theater lobby. At the end of the play's first scene, we realize that Chris has come to the boarding school to propose marriage to Kay and inform her that he is leaving for New York City to become an actor. Chris' metatheatrical identity as an actor is exploited to great effect by Kennedy. He sings portions of the song "Bittersweet" throughout the play, which contains a line that will haunt his relationship with Kay: "we'll find our fortune and our happiness there." But the persistent elusiveness of 'there' makes the song simultaneously more morbid and maudlin as the play progresses, another one of Kennedy's traumatic repetitions.

Yionoulis described the second and final scene of the play as a "split scene." It is framed by the correspondence between Kay and Chris, who are now in a long-distance relationship. Kay has presumably graduated from the boarding school and is now a first-year student at Atlanta University. Even though Kay writes about her "school colors" and sends Chris "pictures of friends," her correspondence reveals that she is primarily reliving the traumatic repetitions of the past. Kay's letters to Chris are consumed with discovering the truth surrounding her mother's violent death. In this sense, *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box* can be understood as a neo-lynching play

in the vein of Koritha Mitchell. Like the writers of the late 19th century plays that Mitchell discusses, Kay attempts to reconstruct her mother's murder as a way of navigating racial terrorism. Harvey Young would also argue that through these repetitions, Kay is "activating black memory" and giving "voice to [her mother's] embodied experiences."

Like Kennedy reflecting on the dual terror and pleasure of the lake, Kay's letters to Chris represent her own desire to transform the traumatic repetition by writing the truth into existence. Kay believes that her mom was killed by her biological white father, who stabbed her in a freight elevator and has kept her deceased mother's heart in a long glass box (hence the title of the play). This story is corroborated by her great aunt. However, her mother's official cause of death is suicide – the driving force behind Kay's desire to rescript the truth. Yet, Kay's desire to transform the traumatic repetition finds resistance even from within her own family, as her grandmother "[whips] her every time" she attempts to discuss her mother's death. During her mother's funeral, Kay's biological father allegedly hid "among the cedar trees," though she would never recognize him herself. Though Kennedy does not explicitly make this connection herself, an offhand comment from Chris might shed some light on Kay's paternity, and subsequently solve her mother's murder. Chris says that his late father, Harrison Ahearn, would often watch the piano recitals of his Black children "from the wings." Experience the gaze of a rapist is another form of traumatic repetition, and the fact that Kay and Chris may be half-siblings adds another layer of doom to their romance. After exchanging letters for most of the play, Kay and Chris are shot dead when they finally unite. The killing both signals the

futility of their union and reinscribes the traumatic repetition of Black women murdered under mysterious circumstances.

Kennedy uses her memories of childhood melodramas as an anchor through which to mobilize her emotions. Through her work, Kennedy reveals that trauma is an elastic category that can be stretched to produce both pleasure and horror. Trauma is shaped and retransformed through infinite repetition, as Black people navigate the afterlife of slavery, and Kennedy uses the melodrama as a tool to explore the mobilization of Black affect in the modern and contemporary era. Through "On Seeing *Leave Her To Heaven," Ohio State Murders,* and *He Brought He Heart Back in a Box,* Kennedy uses the re-performance of trauma as a way of navigating antiblackness, and confronting one's trauma – even repeatedly – is the only way to acknowledge your humanity in a world that seeks to erase you. Kennedy positions melodrama as an elastic category that stretches mediums, temporalities, and affects as Black women navigate survival and risk across generations.

Chapter Three: "Big Hand Coming Down on Me": Abjection and Elasticity in Suzan-Lori Parks' *In The Blood*

"Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me."

-Hester from Suzan Lori-Parks' *In The Blood* (1999)

"He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention."[19]

-Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Introduction: appendages.

Suzan-Lori Parks' *In The Blood,* first produced in 1999 at the Public Theater in New York City, is a riff on Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter.* In Parks' play, Hester is transformed into a single mother of 5 children by 5 fathers who lives under a bridge. Parks' play is a response to the stigmatizing discourse around single Black mothers during the era, a discourse that began as a part of Ronald Reagan's creation of the "welfare queen" stereotype as a part of his 1976 presidential campaign and persisted through the 1980s and 1990s. And unlike Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Parks' Hester is not able to carve an independent life for herself as a seamstress, nor does she see any of her children grow up and marry into respectable families. Instead, she is exploited by other predatory, capitalistic adults, and expresses her frustration by murdering her eldest child.

[19] The Theory Of Moral Sentiments, Part IV, Chapter I, pp.184-5, para. 10.

In the most recent production of *Blood* at New York City's Signature Theatre in 2017, the aftermath of this murder is rendered in brutal, corporeal detail. With the corpse of her son, Jabber (Michael Braun), still mortally wounded, Hester (Saycon Sengbloh): "*holds up her hands – theyre covered with blood. She looks up with outstretched arms"* (Parks 108). From my orchestra seat, I heard the blood dripping from Sengbloh's hands down to the stage, and off the edge of the proscenium stage to the hovel where Hester's children slept in the production. The hand is a looming specter of Parks' play, a metaphor. Throughout the play, Hester fears that the hand will "come down" on her, that ends will finally be stretched too thin, that no creative solution will allow her to provide for her children. In other words, she is stalked by the weight of capitalism. This description of capitalism is starkly different than the one offered by the 18th century Scottish economist Adam Smith, often described as the "Father of Capitalism," who argued that if middle class and wealthy people act in their own economic interests, the benefits will eventually reach the poor (thus creating a blueprint for the trickle-down economics that will be exploited by Reagan later).

Yet, in Parks' play, we see figures who are supposed to function as a safety net for the poor – a doctor, a welfare representative, a reverend, Hester's friend, and her ex-boyfriend – collude to exploit a vulnerable woman. Despite this, Hester tries valiantly to work within the system to create a dignified life for herself and her children. Despite her marginalized position, she displays enormous creativity and elasticity – an ability to keep her family unit together despite the intrusions and manipulations of the state, and an ability to use her own small hands to stretch her own resources to fight the 'big hand' – creating food for her family when there is none,

doing hair, and sewing dresses even though she is not compensated enough for either. Hester mobilizes her own elasticity by stretching her resources away from the grasp of the 'big hand,' but her own hands eventually snap in violence against her flesh and blood.

This snapping, this rupture is the product of the abject state in which Hester lives. Her brief, violent life is defined by a state of abjection, or, the state of being cast off. In *Powers of Horror,* Julia Kristeva describes the "abject not [as] a "definable *object*," "ob-jest" or "correlative" to the subject" but as something that is "opposed to" the object (Kristeva 1). She continues: "what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). Thus, Hester is not even granted an object position – instead she is defined by the ways she has been discarded by the constellation of other 'responsible' adults in her community. The place of exclusion in which she dwells is a place beyond meaning, beyond significance, in which Hester lives out of sight and mind. It is represented geographically in Sarah Benson's Signature production as a halfpipe under a platform that the respectable characters in the play traverse. Darieck Scott both queers and racinates Kristeva's formulation, arguing that the "abject describes a kind of lowering historical cloud" and a "a history of humiliating defeat, a useless history which must be in some way overturned or overcome" (Scott 4). Scott locates the abject in a kind of historical place, be it the plantation, the lynching post, or the segregated lunch counter. "To this way of seeing," he continues, "the past is an obstacle to imagining and building an empowered political position capable of effective liberation politics" (Scott 4).

Though Parks does not place Reverend D within any Black historical past (though he was played by a Black actor, Russell G. Jones, in the Signature production), he is a man who views his past – and Hester's role in it – as an object that must constantly be defeated. Hester's search for child support is a recurring theme in the play, and after repeated appeals, Reverend D finally promises to give Hester "100 bucks" to support their child (Parks 102). Hester responds with the following comment: "I was thinking, you know, in my head, that there was something I can do to stop that hand coming down. Must be something –" (102). Even though Reverend D has offered a (flimsy) promise to provide some financial support for his son, Baby, Hester flirtatiously insinuates that she wants more. In her head, she visualizes a moment when she can cast off her own abjection and enter a monogamous, heteronormative partnership that will turn her into a respectable woman. Her attempt to reinitiate her relationship with Reverend D is partially a desperate attempt to give her children a father, but also an attempt to cultivate a human connection in a society that has discarded her. However, Reverend D still defines his relationship with Hester as one of exclusion, and he smears her as a "common slut" before threatening to "crush [her] underfoot" (103). Hester has attempted to find an aperture, a little thread of opportunity in drawing upon the memories of her relationship with Reverend D. However, Hester does not have to summon the image of the 'big hand' to be crushed under its weight. Reverend D slut-shames Hester and threatens her with violence despite the fact that he was directly involved in Baby's conception. Once again, the audience sees a woman who is crushed by the hands, feet, and other appendages of the people who are supposed to support her.

But before she is crushed, Hester demonstrates enormous creativity and resilience. Her lack of support from the fathers of her children means that she struggles to give them necessities like food. Despite that, Hester does not let her financial limitations restrict her creativity, and she uses her hands to stretch the few resources that she has. When she tells her children that she is making a "soup of the day," Trouble, her son with the Doctor, retorts that the children "had soup of the day yesterday" (Parks 14). This is a conversation that would frustrate most exhausted parents after a long day of work, but Hester, full of optimism, argues that "todays a new day" and encourages an inquiring Beauty to "wait and see" if the soup is different from yesterday's soup (14). Thus, in the beginning of the play, Hester attempts to build a world of optimism and possibility that exists beyond the rigid confines of her material condition. Though the family will end up eating a fantastical soup made of ingredients from their collective imaginations, Hester's act of critical fabulation, to borrow a phrase from Saidiya Hartman, demonstrates Hester's elastic vision. Hester forces her children to stretch their imaginations to imagine a world in which they are fed enough, a world that is willing to stretch enough to include not only respectable families led by a patriarch, but a woman and her children by 5 fathers. What would it be like if Black women, Black single mothers, did not have to constantly dodge the weight of crushing hands and feet? What can Hester tell us about ways to tap into the potential of marginalized Black women? Though we see Hester struggle internally and externally with the weight of being cast off from society, her valiant resistance reveals to the audience a blueprint for future iterations of Black womanhood in which

vulnerable women do not have to stretch themselves to the breaking point to avoid suffering.

What is elasticity in the context of this play? Elasticity refers to one's ability to stretch while also retaining one's original shape. Reverend D, The Doctor, Amiga Gringa, Welfare, and Chili are all elastic presences in the constellation of *In The Blood.* They stretch towards Hester when they want to exploit her labor, and pull back when they want to resume their positions as respectable members of society. And though Hester remains an abject figure throughout the duration of the play, Parks shows the audience that she, too, is elastic, always grasping for a better life despite being crushed under the weight of the structural barriers symbolized by that 'big hand.' And Parks' text, though it has been criticized for pathologizing Black motherhood in its attempts to create awareness of society's cruelty against Black women, also stretches to make way for a world in which Black women do not have to strive and overcome exploitation to live comfortably**.**

Though Parks offers a sharp and often bitingly funny critique of the ways that the state enacts cruelty on Black single mothers, she does not offer a way through the abject. Parks leaves the audience with a caged Hester at the play's conclusion, which begs the following question: Is this it? And though Scott argues that there is power in abjection, I argue that there are nuggets of Hester's depiction that take us to a place beyond abjection, a place where our conceptions of the family can stretch to include people like Hester who were previously cast off as undesirable and unworthy of care. If we can stretch beyond abjection, we will ultimately create a more elastic society, a society that has room for all.

Hester and The Doctor: Projection and the Un-Human

The elastic imagination is not only deployed to create a fictitious soup made of slices of the most delicious pie but is also used to lob numerous violent projections onto Hester's corporeal body. Hester's abjection in *In The Blood* is formed through a series of dehumanizing attacks on her character and person. Hester is surveilled, physically and sexually assaulted, and ultimately rejected by the two men who can immediately improve her financial and political situation. All these humiliations not only affect Hester, but also her children, who feel the abjection in their own bodies. The degradation that Hester and her family experience is elastic: its mode oscillates between the verbal and physical, but its intent is always to keep Hester in her place. In the constellation of Parks' play, Hester is an un-human body that can be violated at will. I argue that Hester is "un-" and not "non-human" because the prefix "un-" suggests that she is in opposition to the human. Hester's fleshiness, her corporeality, is never the issue for the other adult characters in the play. Instead, her existence is an obstacle that must be overcome by them, lest they be cast off from society like Hester. Her positionality is also usefully explained by way of Fanon, who writes: "the first thing the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits" (Fanon 52). For Fanon, the 'native' is un-human. Fanon's remark also suggests a border that cannot be transgressed, a limit that is shaped not only by class position, but also by geography. Hester dwells in an underground hovel that is the opposite of where her community's respectable adult denizens live. And although Hester is not a 'native,' Fanon can be used to theorize about the immobility of the underclass.

Parks has a history of drawing complicated Black women onstage, women who defy respectability and convention, but she has also been accused of presenting negative stereotypes of Black women without critique. Her play *Venus* (1996) was accused of romanticizing the relationship between Saartje Baartman, the Khoisian woman who was kidnapped from South Africa and exhibited all over Europe, and the Baron Docteur[20], fictionalized version of one of her captors.[21] (The *Venus* controversy was reaggravated when Ben Brantley's review of a 2017 revival compared Baartman to Kim Kardashian). Yet, a brief examination of Baartman is useful for the ways in which Parks' dramaturgy is held in thrall of abject women. Katherine McKittrick describes Baartman as the "ultimate "nigger-woman" and defective human," a person who has "been "scienced" into degradation" (McKittrick 117). Hester is similarly 'scienced' via a degrading physical exam that is less about her personal health and well-being, and more about the threat that she poses to the more respectable members of her community. Hester's un-humanness is embodied through her degradation of the exam, in which the Doctor manipulates her like an animal. Like McKittrick, Carlos Miranda argues that Baartman's "genitals and brain [were separated] from her body" (Miranda 913). Though Miranda is discussing the literal enclosure of body parts in a jar, Hester is seen as discrete collection of reproductive organs, and not a whole human throughout the course of the play.

When the Doctor cries "Solutions! Solutions! Solutions! That's what they want," he reduces Hester to a problem (Parks 37). The Doctor does not acknowledge

[20] Both *Venus* and *In The Blood* have relationships between abject Black women and white male doctors as central parts of their dramaturgy.
[21] https://www.americantheatre.org/2000/10/01/the-possession-of-suzan-lori-parks/

that a society that neglects its most vulnerable citizens is the problem. Instead, he sees Hester as a conundrum that most not be supported but solved, an evocation that hearkens back to Adolf Hitler's Final Solution, which was regarded as the "answer" to the Jewish question,"[22] and laid the intellectual groundwork for the Holocaust. Foreshadowing the play's conclusion – and Hitler's own aims - the Doctor understands that there is a point at which Hester will cease to exist as a free woman. The Doctor forces Hester to perform the "spread and squat" and refers to her gynecological exam as a "look under the hood" (39). 'Spread and squat' is evocative of the examinations that prisoners experience during intake, examinations that are meant to confirm that they don't have any contraband. In Hester's case, the 'contraband' for which the Doctor's look is not a pocket knife or hidden drugs, but additional children that will function as a burden to the state. Reducing her body to a 'hood' also heightens her objectification, making her more car than human. The Doctor gives Hester an eye exam chart that says "SPAY," thus showing how the respectable adults in *In The Blood* view Hester as an animal, not a person (Parks 41). The discourse around solutions is further emphasized when the Doctor explains why he must give Hester a hysterectomy:

> Doctor: When I say removal of your "womanly parts" do you know what parts Im talking about?
>
> Hester: Yr gonna take my womans parts?

[22] https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/first-moments-hitlers-final-solution-180961387/

Doctor: My hands are tied. The Higher Ups are calling the shots now. (*Rest)* You have 5 healthy children, itll be for the best, considering. (43)

A hysterectomy is the removal of a person's uterus and is a procedure that is often only performed on people who are menopausal, experiencing uterine fibroids, or who have chosen not to have children themselves. Hester meets none of these criteria, and most importantly, is not electing to undergo the procedure herself. The Doctor's demand has dark resonances with the sterilization programs that were enacted against poor Black women in the Southern United States, programs that were presented as 'solutions' to the burden of poor Black women's reproduction.[23] Reaching even further back, the Doctor's actions recall the gynecological experiments that were wrought upon the bodies of enslaved Black women, experiments that are credited with advancing gynecology as a field.[24] But unlike many of the girls and women who were sterilized and abused under these real-life campaigns, the Doctor at least has the 'courtesy' to tell Hester that she is being sterilized. Yet, he also displaces responsibility for this decision to the 'higher ups,' negating his own agency – and expressing tacit approval of the orders he is enacting. Like Adolf Eichmann, the German-Austrian SS officer and antagonist of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* he is a good functionary of the state, a state whose functioning is premised on layers of deflection, collusion, and violence against Black women. Ultimately, the Doctor has agreed to perform Hester's hysterectomy because her reproduction – as a

[23] http://www.msnbc.com/all/eugenic-sterilization-victims-belated-justice
[24] https://jme.bmj.com/content/medethics/19/1/28.full.pdf

Black woman living in poverty with 5 kids and without a husband – has been deemed a nuisance to polite society. He also relishes in his own power and entitlement to control a Black woman's fertility decisions.

Hester's lack of ownership over her body is emphasized even when she seems to be making her own choices about how she wants to live her life. Like Parks' version of Baartman, Hester has a complicated relationship with her sexual exploitation, both leaning into and resisting her own abjection. Miranda and Spencer describe the ways in which Baartman "[attempted to negate] her negations," which they consider "a somber but forced embrace of the assaulting relations of power through which she must index self and flesh and reckon with the brutal effects of power on the body and the psyche" (921). Similarly, Hester will engage in seemingly consensual sexual relationships with the other characters in the play.[25] She reluctantly engages in transactional sex with other characters as an attempt to access respectability and resources, but these transactions must be understood as occurring under the suffocating matrix of power that diffuses the play.

One of her partners is the Doctor, the father of her son Trouble. When the former describes a sexual encounter with Hester, he argues that "…she was, like she was giving me something that was not hers / to give me but something that was mine / that I'd lent her / and she was returning it to me" (45). The Doctor emphasizes that Hester was not "paid" for this encounter, but it emerged out of her deep sense of "loneliness" and need for human connection. Thus, the encounter between the Doctor

[25] This – particularly Hester's sexual relationship with Welfare – will be further explored in my next section.

and Hester is provoked, in part, by Hester's own desire. Yet, one wonders what this interaction would look like if the respectable adults in the play acknowledged Hester outside of a sexual context. Hester must 'give' the Doctor her body because it is the only way she will be acknowledged in a society that still sees Black women as chattel. Hester's struggle also shows the precarity of marginalized bodies in contemporary liberal 'rights' discourses – the hard-earned rights of marginalized people benevolently granted by white men can be taken back at a moment's notice. The fact that she must 'return' her body to the Doctor implies that even if no money is exchanged, maybe Hester feels as though she is exchanging an opportunity to be treated with more respect.

Hester and Amiga Gringa: Confessions of Whiteness and Womanhood

Yet, not all women on the margins of society are threatened by the forced removal of their reproductive organs or are placed in positions where they must unwillingly exchange sex for survival. Hester's conversations with Amiga Gringa, her white friend, show how white women resist and even subvert these medicalizing discourses. Amiga Gringa taunts Hester with the question: "do you know how much cash I'll get for the fruit of my white womb" (71). Amiga Gringa's provocation is a play on words, with allusions to both money and sex. It reflects the desirability of white women in an antiblack sexual marketplace, where a white woman's "fruit" is the vagina that she will use to make money via sex work, and also the white baby that will

emerge from her womb, in a world where white newborns receive top dollar in the adoption market.[26]

Amiga Gringa's flippancy also reflects white women's elastic position in society. They can stretch themselves in multiple unappealing ways, yet they will always be drawn back into the fold of respectable society. Because of the power she holds in society despite her transgressions, Amiga Gringa is baffled at Hester's unwillingness to fully embrace her abject position in society. When Hester declines Amiga Gringa's offer to engage in sex work, Gringa quizzically remarks how the former "most often chooses to walk the straight and narrow" even though she is "driving her life all over the road" (Parks 71). What is the difference between walking and driving in this regard? Though Gringa claims that Hester is in the driver's seat of her own life, many of her poor outcomes are shaped by the sexual and financial exploitation that she experiences at the hands of the other characters in the play. There are clearly others driving Hester, and her 'walking' is a way of resisting those external forces. And Hester's determination to 'walk' emphasizes both her own resilience and elasticity, and the degree to which she has internalized discourses about respectability and strives to live up to them, not quite understanding the structural forces that undermine her at every turn.

Amiga Gringa is unwilling to work her way to the top because the power that accompanies her white femininity makes makes hard work obsolete. She has a "command of [her] embodiment" that accompanies whiteness, the assurance that your

[26] https://www.npr.org/2013/06/27/195967886/six-words-black-babies-cost-less-to-adopt

body is desirable, and your children are valued (Scott 17). Hester is blamed for her circumstances by Amiga Gringa, who doesn't understand how her whiteness allows her to navigate marginalization with greater ease. When Hester discusses the sewing "job" she has received from Welfare, Gringa calls her a "slave" and "animal" for refusing to work for a "living wage" (Parks 66). When Hester argues that she "can't start from the top," Gringa retorts that "plenty of people start from the top" (66).

Though Gringa is right – Hester should be working for a living wage, Gringa's criticism also begs for another question of Scott's to be addressed: if one does not have command of their embodiment, then "What is the fashion of survival?" (Scott 17). Scott characterizes these modes of survival as 'powers of abjection,' riffing on Kristeva's powers of horror. But instead of centering the power to disgust, Scott argues the ways the abjection can be mobilized for feminist purposes. And even though the terms of Welfare's agreement with Hester are deeply exploitative, Hester is still showing resourcefulness – a kind of personal elasticity - by attempting to support her family through sewing. Gringa's judgment should be directed to Welfare, not the single mother who as clinging for any opportunity to support her family. Reflects the ways that vulnerable people are blamed for not navigating oppression effectively, instead of their oppressors. Furthermore, Hester has internalized the false, capitalistic narrative of working one's way up from the bottom that is fed to poor people by wealthy people who know that their wealth is largely inherited. Gringa bursts the bubble, but instead of empowering Hester with that information, uses it to scam her once again.

Amiga Gringa's white violence not only affects Hester, but also her children, who internalize their abjection, which is in turn embodied as a stress response. A hungry Bully watches Amiga Gringa eat a sandwich that was meant for Hester. Though she is a child, and unable to articulate the humiliation and gratuitous theft of seeing a white woman eat a sandwich meant for her Black mother, she balls her hands into fists. Hester "unlocks" her fists, but the damage has been done (Parks 70). Bully's locked fists reflect how the stress of her living situation is subconsciously embodied and reflects that ways that Black children internalize racism in the real world.[27]

Hester and Welfare: Confessions of Surveillance, Class, and Rape

It is not surprising that men and white women are cruel to Hester, but one of Hester's most vicious tormentors is another Black woman, Welfare. Hester is not only exploited and surveilled by Welfare and related institutions, but Welfare also takes great pains to distance herself from Hester while directly benefiting from the latter woman's exploitation. Welfare demonstrates great elasticity – stretching herself towards Hester when she needs inexpensive labor or desires sex and retreating behind her position as an agent of the state when she wants to reassert her respectability. Though much of my previous discussion has centered around Hester's interpersonal relationships, institutions – and their figureheads - that are meant to serve Hester are the source of intense humiliation and surveillance. In her conversation with Welfare, who has come to visit her home, Hester argues that the homeless shelter "hassles me. Always prying in my business. Stealing my shit. Touching my kids. We was making ends meet all right then – ends got further apart" (Parks 55). This is a common

[27] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10379455

description of shelters, institutions that are supposed to provide a buffer between vulnerable people and the streets, but function as their own incubators of exploitation. Homeless people in shelters often report that their property, particularly the various forms of identification needed to navigate the adult world, has been stolen.[28]

Welfare is the only other Black woman in the play (in the Signature production, she was played by Jocelyn Bioh), and the distinctions that Parks creates between the women hinge sharply on issues of class. Montana Levi Blanco, the costume designer for the production, dressed Welfare in a smart, teal 2-piece suit with gold buttons, signifying respectability and affluence compared to Hester's drab black outfit. Hester's costume was replete with kneepads that allowed Hester and her children to navigate the set's treacherous halfpipe, but also cannily suggested Hester's sexual subservience. For Welfare, Hester is a failed Black woman, part of that "terrifying" Black past which is "useless" and "which always has to be surpassed" (Scott 5). Unlike Welfare, Hester is an abject being who has failed to conquer that treacherous dialectic of "domination and defeat" (Scott 6). When Hester argues that the "world don't like women much," Welfare emphasizes that she is "a woman too! And a black woman just like [Hester]. Dont be silly" (Parks 59-60). The implication, of course, is that Hester should be doing much better than she is because Welfare has been able to successfully navigate a misogynoiristic world. Knowing well that her comfortable, middle-class existence is predicated on exploiting the labor of another vulnerable Black women like Hester, whom she only offers "a buck" for doing hair (60). Welfare previously emphasizes that her hair is "silky," implying that she can

[28] https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ID_Barriers.pdf

afford expensive chemical relaxers that allow her hair to imitate European textures, a luxury that Hester is not afforded living under a bridge.

Yet, despite Welfare's disdain for Hester, she is still drawn to the latter woman. Kristeva argues that abjection "fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced." Eventually, "desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (Kristeva 1). Even though to be abject is to be cast off from society, there is still longing for the abject, but longing itself is eventually cast off. Welfare describes the "thrill" that she experienced during her husband's threesome with Hester (62). Welfare is excited by the prospect of sexual contact with the 'other,' but also emphasizes her sexual purity and respectability in relationship to Hester, arguing that it was her "first threesome / and it wont happen again" (62). Welfare further underlines the distance between herself and Hester by emphasizing the latter's position as a "low-class person" and reiterates that "We have absolutely nothing in common" – other than the shared experience of sexual intercourse with Welfare's husband, though only Welfare is protected by the cover of respectability that comes with wifehood (Parks 62). Abjection "lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (Kristeva 1). Hester is literally lying next to Welfare and her husband, but she will never be assimilated into their lives beyond the bedroom.

Sexuality is a useful lens through which one can look at abjection, and Scott argues that the "history that produces blackness is a sexual history" (Scott 8). Yet, as I investigate the ways in which Welfare wrestles with the abject that accompanies her sexual encounter, it is important to emphasize that Hester is unable to consent to a sexual encounter with an agent of the state that is responsible for supervising her. If

we understand “rape as a sexual trauma” and a “historical subjugation,” is there any way that it also “endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive black power” (Scott 11)? The “power” that I locate in this case is not mobilized by Hester – who is brutally victimized by Welfare and her husband – but in the way that Parks mobilizes Welfare’s confession to reveal the elasticity of relations between powerful and marginalized people in society.

Welfare argues that “Maintenance of the system / depends on a well-drawn boundary line / and all parties respecting that boundary” (62). Though Welfare insists that there is a ‘boundary’ that must be maintained, she confesses to an intimate relationship between herself and Hester that reveals that the boundary is extremely flimsy. Parks’ descriptions of the dehumanizing sexual exploitation of Black women also intersects with her class analysis. ‘Welfare’ is not a system that is meant to give poor people the resources to live a decent life, but it is a state-sponsored system that is intended to maintain a permanent underclass. And this permanent underclass is maintained at the expense of Hester’s own personal boundaries. When describing her the threesome with Hester, Welfare argues that she was “surprised, but consented” (61). The ‘surprise’ is itself a form of violation, an unexpected moment that precipitates the ‘consent’ under duress. Yet, consent cannot be offered under duress, thus making Hester’s agreement an example of the power of the ‘big hand’ that shapes Hester’s choices.

Haley Konitshek describes Hester as “Sapphire’s mocking double," a figure who talks back at the stereotype of the rude, insolent Black woman (Konitshek 674). Yet, reducing Hester to a sapphire is unnecessarily limiting when her sexual

exploitation is so central to her identity. Hester's sexuality is the fruit that precipitated the crisis in which she finds herself. I see her as a 'Jezebel of convenience,' forced to mobilize her sexuality to curry favor with the 'higher ups,' even though they should be responsible for taking care of Hester. Instead, Hester is described as the "spice" in her threesome with Welfare and her husband (Parks 61). In this rendering, she is not a person, but the seasoning for a piece of meat. The 'higher ups' have a social elasticity that Hester lacks, in which they are able stretch themselves down to Hester's level, then snap back to a place of safety and respectability.

Hester and Her Men: Tracing Geographies of Abjection

Yet, despite the judgment and exploitation that Hester experiences at the hands of other women, her unraveling is precipitated by a series of betrayals by the men in her life. The Doctor, Reverend D, and her ex-boyfriend Chilli both distance themselves from Hester's plight in a geographical sense. Doctor says there is "such a gulf" between himself and Hester, but it is Reverend D who most clearly articulates what is at stake (Parks 44). Though the respectable adults experience a great deal of elasticity, stretching to slum it with Hester before returning to their protected spaces, fully acknowledging their connection with Hester will lead to personal tragedy. The metaphor of the gutter is first introduced in Scene 3, right before Hester first confronts Reverend D, the father of her youngest child, Baby, about his missing child support. As Hester stands just off in the distance, Reverend D muses about the "endless" gutter, which is "deep and wide and if you think you gonna crawl out of the gutter by crawling along the gutter you gonna be in the gutter for the rest of your life" (47). For Reverend D, the gutter is Kristeva's "vortex of summons and repulsion" (Kristeva 1).

His “certainty” about the perils of the gutter protects him from “shame.” Yet he must consciously resist its lurking temptations (1). The gutter cannot be negotiated – if must be avoided at all costs, lest its contaminants soil those who are trying to escape.

Reverend D emphasizes his virtue by arguing that he never “hurt anyone” or “held hate for anyone.” This affirmation of his goodness functions as a self-soothing rhetorical exercise, a way of reassuring himself that he is a fundamentally decent person, and this decency will allow him to avoid accountability for his past life. Yet, Hester threatens to disrupt his delicate peace, to “drag me down / and sit me at the table / at the head of the table of her fatherless house” (79). Reverend D’s monologue is a confession, a space of rejecting the abject. Like Chilli, he is an elastic figure who enjoys the pleasure that accompanies sex with Hester but pulls back when it is time to care for the children. Furthermore, the image of being dragged down is evocative of a gender-swapped Persephone and Hades story, in which a young woman is dragged into the nether to become the queen of underworld. Reverend D expresses his fear of becoming too much like Hester and does not want to be dragged into her underworld.

Reverend D and Welfare are the only two Black characters in the play other than Hester and are also virulently disgusted by her behavior. Reverend D’s obsession with not returning to the gutter and Welfare’s insistence on boundaries is a product of the precarity of African-American life – because structural racism has prevented many African-Americans from building and maintaining wealth, one can be comfortably middle-class and see all of their capital evaporate in the space of a generation. Yet, instead of cultivating some class solidarity and banding with Hester to create an

equitable world for all Black people, Welfare and Reverend D cling to the sliver of privilege that they have. It is easier.

After her being kicked out by Reverend D's, Hester is confronted with one final Hail Mary: Chilli, her first love, and the father of her eldest child, Jabber, returns unexpectedly to the fold after a multi-year sojourn. He proposes marriage, thus promising to finally make Hester a respectable woman. Hester will no longer stretch to be seen, making bad bargains with the higher-ups, to provide for her family. But Chilli has several terms:

> Chilli: And your child – ok. *Our* child – ok. These things have to do with you and me. You would be mine and I would be yrs and all that. But I would still retain my rights to my manhood. You understand.
>
> Hester: Sure. My-
>
> Chilli: Yr kid. We'll get to him. I would rule the roost. I would call the shots. The whole roost and every single shot. I've proven myself as a success. You've not done that. It only makes sense that I would be in charge. (Parks 92)

Chilli has not yet married Hester, and he is already distancing himself from the responsibilities of paternity. His Freudian slip reveals that he sees Jabber as Hester's responsibility. Chilli's multiple acts of distancing – he abandons the family, then returns unexpectedly making multiple demands - reveal the elasticity of fatherhood in a world that still understands that childrearing is 'women's work.' He makes a shallow appeal to the mutual respect and understanding that undergirds successful marriages, but ultimately emphasizes the importance of his own "manhood" over any obligations

to family. Chilli then interrupts Hester and reemphasizes that Jabber is hers, but he will be in control of all other aspects of the household. This is not the product of a particular investment in the running of the household, but a desire to control those with even less social capital than him.

Also, he is delusional – he insists that he has been a "success," though Parks deliberately makes it unclear as to what Chilli has done in the intervening years. Patriarchy is another finger on the big hand. Instead of celebrating Hester for providing for her family against all odds and without any help, Chilli is disgusted when he realizes that Hester has four more children since his departure, and he ultimately retracts his marriage proposal. Patriarchy is the expectation that Hester must remain the woman that Chili abandoned years ago, ignoring the ravages of time and the burden of her single motherhood. The threads of the patriarchy cling to Hester, their sticky tentacles leaving casting a film over Hester, even as they retreat into the distance.

Completely abandoned by all the adults who have the capacity to help her, Hester unravels completely, culminating in the murder of her eldest son with Chilli, Jabber. The murder of Jabber is the "purifying sacrifice" that occurs "by duplicating and thus displacing through ritual the preeminent separation" (Kristeva 99-100)**.** The killing of Jabber is an expression of exasperation, but it is also an attempt to free herself from that primordial connection – that first son that marked Hester as a single mother and began her slide to ignominy. Hester is prompted to kill Jabber when he calls her a slut, instinctively apologizing for his outburst with a tepid "sorry" (Parks 105). He is immediately apologetic, as if trying to stave off the inevitable. Parks

describes his remark as a “childs joke” (106). Hester is illiterate, and thus “dispossessed in the very language” that is supposed to be her native tongue (Miranda and Spencer 916). But she is still very capable of speaking and understanding language, which is a form of literacy. Most importantly and fatally, she recognizes that her son is misnaming her, recognizing that in the end, even her children see her as a ‘slut.’ Hester subsequently kills her son by “brutally” hitting him with a club. She then writes an “A” on the ground, “her hands wet with blood” (106). In the Signature production, the audience was frozen silent as the blood from Hester’s hands dripped off the corner of the proscenium stage and into the hovel where her children slept. Drip, drip, drip. The optimism and imagination that inspired her earlier acts of mothering – fashioning a soup to ‘feed’ her whole family out of thin air – are gone, replaced with the despair that she will forever be marked by the stigma of single motherhood.

Hester’s “descent into madness and psychiatric non-personhood” has a real-life corollary - Malcolm X’s mother, Louise Little. The latter’s death was precipitated by the death of her late husband, Earl, who officially died by suicide. However, Mrs. Little believed this story was a coverup for his murder at the hands of white supremacists, and the incongruity between her beliefs and the state’s account of her husband’s death caused her unraveling. Malcolm decried the “hypocrisy of “a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight” (Malcolm X qtd in Long 307). Hester's intersectional identities erode her humanity - humanity that is defined by whiteness, masculinity, and wealth in Parks' ecosystem. She is simultaneously crushed by pressure and penalized for not

withstanding it. Hester kills Jabber not because she is a bad or unfit mother, but because the threads of her final safety net – a possible reunion with Chilli, Jabber's father - have snapped. She has lost her elasticity and sees no exit other than violence.

Abjection's Endgame: The Restoration of Social Norms

In *In The Blood,* abjection's endgame occurs when the law is enforced, and social norms are restored. Kristeva traces "another logic of abjection [that] is no longer defilement…but transgression due to a misreading of the Law" (Kristeva 87-88). Hester's transgression is the murder of her son, for which she must be punished in order to bring discipline to society. Hester is an example of what can happen to women who attempt to stretch themselves beyond the bounds of respectability, and her fate is "the horror that they seize on in order to build themselves up and function" (Kristeva 210). The horror, of course, is the threat of becoming like Hester. Social norms are enforced by structural violence, which Russell Vandenbroucke defines as a "shift in focus from direct violence that harms individuals to structural and cultural violence that injures society" (118). Structural violence is marked by "racism, poverty, and sexism" and a "Sisyphean system with no beginning or end" (Jones qtd in Warner 164). Structural violence is the 'big hand' that crushes Hester under its weight. After killing Jabber, "Hester sits there, crumpled, alone. The prison bars come down" (Parks 106). The deviant woman has been punished, the company is subject to the horror of her crime and punishment, and society has been restored to normal.

In the play's final scene, titled "The Prison Door" the entire company reforms as a depersonalized Greek chorus to shame Hester in unison. She is described as an "animal," they say "she oughta be married" and that "she dont got no skills cept one"

(108). All of these descriptions slut-shame Hester in various ways: her marital status is mocked (ignoring that Chilli's proposal was retracted, and that the Reverend D refused to marry her as well). She is punished for being 'too good' at sex and reduced to a beast – a "thing-ification." In the Signature production, the lowering of the prison doors – a grate festooned with neon lights in the Signature production – is an enormous spectacle and underlines the ways in which Hester's identity is foreclosed by her dual positions as captive and 'thing.' Her un-humanity – as the opposite of a respectable person – is reaffirmed in this moment. Ultimately, and unlike Hester Prynne, she is unable to stretch beyond the mark of the 'A,' for which the company cruelly mocks her:

> Welfare: Is she in any pain?
>
> Doctor: She shouldn't be. She wont be having anymore children.
>
> Welfare: No more mistakes
>
> Chili: Whats that?
>
> Welfare: An "A."
>
> Amiga Gringa: "An A."
>
> Doctor: First letter of the alphabet.
>
> Welfare: That's as far as she got. (108-09)

In this moment, Hester is reduced to a beast who cannot experience physical pain. She is rendered feral, not acknowledged as a mother who is grappling with an unspeakable crime. The language of the chorus is reminiscent of the many people who are judgmental of mothers who kill or harm their children, yet never give a second thought to the structural causes that result in children being harmed. Have curtailed

Hester's fertility not through an un-humanizing hysterectomy, but through incarceration. The chorus' discussion of the 'A' is a riff on Hester's illiteracy, but also her inability to master life, to pull herself out of the gutter. Yet, the elasticity that is achieved when one pulls oneself out of the gutter is only achieved at the expense of others – by reinforcing the boundary between yourself and others. Incarceration is the ultimate inelastic position, one's ability to stretch and better themselves rendered irrelevant by the state.

Beyond The "Terror-Bound Underside": Reevaluating Parks' Dramaturgy

Parks leaves the viewer with a completely broken Hester, an inelastic woman who has been rendered incapable of transcending her abject positionality because of incarceration – the endgame of a society that is built upon structural violence. Cheryl Black argues that "the degradation and oppression [Hester experiences is so] excessive that their condition approaches a kind of hyper-abjection" (Black 51). Parks provides the viewer with excess abjection – an abjection that folds upon itself and replicates in almost parodic ways. Watching the Signature Theatre production of *In The Blood* is tantamount to being pulled into the gutter that Reverend D desperately tries to escape. Yet, are there lessons to be learned from the abject? Scott argues abjection has the potential to "[enrich] the expanse of what is human being rather than setting its limit or marking its terror-bound underside?" (Scott 6)**.** Even if Parks subjects the viewer to endless reams of abjection, does her text allow for apertures that provide a window into a world for Hester beyond abjection? Is showing the vectors of exploitation that

lead a Black single mother to murder her child a realistic slice of life, or part of the endless, strange loop[29] of violence on Black bodies that perpetuates to this day?

In The Blood is an elastic text that has many potentials for reading and misreading. Parks herself has said contradictory things about it – and her dramaturgy, broadly - over the years. According to Parks, her work doesn't "have a message," she has "nothing to say," but "things to show." Her plays should not be intellectualized but felt "in the gut" (Parks qtd in Black 50). Similarly, in "Elements of Style," Parks argues that plays should be "an examination of the human condition," whether or not race is central to a play, rather than a vehicle for social commentary" (Parks qtd in Mihaylova 217). Yet, Parks' written remarks are very different from what she told me in the lobby before the Signature Theatre before the 2017 production, where she emphasized that the play has an "important message." But even in Parks' prescriptive-sounding earlier remarks, there is an aperture towards greater meaning, and room for elasticity. Feeling – or having an emotional response to a performance – is often very meaningful. And the "human condition" and "social commentary" are not mutually exclusive, the former providing fodder for the latter.

If one concedes that Parks intended for an audience to find meaning in her work, we can return to the question of 'hyper-abjection.' How much abjection is too much? In her discussion of Parks' Venus, another play with an abject Black woman at its center, Stefka Mihaylova rejects the "demands for "corrective" context" that surrounded Parks' retelling of Saartje Baartman's story (Mihaylova 215). However,

[29] I am thinking particularly of Michael R. Jackson's play *A Strange Loop,* produced in 2019 at Playwrights Horizons in New York City.

LaTanya Rogers argues that *In The Blood* "reinforces negative stereotypes of Black women as promiscuous and irresponsible…without offering any real solutions for healing or reconciliation" (Rogers 62). Rogers also returns to Hawthorne's source material, arguing that Parks' Hester La Negrita is "cast even further outside of the realm" of "proper" womanhood" than Hester Prynne, and that La Negrita's "motherhood is called into question in ways that her counterpart never encountered" (Rogers 63).

Mihaylova and Rogers are useful proxies for the debates over Parks' work that began in the 1990s. White critics like Mihaylova are dazzled by Parks' formal innovation, but Black critics like Rogers bristle at her debased depictions of Black life, and her work was not often produced in spaces that were primarily devoted to producing Black theater. In fact, there are striking parallels between Parks' reception in the 1990s and the furor surrounding Jeremy O. Harris' 2019 New York Theater Workshop production of *Slave Play*, which was received rapturously by white theater critics, but sharply criticized by Black audiences. Yet, even if one believes that Parks and her intellectual descendants are representing Black life in irresponsible ways onstage, playwrights should be able to depict societal problems onstage without needing to offer solutions for those problems. The idea that Parks and other Black playwrights must do "uplift work" – representing Black people in a positive and dignified light at all times – is a particularly heavy burden that has been placed on the shoulders of the Black playwright, and can get in the way of making compelling art.[30]

[30] The debate between 'art for art's sake' and racial uplift was epitomized in the debates that occurred between Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Furthermore, Rogers decries the lack of reconciliation that occurs within the world of Parks' play. I argue that it would be difficult -and more importantly, not worthwhile - to build community with state functionaries that do not see the inherent value and humanity in poor Black women, even if some of these people (like Welfare) are Black women themselves. And though Rogers decries Hester's hyper-abjection, it does contain truth in a world where Black women are dealing with multiple vectors of oppression. By virtue of her Blackness and womanhood, Hester La Negrita is further cast off from society than Hester Prynne. it would make sense for Hester to be in a more abject position then Hawthorne's Hester. And finally, "proper womanhood" and other taxonomies of respectability are categories that should dismantled. There is no one right way to be a mother and acknowledging the elasticity of motherhood makes it safer for mothers on the margins to parent.

Yet, despite my critique of Rogers' attempts to include Black women within the pantheon of respectable motherhood, I too believe that Parks' project is incomplete. It is not enough to reproduce the horror, the exploitation, the murder, the incarceration. Black harm without context is alienating, similar to the loops of Black people being murdered on Twitter and the surreptitious videos of White women calling the police on Black people who are barbecuing. Though Parks believes that the marrow of her "important message" will shine through, it is too much to expect the audience to see past Scott's 'terror-bound underside.' Though Mihaylova would likely argue that I am reproducing the same demands for 'corrective' context for which Rogers clamors, and that Parks is simply being honest about the barriers that Black women face, I am not asking for a rosy ending where Chilli sees how much Hester's

essential "goodness" and marries her despite the 4 additional children she has had since their initial departure. I am looking a space beyond abjection where Parks shows not only the violence that is enacted against Black single mothers but has the imagination to show a reality in which a Black single mother of five can thrive.

This potential for thriving is embodied by figures like Tanya Fields, a food justice activist and community organizer from the Bronx. She came to the public's attention in 2013 for her remarks during a question and answer session after a dialogue between bell hooks and Melissa Harris-Perry at The New School. Fields, at that time a mother of four with a fifth child on the way, spoke candidly about the judgment that she feels from other Black women in organizing spaces: "I have people who tell me 'When you talk about being low-income, don't talk about feeding your kids on food stamps. You don't need an audience for that. Suffer in shame and in silence. The situation that you are feeling is your own and is a product of your own bad choice.'"[31] After Fields finished her remarks, Harris-Perry walked into the audience and hugged her, a gesture that was controversial at the time. Though Fields identifies herself as "low-income," the core of the anxiety and frustration that she expresses is not about her inability to provide for her children, but the abjection that she experiences at the hands of other Black people for not having a respectable family unit. Like Welfare, who mercilessly judges Hester La Negrita while facilitating the latter's abjection, structural issues are reduced to personal failures. Fields is criticized for 'choosing bad men,' but a society that teaches men that childrearing is 'women's work' (even for

[31] http://yourblackworld.net/2013/11/18/melissa-harris-perry-defends-unmarried-and-financially-insecure-activist-for-having-5th-child/

married couples) is not. In order to avoid shaming the community, Fields is discouraged from speaking out in ways that would garner her support, thus compounding her abjection.

Yet, what is the trouble with embracing a Black single mother? What is the issue with stretching to include those beyond the bounds of respectability? Though respectability has been wielded as a cloak of safety for Black people, the constant and painful efforts that Welfare makes to erect boundaries and Reverend D makes to keep out of the gutter show the continued precarity of Black bodies who struggle to meet an unachievable standard. Single motherhood is not an abject condition, but a form of embodiment, a negotiation through life. I do not expect Parks to offer policy solutions for complex societal issues, but it would be an extraordinary act of imagination to capture the optimism of Hester's earlier moments in the play, the moments where she is deploying her creative potential, rather than casting her off because she does not conform to an idea of respectable Black womanhood. A text that acknowledged Hester's ingenuity along with her struggle is an elastic melodrama. The elastic melodrama does not simply reproduce trauma but stretches the form to create a new horizon beyond abjection.

Chapter Four: Self-Authorship in the '19th Century' Melodramas of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

> "If such an imitation of human beings, suffering from their fate, be well contrived and executed in all its parts, the spectator is led to feel a particular sympathy with the artificial joys or sorrows of which he is the witness. This condition of his mind is called the theatrical illusion."
>
> – Dion Boucicault, "The Art of Dramatic Composition" (1878)

This epitaph marks the beginning of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' 2014 play *An Octoroon,* an adaptation of the Irish dramatist Dion Boucicault's 1859 play *The Octoroon.* Both plays largely follow the same dramatic arc. George Peyton, the nephew of the deceased master of Terrebonne Plantation in Louisiana, has returned from Paris to collect his inheritance. He learns that his deceased uncle was in debt. In order to repurchase the plantation, George agrees to a marriage of convenience with Dora Sunnyside, a clingy but wealthy heiress who is smitten with him. This is a deeply painful choice for George, as he is in love with Zoe, the "octoroon" daughter of his uncle.[32] Meanwhile, Jacob M'Closky, the manipulative plantation overseer, murders the enslaved boy Paul to intercept a letter that will free the Peytons from their debt. Unaware of this letter, the enslaved people on the plantation – including Zoe - are auctioned in a desperate attempt to raise funds. Zoe is sold to M'Closky – who is also obsessed with her – and must decide whether life is worth living without the familiar confines of Terrebonne and the love of her life, George.

[32] This makes Zoe George's biological cousin, an issue that neither Boucicault nor Jacobs-Jenkins explore.

In the epitaph, Boucicault's use of the word "imitation" immediately summons images of shallowness and artificiality – images of melodrama, typical of the shallow imitations of humanity displayed by the genre's stock characters typical of the genre.[33] Boucicault's use of "contrived" and "executed" evoke discussion of the well-made play, a form that is intended to mobilize artificial displays of sympathy. Boucicault's epitaph is followed by Jacobs-Jenkins' own "Art of Dramatic Composition: A Prologue," a psychoanalytic deep dive into BJJ's psyche that is in dialogue with Boucicault's work, and in which the major themes of the play are laid bare. Jacobs-Jenkins' work is to - stretch the illusion, show how it is constructed to the point that that also becomes another illusion. The prologue is carried by three authorial voices: BJJ, a fictionalized version of Jacobs-Jenkins, The Playwright, a fictionalized version of Dion Boucicault, a 19th century figure who has been forcibly jolted into the 21st century, and the invisible hand of the real Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, the architect behind the entire play. Jacobs-Jenkins was initially motivated to adapt Boucicault's play because he had an emotional response to it. Jacobs-Jenkins subsequently takes his readers on an affective journey, first wrestling with an existential struggle as a Black playwright who is both fascinated by questions of race, while also fearful of being limited by them. He enacts self-authorship writing his way into the 21st century by reaching backwards and excavating stereotypes to push an anti-racist politic. His investigation explores humor, visuality, and affect before concluding with a discussion of the elasticity of language and form. By stretching a 19th century melodrama to

[33] It also refers to Douglas Sirk's 1959 melodrama *Imitation of Life.*

accommodate his expansive, 21st century vision, Jacobs-Jenkins shows the continued relevance of melodrama as a conduit through which to experience human emotion.

The Agony and The Trickery: What Is A Black Playwright To Do?

Is *An Octoroon* truly an adaptation? Tina Post describes *An Octoroon* as more of a "counterplay than an adaptation." She continues, arguing that "*An Octoroon*'s premiere at Soho Rep in New York was advertised as a "world-premiere, old-fashioned, meta-melodrama with Humor! Feelings! Live Music! Wigs! Sensation Scenes! Slave Auctions! Exploding Steamboats! Photography! And More!" ("An Octoroon"). The proliferation of exclamation points promises surplus after surplus – the bread and butter of melodrama (Post 542). In Post's estimation, *An Octoroon* both embraces and mocks melodrama's excesses. Verna Foster builds upon the idea of the play as a "meta-melodrama" (qtd. in Bent, "Branden"), a play that both celebrates and critiques its own form" (Foster 286). Foster locates this Brechtian 'quotation,' the instinct to critique and while also reifying, in *An Octoroon's* cross-racial casting, especially in Jacobs-Jenkins' "use of a black actor in whiteface to play George/M'Closky, produces the effect of Brechtian "quotation." The black actor is obviously presenting, or "quoting," rather than identifying with his lines" (Foster 297). Furthermore, Jacobs-Jenkins' male characters are the only ones cast cross-racially, thus revealing the mutability of masculinity and the ability of men to transform their identities in a way that women are not allowed.

Jacobs-Jenkins' adaptation differs most significantly from Boucicault's original play in his creation of BJJ, his alter ego. It is through BJJ that we are first introduced to the specter of the "black playwright." BJJ first appears to the audience

almost completely "naked" thus revealing both his vulnerability and the ways in which his skin circumscribes him. What does it mean to be a Black playwright? Presumably, it means that one will always be in a state of precarity. After taking the audience through a lengthy dialogue about his therapist, BJJ reveals that he doesn't "have a therapist" because he "can't afford one" (Jacobs-Jenkins 142). This reveals that the plight of the Black playwright is not that far from the struggles of the actual Black person, not only influenced by limited finances related to generations of systematic income inequality, but also struggling to navigate racism from therapists themselves. The therapist also functions as a white gaze/critic/white lens that is on BJJ and Jacobs-Jenkins from the opening moments of the play. Even the Playwright mocks BJJ, minimizing his 21st century problems. Evoking Black horror tropes, BJJ has a nightmare about being "[choked] to death" by bees, which evokes the 1992 horror film *Candyman.* BJJ is trapped within his own horror film, which is shaped by the antiblackness contained within the American theater. In addition to struggling with a therapist who doesn't understand him, BJJ finds resistance from other white theater makers who deride his *Octoroon* adaptation as too "melodramatic," which is clearly intended to be pejorative (Jacobs-Jenkins 141).

When BJJ reveals that BJJ "gets into whiteface," presumably to prepare his body to play M'Closky, the villainous race-swapped overseer that is the play's antagonist. But he is also revealing the masks that Black playwrights must also don to be legible to white theaters and get their work produced. These masks are not just limited to the playwright's physical body but are also reflected in the types of roles he can envision onstage. BJJ repeatedly discusses the resistance he got from white people

as he developed *An Octoroon,* resistance that is depicted in the following conversation: "Well, such-and-such doesn't really get the stuff about slaves." / I'm like, "What is there not to get? It's slavery, / And I'm not even asking you to play the slaves. / You're playing the goddamn slave owner" (Jacobs-Jenkins 142).

BJJ mentions that he is warned to not "shit where [he eats]" (Jacobs-Jenkins 143). This is clearly a friendly suggestion to not upset the powers that be in the institution that butters his bread - the American theater. By retorting that he "shit[s] where [he starves," BJJ is enacting elasticity, stretching the metaphor, and creating space where there is none for people who look like him (Jacobs-Jenkins 143). An exasperated BJJ then goes through a laundry list of demeaning, stereotypical roles that Black actors are expected to play without any resistance, roles that fold and compound upon each other, including a man who is "secretly on the DL with HIV" while also "trying to get out of a generic ghetto with his pregnant obese girlfriend," and ends with "someone's mother having a monologue where she's snotting out of her nose" because "she's been caught smoking crack" (Jacobs-Jenkins142-43). These things hearken to a multiplicity of Black representations over the past 30 years: the supposed downlow crisis of closeted, professional Black men that was covered extensively on the Oprah Show and other media in the early 2000s.[34] The "generic ghetto" represents the hood movie genre of the early 90s, (*Boyz N The Hood, Juice, Menace II Society, New Jack City,* etc) in which a glut of young, post-Spike Lee Black directors created depictions of Black life in the wake of the crack epidemic and the dismantling of the promises of

[34] And subsequently dismantled in the work of C. Riley Snorton.

the Civil Rights Movement. The "pregnant obese girlfriends" refers to the titular character that Gabourey Sidibe played in the 2009 film *Precious*.

BJJ does not allow depictions of Black motherhood to be left off the hook, and his "snotting" remark refers to multiple Viola Davis performances, in which the actress becomes so emotionally invested in a monologue that her nose begins to run. And though there have been quite a few Black mothers with substance abuse problems depicted on stage and in film, I think of Naomie Harris' depiction of a crack-abusing mother in Barry Jenkins' 2016 film *Moonlight* as the most lauded in recent memory. On a lighter note, BJJ's rant also references other satires like *Hard To Watch,* a fictional movie that allowed Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan), a ne'er do well comedian on the sitcom *30 Rock,* to finally be taken seriously as an actor, a point that is also taken up in Lydia Diamond's *Smart People,* during a scene in which a Black actor is told to 'Blacken up' their portrayal of a character by a white director. Also shows how Black actors must bare their trauma onstage to be taken seriously as actors.[35]In *She's Mad Real,* Oneka LaBennett also argues that while many Black people experience multiple oppressions, there is not one who experiences all of them.

BJJ's rant continues as he sympathizes with actors of color who are limited to playing "offensive bag[s] of garbage / so far from [their own lives] / but which some idiot critic or marketing intern is going to describe as / a gritty, truthful portrayal of "the black experience in America" (Jacobs-Jenkins 145). Jacobs-Jenkins begins his critique of the white gaze here, in which a mixture of white supremacy and a

[35] Could you imagine a Black actress winning for a musical-comedy role like Emma Stone of *La La Land* fame?

superiority complex positions white cultural gatekeepers at major newspapers - like Ben Brantley at the New York Times - whose opinion has the ability to make or break a show - and the mostly-white administrative staff at theaters around New York City, who determine which plays will be developed by their theaters - position themselves as authorities on the Black experience through a combination of hubris, arrogance, and white supremacy. Though it is likely demoralizing to graduate from Julliard or the Yale School of Drama and be limited to playing Thug #2 in a network police procedural, Jacobs-Jenkins own respectability politics emerge here. There are real Black people struggling in communities that have been shaped by systematic disinvestment. Do their stories not deserve to be told?[36] There is also a broader issue about the ways that Hollywood fetishizes suffering - the glamorous actor who transforms themselves to portray a marginalized person. This actor collects an award for their temporary suffering, burnishing their professional reputation and legacy while the truly abject see very little for their suffering depicted onstage. The issue is not fewer hood stories, it is about empowering black theater artists and filmmakers to create all types of stories.

The label of "Black playwright" is a burden that has attached itself to BJJ. He bemoans that he can't "wipe [his] ass without someone trying to accuse me of deconstructing the race problem in America" (Jacobs-Jenkins 144). BJJ mentions an earlier play, in which he used farm animals as metaphors to discuss his substance

[36] There are white actors like Christian Bale and Tony Goldwyn who have played characters with substance abuse issues, and white actresses like Julianne Moore and Michelle Williams are known for their portrayals of women in crisis.

abuse issues. The play was accused - most likely by those white critics and theater administrations he has previously admonished - of "deconstructing African folktales" (Jacobs-Jenkins 144). Immediately after this moment, BJJ places a "blond wig" on his head, further intensifying his whiteface transformation into the overseer M'Closky. Both visually and verbally, BJJ continues his depersonalization - both as a fictionalized version of the real Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, and as someone who is positioned as an archetypal Black playwright despite his resistance. His rant is both an indictment against the racism of the American theater, but also an example of depersonalization, self-alienation, and erasure of the Black subject. Thus, the state of being a Black playwright is itself a form of melodrama. The Playwright mocks BJJ as being "melodramatic" in a "slightly whiny" tone, which is Jacobs-Jenkins' way of communing with Boucicault.

BJJ is not Jacobs-Jenkins only alter ego onstage. He also designates a surrogate in the form of Br'er Rabbit, representing the layers of subversion in his authorial voice. Self-authorship is not only about concealing his own identity, but also reaching through the diaspora for African folktales that represent the history of the enslaved. But predictably, the white characters in Jacobs-Jenkins' play do not understand the complexity of Br'er Rabbit, and George reduces it to "a wonderful folktale" (Jacobs-Jenkins 158). George's flattening of Br'er Rabbit's complexity functions as a mockery of white ethnographies of Black people, conjuring the specter of the white sociologist who stands in front of a brick wall to prove their toughness.

Br'er Rabbit, played by a member of the ensemble or an uncredited Jacobs-Jenkins himself, has several silent entrances and exits throughout the play, usually

after the conclusion of a scene (Jacobs-Jenkins 176). The author photo in my edition of *An Octoroon* is a picture of Jacobs-Jenkins (or is it really him?) wearing a rabbit head, thus symbolizing his total identification with the mythological character. But Br'er Rabbit is not simply a silent, disengaged surrogate for the playwright. In the text, Jacobs-Jenkins deploys what Bess Rowen refers to as "affective stage directions." These "affective stage directions…require actors, directors, and designers to think through their own embodied experiences in order to make meaning out of these moments of the script, allowing for production teams to make these parts of the plays relevant to a particular cultural moment and location" (Rowen). In *An Octoroon,* Br'er Rabbit "*pauses, notices the audience, and seems to inspect it from afar for a bit, before exiting"* (JJ 176). Though he does not speak, Br'er Rabbit is still an active participant in the play, observing and responding to everything that occurs onstage. He notices the audience with different degrees of intensity. As a surrogate for Jacobs-Jenkins – or the actual playwright in costume – Br'er Rabbit surveys reactions to the work, focusing a pronounced lens on the mobilization of affect in the audience. Br'er Rabbit also periodically enters the tableaus that mark the end of an act. At the end of Act Two, M'Closky has killed the enslaved boy Paul in order to intercept the letter that will prevent him from being able to purchase Zoe at auction. As the indigenous man Wahnotee[37] grieves over the body of his young friend, frozen in tableau, "*Br'er Rabbit wanders through it"* (JJ 179). Wandering through a tableau is JJ's literal and physical

[37] According to Jane Kathleen Curry, the role of Wahnotee was originated by Boucicault himself.

intervention - a way of asserting his agency as a contemporary Black playwright by disrupting an image frozen in 1859.

Jacobs-Jenkins also functions as a puppetmaster through his manipulation of the audience. In the stage directions, he also portrays Captain Ratts, the steamboat captain who will play a pivotal role in the world of the play. During his first entrance, Captain Ratts *"enters from the audience, looking for special seating, on account of his obesity[38]"* (Jacobs-Jenkins 193). *An Octoroon* is a deeply interactive work in which performers engage and blend with the audience. In the slave auction, intended to raise funds to save the plantation, JJ opens up the possibility of audience participation: "*There is either one of ninety-nine people playing various bidders. Or maybe there's some clever way to force the audience into doing this"* (Jacobs-Jenkins 193). The use of the word 'force' is telling - it breaks the fourth wall and engages an audience that most likely intended to only passively observe the play. Also, considering the likely demographics of the people in the audience, it engages a significant number of white liberals in a spectacle that they would rather forget – or would they relish the opportunity to unleash their racism in a controlled environment?

But despite JJ's impish manipulation of Black folktales and his audience, he is not immune from his own anxieties. He worries "*about the whole thing becoming too Brechtian. Though, does it matter? Also, can I help it? Or maybe it's just whoever's been playing music this whole time? Or maybe it's just me? Maybe I sit in the audience of every show and play Ratts. Or maybe it's Br'er Rabbit? Let's just say it's*

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[38]But Jacobs-Jenkins' description of Ratts' "obesity" also offers a limit for the outer reaches of his vision, including his fatphobia.

Br'er Rabbit.)" (Jacobs-Jenkins 193). Jacobs-Jenkins is experiencing the anxiety of influence. And it is an anxiety about people drawing parallels between himself and Brecht, a playwright known for his distancing mechanisms and didacticism. The fear of seeming too didactic is also particular to JJ's positionality as a Black playwright who is hesitant to seem as though he is lecturing his mostly white audience about the evils of slavery. The metaphysical anxiety is manifest as a very literal rumination about where his body will be located onstage. He wonders what part he should play in the audience: the white boat captain Ratts, or the impish Br'er Rabbit. As a Black playwright and a trickster, he ultimately settles on Br'er Rabbit.

Sensation Scene

The black playwright (both BJJ and Jacobs-Jenkins) and the Playwright (maybe giving respect to Boucicault or indulging the universalizing logic of whiteness too easily) lead the audience through the mechanics of melodrama. At the beginning of Act Four, they break down the mechanics of the sensation scene. According to Linda Williams, "the fundamental truth of the sensation scene consists in its “revelation of who is the true villain, and who the innocent victim” (18). Act Four begins with BJJ and the Playwright stepping forward from one of those tableaus that Br’er Rabbit has previously disrupted. The Playwright tells the audience that Act Four is "the most important of all the acts in a melodrama" and the "hinge around which everything turns" (Jacobs-Jenkins 201-2). This "Sensation Scene" is notable for its use of a big "theater trick" that functions as a second climax at the end of the scene, highlighting the episodic nature of melodrama and further distinguishing it from tragedy, in which the climax reveals how the protagonist is undone by their tragic

flaw. According to the Playwright, the Sensation Scene "push[es] everything - actors, props, set, lights - to the limit somehow" (Jacobs-Jenkins 202). It is when the essential work of melodrama - the mobilization of sensation - the height of affect - reaches its apogee.

BJJ and the Playwright subsequently launch into a summary of the first three acts, arguing that the sensation scene is not only notable for its mobilization of affect, but also must resolve the "A plot - in this case, the story of Zoe and the estate" and also the "B plot," which is "the murder of Paul" (Jacobs-Jenkins 202). Yet, the resolution of this twin plots is also doing is own affective work. The resolution of this twin plot hinges on a kind of justice, a justice that according to the Playwright, is intended to "make people think, for just a second, that what they're seeing is real and dangerous and sort of novel." BJJ echoes this point, arguing that "Act Four is where the like moral of the play lives-" (Jacobs-Jenkins 202). This is a form of direct intervention from JJ, which seems to play upon his earlier fear of writing a play that becomes too Brechtian. JJ distancing the audience by showing the pulleys and levers of melodrama, but does this numb them to its effects? Or does explicitly naming the maneuvers of melodrama cultivate anticipation in the audience, thus heightening the sensation at its conclusion?

JJ's Scene Four intervention also involves not only broad commentary on the mechanics of melodrama, but also an appraisal of Boucicault's work. As M'Closky is being held accountable for the murder of Paul, BJJ intervenes in the scene to address issues with the plot of the original *Octoroon:*

BJJ: Oh right, also, like, randomly someone has brought on the camera that Wahnotee smashed after he found Paul dead-

Playwright: The same camera M'Closky stood in front of reading that letter-

BJJ: And randomly, I guess, George never looked in the camera or forgot about the camera? This is actually a hole in Boucicault's plot. Not mine. (Jacobs-Jenkins 205)

In assessing the improbability that the camera still exists, and that if the camera exists, why didn't George look through it earlier, Jacobs-Jenkins looks at the work through a contemporary critical lens. The Playwright, being protective of his work, elides the criticism, and Jacobs-Jenkins plunges the audience back into the world of the play. Though Jacobs-Jenkins' version of Boucicault does not address it, there is likely a defensiveness and protectiveness of the author towards the original melodrama, a protectiveness that reflects melodrama's origins as a conservative form. The interruptions function as their own sensation. In Boucicault's original play, the steamer catches fire, but the exploding cotton is all an invention of Jacobs-Jenkins.

But Jacobs-Jenkins' most important intervention in this moment is not the spectacle of the Sensation Scene itself, but the commentary around the spectacle. His discussion of the uses of photography and the image begins with Boucicault. In *The Octoroon,* there is a moment where Dora is displeased with the photographs that Salem takes of her. Scudder replies to her objections that "the apparatus can't mistake…The machine can't err—you may mistake your phiz but the apparatus don't." When she replies that the images of her face aren't "agreeable," Scudder says: "No, ma'am, the truth seldom is" (Boucicault). The idea that the image holds an

uncomfortable truth that we must confront despite its disagreeability is crucial to the revelation that M'Closky killed a little boy so that the plantation would be sold to him. It is a statement on the inevitability of emotion that melodrama will eventually bring – you may try to look away but watching a melodrama will eventually result in a confrontation with your most unwelcome emotions.

But BJJ – and by extension, Jacobs-Jenkins – is cynical about the truth of photography. In a contemporary intervention, BJJ argues that "we've gotten so used to photos and photographic images that we basically do nothing but fake them, crop them, filter them, Photoshop them, so the kind of justice around which this whole thing hangs it's actually a little dated-" (Jacobs-Jenkins 205), But as a rejoinder, the Playwright argues that the "Sensation" of the scene, was giving people back then a sense of having really witnessed something new and novel" (Jacobs-Jenkins 205). While BJJ is correct about the mutability of photographs, this mutability has not diminished their function as proof. "Proof" is rarely about the actual truth, and more about the ways in which collective social truths are formed. Nude images of celebrities trend for hours on Twitter even though they may not be nude images of the actual celebrity. Even when these images are proven to be doctored, or of another person, the sometimes days long retweeting, resharing, and discussion of the images will forever connect them to the alleged celebrity. Videos – those moving images - that show Black people being murdered by the police are often used as smoking gun proof that will hopefully result in a conviction for the police officer who killed another Black person. And maybe the 'proof' for which Boucicault is looking for in this scene is not truth, or socially defined truth, but the idea that evildoers will be brought to heel,

additional evidence that melodrama creates an ideal moral calculus that is not evident in real life.

The trial of M'Closky continues, as Jacobs-Jenkins looks for the appropriate sensation that will push the scene to its limit. With the help of the Assistant (who is doubled by the same actor playing Pete and Paul - maybe a hamfisted attempt to seek justice), BJJ "*projects a lynching photograph on to the back wall"* (Jacobs-Jenkins 206). But who is Jacobs-Jenkins shocking with this image? What is the audience expected to feel? Understanding the history of lynchings and how they were consumed contemporaneously by white viewers as lazy afternoon entertainments akin to the baseball game, this image is less of a sensation that is meant to arouse a sense of moral righteousness in the viewer, and more of an image that will simply retraumatize Black audience members. In fact, it reinforced the banality of lynching, in the fact that images of lynched Black bodies were circulated in postcards, and the knuckles of Sam Hose were displayed in a department store window (serving a source of horror for W.E.B. Du Bois). So, who is Jacobs-Jenkins shocking? He is simply retraumatizing Black people, who are in no need of the moral lessons that he promises to offer.

George's affective appeal to 'justice' wins the day, and M'Closky is sent to jail instead of murdered. However, he escapes and sets fire to Captain Ratts' boat. We have arrived at Jacobs-Jenkins' sensation:

> *(They exit as the noise and the flames build and build and build and build before, suddenly, lights and sound cut out completely, everything plunged in darkness and quiet. Assistant wonders in carrying a small flame or lantern.)*
>
> Assistant/Pete: *(In the darkness)*: Then the boat explodes.

(Cotton rains down on the audience. Or not. Sensation. Beat.)

Anyway. The whole point of this thing was to make you feel something. What does that mean? I have no idea, but I came here to tell you a story.

(Assistant/Pete exits). (Jacobs-Jenkins 210-11)

The sensation is not one moment, but a series of layered sensations: noise and flames rising to a crescendo. But instead of reaching that crescendo, Jacobs-Jenkins pulls the plug on the audience, plunging everyone into darkness and emphasizing the communal nature of this affective experience. What will happen next? (A question shared by all!) The boat explosion is like the jump scare in a horror movie, destabilizing an audience that has become familiar with the intimacy of the dark. Pete emphasizes that this exercise was intended to make the audience "feel something," although he does not know what that means. However, the feeling is less about creating meaning, and more about immersing oneself in a sensation. But behind the sensation is a story with a moral center - a story in which the violence and chaos wielded by an unrepentant racist becomes apparent.

Humor

According to Glenda Carpio, "Black American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community" (Carpio, Locations 87-88). Even before the play begins, the audience is confronted by a humorous with a warning from Jacobs-Jenkins: "I'm just going to say right now so we can get it over with: I don't know what a real slave sounded like, and neither do you" (Jacobs-Jenkins 153). Jacobs-Jenkins' joke is meant to obscure the violent

history and lack of regard for Black life that produced enslaved people and prevented contemporary audiences from understanding what they sounded like. But this note is not entirely accurate: we have records of what enslaved people sound like – Zora Neale Hurston's *Baracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* which emerged out of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) Slave Narratives project during the Great Depression. Jacobs-Jenkins tends to flatten the existence of the enslaved - it is not entirely a fabulation. But the stage direction also functions as a form of direct address, not embodied and enacted like the prologue. Stage directions also reveal tensions between realism and absurdism: The Plantation Terrebonne could be both "a low-built but extensive planter's dwelling, surrounded by a veranda. Or not. (There could just be cotton everywhere)." (Jacobs-Jenkins 153) In this moment, Jacobs-Jenkins is giving a set designer the option between the pictorial verisimilitude of the plantation home or offering a different kind of reality – surrounding the stage with the products of Black labor.

Like Kara Walker, Jacobs-Jenkins' subversive predecessor in the visual art world, *An Octoroon* "focuses on keeping the history of slavery from becoming ossified [and] proposes a new lexicon for examining the legacy of slavery in America" (Carpio, Locations 3018-3019). Humor is also the intervention of the contemporary into the antebellum moment. During the Prologue, the playwright asks, "where did all the indians go?" (Jacobs-Jenkins 151). The answer to the Playwright's question is genocide, which displaced indigenous people from their land and confined them to reservations so white settlers could develop what is now known as the United States. Unspoken, of course, is genocide. Minnie, an enslaved woman, discusses "slave-

mixers" (Jacobs-Jenkins 154). Very unlikely that actual enslaved people used the word ‘mixer,’ but JJ humorously summons images of gatherings during which enslaved people stole joy amidst the violence. Friendship of Paul, and enslaved boy, describes Wahnotee as speaking "a mashup of indian, french, and mexican" (Jacobs-Jenkins 163). Boucicault's original *Octoroon* wrote "mexican" and "'merican," but it was poorly transliterated. Jacobs-Jenkins' intervention/Freudian slip both situates Mexico as a part of North America, and essential to the formation of the United States even if we live in a contemporary moment where Mexican immigrants are pathologized. Grace, an enslaved woman who works in the fields, tells Minnie that she acts "kinda ghetto" and that her behavior is "embarrassing to the community" (Jacobs-Jenkins 191). Beginning of respectability politics on the plantation. Grace, who will later establish herself as a woman with fewer material resources than Dido and Minnie due to the type of labor that she performs, seizes upon her more respectable behavior as a way of claiming the cultural capital that eludes her as someone who works in the field. When M'Closky wins Zoe in the auction, he "makes it rain - perhaps literally" and Jacobs-Jenkins emphasizes that "the theater is a space of infinite possibility" (Jacobs-Jenkins 199). 'Mak[ing] it rain' evokes the strip club - emphasizing the exchange of Zoe's flesh for M'Closky's money. Yet, Jacobs-Jenkins leaves room for designers to stretch - elasticity! - this possibility, creating the opportunity for it to rain - water or anything else.

For Black people, “humor has often functioned as a way of affirming their humanity in the face of its violent denial" (Carpio, Kindle Location 94). In *An Octoroon,* Jacobs-Jenkins uses it as a lens through which to grant Black women

subjectivity. Black women serve as the lifeblood of many communities, holding them together. Much of the humor comes from Dido and Minnie, two enslaved women who work inside the plantation house. The enhanced roles of Black women in Jacobs-Jenkins' play differs sharply from Boucicault's original work, in which Black women have almost no dialogue and are largely reduced to set pieces. Grace only speaks at very beginning in Boucicault's text, and Dido only speaks when she attempts to prevent Zoe – the white adjacent woman to whom the audience should direct their sympathy - from committing suicide by poison.

But in Jacobs-Jenkins work, Black women are granted an interior life, even making ribald jokes about the substantial size of their deceased master's penis (Jacobs-Jenkins 155). Minnie asks Dido if she would "fuck" Massa Payton. Dido says "no," but Minnie also acknowledges that she "don't really get a say in the matter" (Jacobs-Jenkins 156). Jacobs-Jenkins is not the first person to discuss the rape of enslaved women on the plantation. However, unlike sentimental novels like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* which offer a sincere account of the horrors of sexual violence, Jacobs-Jenkins use of humor to both reveal that enslaved women likely had thoughts about the bodies of the people who enslaved them while underlining that there is no consent on a plantation. Dido mentions that "being a slavemaster ain't that hard," an acknowledgement that plantations are able to function because of the labor of enslaved people (Jacobs-Jenkins 155).

In addition to Jacobs-Jenkins' humorous reframing of sexual violence, he also humorously shows how Black women used their sexuality to attempt to control the trajectory of their lives on the plantation. During the auction in Acts Three and Four,

Minnie and Dido wear "remarkably sexier and more revealing slave tunics and have their hair and makeup done up accordingly" (JJ 194). The idea that two enslaved women are sexually attracted to a man who will soon hold them in captivity seems repulsive. However, their flattering styling is a way of regaining agency amidst a violent and cruel landscape in which they will be ripped away from family and friends, never to see each other again. They want to live on a boat with Captain Ratts, to whom they are both comically attracted, but also the boat represents freedom and escape and a possible journey back to Africa.

The enslaved women continue provide much of the play's humor, including jokes about literacy:

> 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 use to read.
>
> Minnie: Yeeuh, but I was hopin' you wuz one of them secret readin' niggas. You know, like Rhonda (Jacobs-Jenkins 181).

Jacobs-Jenkins is using humor to convey a message about the structural barriers that prevent enslaved people from learning how to read, and how despite those barriers, there are brave enslaved people who subvert the rules potentially at the cost of their own lives. Jokes about the ways in which enslavement robs you of agency are a recurring part of Jacobs-Jenkins' text. Minnie asks Dido if another enslaved woman is "takin' a trip," to which Dido replies: "trip to where, Minnie?! Slaves don't take trips!" (Jacobs-Jenkins 182). There is no vacation time on the plantation. If you leave, you are leaving for good.

The realism and humor offered by Minnie and Dido serve as a rejoinder to the artificial romance of Zoe and George, grounding the central melodramatic narrative in the corporeal horrors of the plantation. Jacobs-Jenkins also creates distinctions between Black women with different social capital on the plantation. Despite their humorous reflections on sexuality and freedom, Minnie and Dido work in the plantation house, and their social position shields them from the realities confronted by Grace, who works in the fields:

> Minnie: Yeah, I didn't wake up thinkin' this was where my day was gonna go. I can't believe nobody told us they was running away. Why didn't they tell us, Grace?
>
> Dido: Yeah. You would know.
>
> Grace: You house niggas.
>
> Dido: What?
>
> Grace: You house niggas. Y'all was livin' it up in the damn house all the time, serving everybody pancakes and shit while we wuz in the fields all day hoeing cane and picking a fuck ton of cotton in the hot-ass sun…So we figured y'all probably didn't need to run away" (Jacobs-Jenkins 191).

All three women were enslaved, but Grace believes that Minnie and Dido's access to the interior of the plantation grants them more privilege. Grace believes that Minnie and Dido's proximity to whiteness and less backbreaking labor makes them more complacent and aligned with whiteness. Grace not only believes that this makes Minnie and Dido less likely to escape, but the latter women's proximity to whiteness

and investment in the plantation hierarchies created by the Peytons makes them more likely to sabotage others' attempts to escape.

Jacobs-Jenkins emphasizes that Black women should protect themselves emotionally. In Act Five, Dido wonders whether she should notify Mrs. Peyton that Zoe is attempting to poison herself. Minnie discourages her from doing this, arguing that she knows they "are slaves and evurthang, but you are not your job. You gotta take time out of your day to live life for you" (JJ 217). Minnie is revealing a Black feminist ethic of self-preservation - she and Dido cannot control their freedom, but they can control their affective investments. Arguing that slavery is a "job" seems trite - as a job implies that there is an exchange of money for labor - but it does also acknowledge that it is the labor of Minnie, Dido, and other enslaved women that allows Terrebonne Plantation to function. Amid captivity, Minnie is encouraging Dido to steal her own pleasure, to enact self-care in the face of terror.

It is useful here to return to Carpio's analysis of Walker, in which "humor is a visceral, visual reminder" that Walker's works are "shadow plays and not mimetic representations of history or lived reality" (Carpio, Locations 3020-3021). Similarly, though Jacobs-Jenkins' work illuminates horrifying truths about the plantation, it is at the end of Act Three that Jacobs-Jenkins' doubling reaches the height of absurdity (both the Climax of the melodrama, structurally, and the apotheosis of ridiculousness). M'Closky has outbid George for the sale of Zoe, which incenses George so much that he incites a physical confrontation with the overseer. However, George and M'Closky are both played by the same actor in Jacobs-Jenkins' play, the confrontation is more absurd than alarming:

(George rushes M'Closky /himself, who draws his knife. They scuffle elaborately - perhaps ridiculously - the actor literally wrestling with himself. The crowd reacts accordingly - the melee going on for a long while until George manages to disarm M'Closky and seems prepared to cut his throat.)

(Boucicault*)*

This is intended to be a funny moment - a fun challenge for the director and fight choreographer to make an actor fight with himself. But in this moment, Jacobs-Jenkins is also illuminating that despite Boucicault's efforts, there is no distinction between the "good" plantation owner's son - the romantic hero of the play - and the "bad" overseer - the play's supposed villain. Jacobs-Jenkins use of humor in this scene makes it significantly different from the original confrontation between M'Closky and George – who are played by two different actors – in Boucicault's play. The confrontation unfolds with a grave, intense seriousness until Salem Scudder intervenes:

Scud. [*Darts between them.*] Hold on, George Peyton—stand back. This is your own house; we are under your uncle's roof; recollect yourself. And, strangers, ain't we forgetting there's a lady present. [*The knives disappear.*] If we can't behave like Christians, let's try and act like gentlemen. Go on, Colonel. (Boucicault)

Boucicault's version of the confrontation between George and M'Closky is completely devoid of humor that Jacobs-Jenkins interjects in his contemporary adaptation. George and M'Closky are played by two different men, and Salem can get George to disengage by appealing to his class position as the nephew of a

distinguished and deceased slave owner. In other words, men of George's stature do not debase themselves by getting into sword fights over mixed race women (even if she almost passes for a lady). Furthermore, Scudder's acknowledgement that George and M'Closky's fight is un-Christian acknowledges not only the fight, but the broader evils of a slave auction. Christians ideally don't trade in flesh – though the history of Christianity is very violent – but gentlemen certainly do.

Haptic Affect, Touching Skin

An Octoroon is full of haptic moments. Defined by Rizvana Bradley, 'haptic' means "to take hold of an object, fasten onto, or to touch it." Bradley also invokes the theorist Laura Marks, who "emphasized the *tactile* as a means of seeing" (Bradley). Fred Moten and Stefano Harney also use the term "hapticality" to describe "the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment," as they proffer "the feel that what is to come is here" (Moten and Harney 98). M'Closky is motivated by a desire to latch on to Zoe both physically and materially. He tells her: "I'm rich and I'll set you up grand, and we'll see these families and their white skins shrivel up with hate" (Jacobs-Jenkins 166)**.** M'Closky's proposition is almost Robin Hood-esque he is stealing from the wealthy, white Peytons to build a life for himself and a mixed-race woman.

Salem Scudder – a character who does not exist in Jacobs-Jenkins *Octoroon*, is noble because unlike M'Closky, he is able to resist his haptic desires for the sake of the plantation's survival. Scudder is the "good" overseer, and the rivalry between him and M'Closky is a major subplot in Boucicault's text. Scudder - the moral center of the play and provider of commentary in the original *Octoroon* - is replaced in the constellation of Jacobs-Jenkins' adaptation by BJJ and the Playwright. Much of his

dialogue is also given to George in Jacobs-Jenkins' version of the narrative. Though Boucicault reading of Scudder is sympathetic, he does reify a classist narrative, portraying Scudder and M'Closky as white working-class frenemies who collaborate to destroy the noble, wealthy Peytons. Scudder tells M'Closky "we've ruined these Peytons; you fired the judge, and I finished off the widow. Now, I feel bad about my share in the business" (Boucicault). Unlike the devious M'Closky, he does have some remorse, and talks about the "civilization" within him. This 'civilization' represents an aspiration to a state beyond his lowly status as an overseer, a state that Boucicault intends to use to endear him to readers. But the haptic rears its head in Scudder's psyche. The regret over his previous collaboration with M'Closky collaborates on Scudder, keeping at him like a "skin complaint" (Boucicault). The anxieties about skin and the way it fastens to us, holds us captive are not limited to the Black and mixed-race characters in the play.

Despite her ability to pass, Zoe is not free from the tentacles of the plantation apparatus. Her light skin allows her a certain power within the plantation economy, but it still restricts her freedom overall. Zoe is part of a debt that Massa Peyton owed at the time of his death, and M'Closky accurately chides him for not being "smart enough to know that while a judgment stood against you it was a lien on your slaves?" (Jacobs-Jenkins 167). Despite the freedoms Zoe, the octoroon, has within the confines of Terrebonne Plantation – though she is considered a lady, receives an education (appropriate for women of the era), and calls monoracial Black people "niggers," she is still property herself. Zoe mentions to George that her "nails are of a…bluish tinge?" He replies, arguing that he can see there is a "faint blue mark," which is "their

beauty." Zoe is quick to correct him, arguing that is "the dark, fatal mark of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black - bright read as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the rest" (Jacobs-Jenkins 175)**.** This exchange reveals how interraciality is both fetishized as beautiful and also feared - the bluish tinge of Zoe's nails marks her as an outsider. And the one drop rule emphasizes that Zoe's blackness will continue to be subdivided among her descendants into perpetuity. Zoe: "I'm an unclean thing - I'm an octoroon!" (Jacobs-Jenkins 176). In Zoe's exclamation, blackness becomes a form of uncleanliness. The racial caste system is reified through the visual - despite her ability to pass, Zoe is forever marked by blackness.

Jacobs-Jenkins desire to adapt Boucicault's *Octoroon* comes from the mobilization of his own emotional response to the text. Affect not only suffuses *The Octoroon,* but Jacobs-Jenkins' relationship to it. During BJJ's interaction with his therapist (performed as a monologue, but rendered as a dialogue onstage), the latter suggests that BJJ should "[adapt] this *Octoroon* - for fun" because "it's important to reconnect with things you feel or have felt positive feelings for" (Jacobs-Jenkins 140). We later realize that the therapist is a fictional character, and though their race is never specified, their lack of understanding of the particularities of BJJ - and, for that matter, Jacobs-Jenkins' struggles as a Black man checks all of the hallmark boxes of the clueless white therapist.

Jacobs-Jenkins' exploration of affect also presses on the crucial issue of white performers' discomfort with his work. He thinly fictionalizes the fraught conversations that he has had with white actors who refuse to "play a racist whose racism isn't "complicated" by some monologue" (Jacobs-Jenkins 143). These actors want to create

plausible deniability, for their egos and professional reputations, and with scare quotes, Jacobs-Jenkins risibly satirizes the idea that racism is complicated. In fact, it is quite simple. It does not matter that your racism is shaped by economic insecurity, or anxiety about the loss of your previous way of life - you are still a white supremacist. The "good" white person makes white people feel less bad about the inherent racism and violence contained within the concept of whiteness itself.

Analyzing what she calls the “white race film,” Lauren Berlant argues that the “main narrative aim [of these films] is to show how not to break the sentimental contract with recognition of common suffering as the basis of human solidarity. Popular culture relies on keeping sacrosanct this aspect of sentimentality—that “underneath” we are all alike" (Berlant 99-100). Throughout Boucicault’s play, Zoe's identification with whiteness remains unshaken until the very end of her life. Zoe positions herself as someone who must suffer for the good of white people – she suffers so that white supremacy can be maintained. At one point in the play, Zoe tells George that she would “rather be black than ungrateful! Ah, George, our race has at least one virtue—it knows how to suffer!” (Boucicault). Anticipating her death – which is rendered with a melodramatic flourish in Boucicault’s work, but totally ignored in Jacobs-Jenkins’ adaptation – she clearly articulates her politics, in which Black people are intended to labor so that white people can flourish. Though we all suffer, some of us are genetically determined to suffer more. Her sacrifice intensifies as the play goes on, and during the slave auction, Zoe argues that she is willing to be “sold then, that I may free his name. I give him back the liberty he bestowed upon me; for I can never repay him the love he bore his poor Octoroon child, on whose breast

his last sigh was drawn, into whose eyes he looked with the last gaze of affection" (Boucicault). Boucicault intended for this to be a poignant moment in which Zoe sacrifices herself so that the great Peyton estate can remain in the possession of the family. But a debt from which Peyton has already been extracted is not comparable to chattel slavery, and she was still property – without any "liberty" to return to the Peytons. And despite the personal affections she may have exchanged with Massa Peyton at the end of his life, the chaos into which she has been plunged in the wake of his death reveals that liberties dependent on personal relationships with white people are not subject to being revoked when those white people are no longer alive to grant them.

Thus, Black suffering is neither good nor noble, but a gentle way of rationalizing a permanent underclass. White womanhood, of course, is represented differently. Mrs. Peyton has treats Zoe like a daughter. Boucicault does this to reify the Peytons as genteel protagonists - but does not reflect the historical relationship that a plantation mistress would have to her husband's multiracial daughter:

> *Mrs. P.* O, George,—my son, let me call you,—I do not speak for my own sake, nor for the loss of the estate, but for the poor people here; they will be sold, divided, and taken away—they have been born here. Heaven has denied me children; so all the strings of my heart have grown around and amongst them, like the fibres and roots of an old tree in its native earth. O, let all go, but save them! With them around us, if we have not wealth, we shall at least have the home that they alone can make—

This statement from Mrs. Peyton is deeply disingenuous – she is absolutely speaking for the estate, as if leaving bondage would be a horrible thing for the enslaved people on her plantation. Her description of the enslaved people on her plantation as “children” is particularly patronizing. You raise children to eventually leave your home and build independent lives for themselves. Mrs. Peyton’s children are tethered to the plantation, adults doing uncompensated labor to maintain her lifestyle (and often children doing adult labor). Her entire monologue perpetuates the romance of the happy slave and fosters the persistent myth of plantations as beautiful homes, which continue to obscure the violence behind the beauty.

On a related note, Jacobs-Jenkins constantly reminds his audience of the differences between material conditions and feelings. At one point in Jacobs-Jenkins adaptation, George states that "the only estate I value is the heart of one true woman, and the slaves I'd have are her thoughts" (Jacobs-Jenkins 174). This sentiment seems warm at first, but it still reduces Zoe to property, and reveals property as an elastic category with long tentacles. George asks Zoe if her "heart [is] free?" This question initially confuses her, but she eventually replies, "of course it is-" (Jacobs-Jenkins 174). This question likely alarmed Zoe because it reminded her of her unfreedom. Zoe’s affirmative reply is the most radical and elastic gesture she will make in the play – she is affirming that her capacity of affect stretches beyond the conditions of her confinement.

Jacobs-Jenkins also writes scenes that elide the ways that affect is mobilized in contemporary discourse. In particular, Jacobs-Jenkin satirizes the idea that Black people are expected to extend forgiveness to white people despite being victimized by

the latter. When M'Closky is about to be put to death for murdering Paul in Act Four, Pete intervenes on the convicted man's behalf, arguing that murdering M'Closky is "what a good Christian should do" (Jacobs-Jenkins 209). The conversation continues:

> George: D'ye hear that, Jacob? This old nigger - the grandfather of the boy you murdered - speaks for you - don't that go through you?
>
> Wahnotee *(His hand on M'Closky's skull)*: Wahnotee!
>
> George *(Stopping Wahnotee):* Whoa! No, Injun, we deal justice here, not revenge; 'tisnt you he has injured, 'tis the white man, whose laws he has offended. (Jacobs-Jenkins 209)

George uses Pete's position as Paul's grandfather to appeal to M'Closky's since of remorse while simultaneously erasing the grief of the person who loved Paul the most. George silences Wahnotee, who is not given space to articulate his rage and grief over the murder of his friend. Wahnotee is the first person who found Paul's dead body, and George's cold appeals to an abstract form of justice erase Wahnotee's feelings, even though the latter man is the only person on stage who has been emotionally injured by the murder. Instead, Wahnotee is depicted as a savage who is unwilling to display the maturity and restraint needed to enact the white man's laws. And why can't revenge be a form of justice? In George's affective appeals to the law which is supposedly neutral - the original injury, the murder of a Black boy, has been lost.

Elasticity

Language is elastic in Jacobs-Jenkins' *Octoroon,* stretching from his imitation of Boucicault's heightened 19th century language to contemporary African American

Vernacular English. Jacobs-Jenkins uses AAVE to humorously used to communicate the tragedy of maternity on the plantation. Dido tells Minnie about the baby of Rebecca, an enslaved woman, was sold by another enslaved man, Solon, who "turnt around and fucking sold the baby." He switched her baby for his own "at the last minute and Massa didn't know the difference so he just sold Rebecca's dumb-ass baby." Minnie responds: "Oh my God. That is so messed up" (JJ 168). AAVE also functions as a coded, aural way for enslaved people to communicate on the plantation that elides the notice of their masters (like embodied forms like capoeira), who like George, expect a caricatured performance of Blackness. Enslaved people use the ahistorical dialect (like what Boucicault wrote) to communicated with white characters, and whiteface characters (like M'Closky); Jacobs-Jenkins is using language to create distinctions between the white fantasy of the happy enslaved person, and the (something approximating) the actual lived experiences of enslaved people. Also related to his comments about Black representation onstage. By making their speech contemporary, Jacobs-Jenkins is drawing parallels between enslaved people and contemporary African-Americans. Which is connected to his monologue about the perils of Black representation onstage. This anecdote shows how the depravation of the plantation causes enslaved people to turn on each other - though Solon's choice does represent a kind of elasticity - stretching resources to achieve an end, regardless of the human cost for others. The melodrama is stretched with moments of pathos - like a baby being sold away from its mother. Minnie's "messed up," is funny in its ability to reduce the destruction of a family to an expression that one might use if someone was casually rude to you in public.

JJ shows the elasticity of language by revealing tensions between 19th century representations of enslaved people's speech and his contemporary depiction, which is an amalgamation of AAVE and Standard American English. AAVE is also used to articulate the gap between white understandings of Black life, and actual Black lived experience. Jacobs-Jenkins discuss how Pete transforms into a "folk figure" in the presence of white people due to the latter's use of a inauthentic version of AAVE shaped by white supremacist ears. After an interaction with Pete, George comments on how "the negro race is so quaint and vibrant and colorful - much like the landscape. And so full of wisdom and cheer and tall tales. I should write a book" (Jacobs-Jenkins 158). George continues to rhapsodize about the "raw beauty of everything here, the wildness, the very essence of life" (158). Fetishizing Black folks as native, the plantation as a site of beauty, ignoring the violence that brings it into existence and reproducing a form of discursive violence by writing it out of existence.

And it's not only George who perpetuates this benevolent antiblackness: though Zoe's Black ancestry dictates her fungibility and shapes her relationship to freedom, her use of language emphasizes her identification with whiteness. At the beginning of Act Five, Zoe has been sold to M'Closky and is desperate to end her own life. She goes to Minnie and Dido in search of poison. She has the following exchange with Dido:

Dido: *(Entering from cabin):* Who dat?

Zoe: Mammy! 'Tis I - Zoe.

Dido *(Taken aback by her word choice, then)*: Missy Zoe! Why are you out in de swamp dis time ob night? And you is all wet! Missy Zoe, you catch de fever for sure!

Zoe: Auntie, that is why I've come. There is already sickness up at the house. I have been up all night beside one who suffers, and, Mammy, you are wise – you know every plant, don't you, and what it is good for? (Jacobs-Jenkins 213)

Zoe refers to Dido as "Mammy" and "Auntie," which can be terms of endearment, but are also much more casual than the way that she refers to the lady of the house: "Mrs. Peyton." The use of the words "Mammy" and "Auntie" suggests a casualness and overfamiliarity that Zoe does not use to address white people whom she regards as superior to her. Due to the impermeability of whiteness and the rigidity of the racial caste system, Zoe is able to communicate with Dido in a way that she will never be able to communicate with Mrs. Peyton. Also, the idea that Dido "knows every plant" posits her as a 'Magical Negress' that can assist her Zoe at a moment's notice. Dido's dialect in the exchange is the language of enslaved people that is conjured by the racist white imaginary. Dido's performance of Mammy is also emphasized by her excessive concern with the exposure of Zoe's delicate, multiracial constitution to the harrowing elements, as if Dido herself does not endure these circumstances every day. Dido's concern reinforces the idea that white and white-adjacent women are more sensitive and deserving of more care than enslaved Black women. Recalling her conversation with Zoe, Dido says the following:

Dido: And you know she kept calling me Mammy! And I was like, "Bitch, what? We are basically the same age!"

Minnie: Whaaat?

Dido: I can't believe that shit. Do I look that old to you?

Minnie: No, girl. Black don't crack. That bitch is just crazy. That's what happens when you hang out wit all these damn white people all the damn time. Let it go. (Jacobs-Jenkins 215)

Though Jacobs-Jenkins stated at the beginning of the play that it is impossible to know how enslaved people spoke, Jacobs-Jenkins is directing his audience towards a more authentic form of Black expression by allowing Minnie and Dido to speak to each other in a combination of AAVE and Standard American English. Zoe's use of signifiers that are generally attached to older Black women also reveals the ways in which white and white-adjacent people prematurely age Black women, assigning them a maturity and responsibility that they do not demonstrate themselves. Minnie's final comment also reveals that the monoracial enslaved Black women understand that Zoe's language reveals her investment in whiteness. However, Zoe's maternal feelings towards Dido make more sense when placed in the context of Boucicault's original text:

Zoe. I came here to you; to you, my own dear nurse; to you, who so often hushed me to sleep when I was a child; who dried my eyes and put your little Zoe to rest. Ah! give me the rest that no master but One can disturb—the sleep from which I shall awake free! You can protect me from that man—do let me die without pain. [*Music.*] (Boucicault)

Thus, in Boucicault's *Octoroon,* it is established that Dido cared for Zoe as a child, making the former woman a safe person to approach in a time of crisis. As someone who cared for her tenderly in life, Dido will make sure that Zoe dies a dignified death and avoids the horror of becoming M'Closky's property. Believing that her freedom is still attached to her father's debt, Zoe understands that she can only be free in death. Her decision to die rather than remain enslaved is reminiscent of Margaret Garner's choice to kill her children rather than raise them as enslaved people. However, Zoe's warm feelings for Dido must be considered with the understanding that enslaved children were responsible for the care of white children. Zoe's monologue ends with music, serving as a melodramatic flourish - underlines the overarching sentiment of the scene.

Jacobs-Jenkins also uses Standard American English as a disruptive mechanism and revealer of truth. Even Pete's down-home charm cannot save him from the violence of the auction block, and the use of Standard American English allows him to drop the 'happy darkie' façade.

Lafouche: Aged…seventy…two?

Pete: Fo'ty-six, sar.

Lafouche: And lame.

Pete: But dat don't mean nuthin'!

(Pete starts to sing a very unimpressive, folksier version of whatever song Zoe and Dora sang earlier, before he gives up.)

You know what? I'm tired of being a slave.

Lafouche assumes that Pete is 26 years older than he is, thus revealing the toll that enslavement takes on one's appearance. And though Lafouche points out that Pete is disabled, the latter man says that he can still work at a very high level. Pete sings for Lafouche in a desperate attempt to channel his Act One charm, but he gives up when he comes to the realization that there is no performance of respectability that will grant him his freedom. Using Standard American English, he makes his most honest statement of the play - that he is tired of being property.

Conclusion: The End of Melodrama

Lauren Berlant argues that "melodramatic conventions that locate the human in a universal capacity to suffer and romantic conventions of individual historical acts of compassion and transcendence are adapted to imagine a nonhierarchical social world that is postracist and “at heart” democratic because good intentions and love flourish in it" (Berlant 6). And underlining Berlant’s overall sentiment, Lisa Merrill emphasizes Boucicault’s “ambivalence to the abject status of actual enslaved persons” (Merrill 136). Boucicault’s play is not intended to be an anti-racist project that uses sentiment to mobilize an affective response that might be transformed into a more radical purpose - not like Rachel. Instead Boucicault leads us to sympathize with Zoe because she is white-adjacent and beautiful. Her white adjacency is part of the theatrical illusion in a haptic and theatrical way. It is through the imagination of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins that An Octoroon becomes in an elastic text, transforming to provide commentary on our contemporary moment.

Jacobs-Jenkins’ series of transformations concludes with a radical transformation fo Boucicault’s original ending. In *The Octoroon,* Salem Scudder

bursts into Terrebonne to tell the Peytons that M'Closky has been defeated, but Zoe has already taken the poison given to her by Dido. As she dies, Dora notices that "her eyes have changed color," implying that they have changed from an innocent blue to an ominous black or brown (Boucicault). Zoe's death scene continues, with Pete interjecting:

> *Pete.* Dat's what her soul's gwine to do. It's going up dar, whar dere's no line atween folks.
>
> *George.* She revives.
>
> *Zoe.* [*On sofa,* C.] George—where—where—
>
> *George.* O, Zoe! what have you done?
>
> *Zoe.* Last night I overheard you weeping in your room, and you said, "I'd rather see her dead than so!"
>
> *George.* Have I prompted you to this?
>
> *Zoe.* No; but I loved you so, I could not bear my fate; and then I stood your heart and hers. When I am dead she will not be jealous of your love for me, no laws will stand between us. Lift me; so—[George *raises her head*]—let me look at you, that your face may be the last I see of this world. O! George, you may without a blush confess your love for the Octoroon! [*Dies.*—
>
> George *lowers her head gently.—Kneels.—Others form picture.*]
>
> *Darken front of house and stage.*
>
> [*Light fires.—Draw flats and discover* Paul's *grave.*—M'Closky *dead on top of it.*—Wahnotee *standing triumphantly over him.*] (Boucicault)

Pete reiterates the sentiment that Zoe previously expressed to Dido – that it is better to die a noble, unspoiled death than become the property of the wrong man. Zoe revives briefly, just long enough to tell George that she nobly took the poison to clear a path towards George and Dora's marriage. The contrast between Zoe's noble death and the killing of M'Closky by Wahnotee also creates a parallel between the two types of justice - like the parallel that will be drawn by Br'er Rabbit in Jacobs-Jenkins' conclusion. Zoe's sacrifice also confirms that she will not be around to tempt George into soiling his bloodline through a union with his mixed-race cousin, as if the plantation is not Zoe's biological inheritance. Boucicault reluctantly revised the ending to please frustrated audiences. There was also an alternate ending - performed in England and Australia - where George rescues Zoe and they marry. But Zoe's tragic death represents Boucicault's original vision for the play.

Ultimately, Jacobs-Jenkins' *Octoroon* ends not with a classic scene of melodramatic reconciliation (possibly with Zoe's full assimilation into whiteness through her wedding with George), but with a conversation between Dido and Minnie, the most vulnerable people onstage and the enslaved women who function as the lifeblood of the plantation. Both women express excitement about the potential for a new life with Captain Ratts, and Minnie says she "would be so pissed if something were to happen that somehow rendered these last twelve hours totally moot." In reply, Dido wonders if the M'Closky killed Paul to intercept the letter, a letter that Minnie did not realize even existed (Jacobs-Jenkins 218). Neither woman is aware that the events upon which they have speculated have happened. And though it seems odd for them to romanticize leaving Terrebonne Plantation for another form of captivity, both

Minnie and Dido - like many other enslaved people - are constantly looking towards a new horizon. Also, Minnie's apathy about the letter that has saved the plantation - she talks about how she is often "bored" at Terrebonne - reflects how the core events of Boucicault's *Octoroon* were largely irrelevant to the lived experiences of enslaved people, who will continue to be in captivity regardless.

Jacobs-Jenkins ends the play with the visage of Br'er Rabbit, his literary alter ego who has haunted the play in multiple capacities. After Minnie and Dido move on from their discussion of the letter, Dido pivots to a more interesting conversation, asking Minnie to "finish telling [her] about that rabbit" (Jacobs-Jenkins 218). Both women subsequently leave, and "*Br'er Rabbit wanders in with a gavel and a tomahawk"* (Jacobs-Jenkins 218). The gavel and the tomahawk represent the two arms of justice. On the surface, this would seem like a straightforward appeal for the rationality of the former and the impulsivity of the latter. However, at his core, Br'er Rabbit is a trickster, and after witnessing M'Closky's subterfuge of justice, it becomes difficult to tell which method is more useful.

Coda: Four Women

"My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain
Inflicted again and again"

-Nina Simone, "Four Women"

As Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins show, African-American melodrama is alive and well onstage. However, it is most accessible for audiences via television. Unlike Rachel, Kay, Suzanne Alexander, Hester La Negrita, Dido, Minnie, and Zoe, the Black women in contemporary melodramas are often beautiful, stylish, well-educated, and in positions of wealth and power. This conclusion will analyze leading ladies from popular Black melodramas of the 2010s – Olivia Pope from *Scandal,* Annalise Keating from *How to Get Away With Murder,* Cookie Lyon from *Empire,* and Tasha St. Patrick from *Power* - to show what they reveal about Black female subjectivity in the contemporary moment. The four protagonists are connected by their fashion sense, empathy and support for other marginalized people, and professional genius complimented by complicated personal lives. Even though Black womanhood has stretched to accommodate visions of a powerful crisis consultant, a defense attorney, a record label executive, and a drug kingpin's wife, these women are still snapped back into place by the restrictive and persistent logic of misogynoir. All four women stretch the abject while continuing to be shaped by it.

Olivia and Annalise: Professional Women, Hot and Cold

Scandal, which ran from 2012-2018, is seen as watershed moment in television. The first primetime drama with a Black woman lead in forty years, its

resounding success spawned numerous imitation melodramas including all of the previously mentioned ones, plus OWN dramas like *Greenleaf* and *Queen Sugar*, BET dramas like *Being Mary Jane* and *The Quad*, and Tyler Perry's *The Haves and the Have Nots*, *Sistas*, and *The Oval. Scandal* was created by Shonda Rhimes, who was known at the time for her intimate workplace melodramas about powerful women, including *Grey's Anatomy* and *Private Practice.* After two successful melodramas with white women protagonists, Rhimes was given the latitude to write *Scandal,* which focuses on Olivia Pope, a crisis manager who is often referred to as a "fixer." In the pilot episode of *Scandal*, titled "Sweet Baby," Olivia Pope is discussed with reverence (revealing that her reputation precedes her), but we do not see her until after the title card.[39] Despite her intense and fearsome presence, she is known as a warm person who has deep empathy for marginalized people. Olivia is first mentioned as Quinn Perkins is interviewed for a job at her firm, Olivia Pope and Associates, by Harrison Wright, a litigator for the firm. During this interview, Quinn functions as the viewer surrogate, attempting to make sense of the chaotic pace of life at a firm that is in the process of recovering the kidnapped baby of an ambassador.

Like the other women discussed in this coda, Olivia is marked by her distinct sense of fashion, which was noted for its seamless blend of conventional femininity and professionalism. The viewer first sees her from behind, and she is wearing a white coat that is cinched tightly at the waist. Olivia will also wear a white hat later in the series. The white items in her wardrobe are intended to reflect her essential 'goodness'

[39] A similar storytelling device is used in *How to Get Away With Murder* and *Empire,* in which we do not see Annalise Keating and Cookie Lyon, respectively, until well into the episode.

and advocacy for vulnerable people despite the harm that she will cause at later points in the series. Under the coat are gray slacks, a translucent blouse, and long, delicate necklaces. Olivia's wardrobe is carefully calibrated to signify professionalism and competence while also projecting the warmth and approachability that she needs to cultivate as a Black woman whose work depends on the cultivation of interpersonal relationships.

Shonda Rhimes is known for her stichomythic dialogue, and the *Scandal* pilot is peppered with catchphrases that will signify both Olivia's approach to work. Harrison describes her employees as "gladiator[s] in suit[s]." When reflecting on whether to assist a man who is accused of murdering his girlfriend, Olivia remarks that her "gut tells me everything I need to know." And when President Fitzgerald Grant asks her to confront Amanda Tanner, a woman whom he argues is falsely claiming to be his mistress, Olivia responds with a brisk "It's handled!" All these phrases are deeply galvanizing, though they beg the question: are the people they are defending worth fighting for?

Olivia finds a sense of moral absolution while assisting Sully St. James, the war hero who is accused of killing his girlfriend. Olivia's team finds an alibi that will preserve his freedom. In a melodramatic hairpin twist, a video is found of St. James kissing another man while his girlfriend was murdered in a different location. Upon confronting St. James with the video evidence, Olivia mentions that St. James has repeatedly referred to Page has his "best friend, not [his] lover. Your best friend." Like another television melodrama protagonist, Captain Olivia Benson of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, Olivia Pope has a way of pulling truths out of people before they

acknowledge them or are willing to disclose them. But when Sully remains reluctant to confront the fact of his queerness, Olivia returns with emotional appeals, arguing that "the rules have changed" and that "Don't Ask Don't Tell is over." Despite Olivia's efforts, Sully refuses to allow the video to be used as evidence, saying that it conflicts with his conservative politics and congressional aspirations. He would rather be incarcerated and closeted than live a free life as an openly gay man and tells Olivia that he "can't be gay." Olivia replies to him, exclaiming "but you are! This is who you are. This is your alibi. Let us help you!" Sully is unwilling to confront an essential part of his identity, despite what is at stake. As Sully storms out of the door, he is arrested to the sound of surging music, and Olivia's team learns that Amanda Tanner has attempted suicide shortly thereafter.

The melodramatic revelations continue. At the hospital, Quinn discloses that Fitz called Amanda Tanner "sweet baby," his nickname for Olivia, which prompts her to realize that Fitz and Amanda were in fact having an affair, contrary to what Fitz told her about his relationship with the younger woman. Olivia attempts to confront him about his lie in the Oval Office, and he tries to silence her several times with a kiss. The kiss reveals that they had an affair prior to his election as president. The affair is rekindled on and off throughout the series, and their forbidden romance is both one of the defining and most controversial features of the show. With a torrent of outrage, she confronts Fitz with the following statement: "I believed you. You clouded my judgment. You made me mistrust my gut, because I wanted to believe you. I destroyed that girl. She tried to kill herself!" Olivia is angry at Fitz because her affair with Fitz is making her doubt her basic instincts and compromising her professional competence.

Cyrus Beene, President Grant's Chief of Staff, walks in on them and it is revealed that he knew nothing about the affair. Olivia sees this as confirmation that she "didn't matter enough" to Fitz. Her remarks also resonate with the historical trajectory of intimate relationships between Black women and white men, in which Black women were raped, assaulted, or unable to be loved out in the open. But despite her moment of vulnerability and ongoing grief about her complicated relationship with Fitz, Liv is still able to reconnect to her gut and continue assisting the people who need her help. She confidently encourages Stephen Finch, a litigator and one of her employees, to publicly propose to his girlfriend Georgia over a meal. While the proposal occurs, she cries in the coat closet, likely wondering if Fitz – or anyone else – will publicly declare his love for her in that manner. Similarly, she encourages Sully to come out publicly, and he is cleared of the murder charges.

At the end of the episode, Quinn asks Harrison if Olivia is "one of the good guys" Harrison replies, "She's the best guy." Quinn, who has served as the point of entry throughout this journey, has asked the question that is likely plaguing the audience who has just witnessed the following spectacle. Liberal and left audience members might question Olivia's investment in a conservative war hero who admits to killing brown people abroad. Much of Olivia's work involves secrecy and intimidation, but she is also invested in helping others live more authentically. While her personal ethics leave a lot to be desired, Harrison reassures the audience that Olivia is always looking out for the most vulnerable people.

How to Get Away With Murder premiered in 2014, and is set to conclude in April 2020. It is not a spinoff of *Scandal,* but is a product of the latter's success, and

occurs along the same timeline. Annalise Keating, *Murder*'s protagonist, is a defense attorney and law professor at the fictional Middleton Law School. Like Olivia, she is marked by her personal glamor, professional competence, and chaotic personal life. However, Annalise is a much colder figure than Olivia, her coldness functioning as a form of protection and discernment. And, like Olivia, we first see Annaliese from behind, her hair styled in a short bob. There are silver bangles on her ears, and she wears a maroon leather jacket and a black pencil skirt. Her fashion is sexier and more authoritative that Olivia's – marked by darker colors and more form-fitting tailoring. Unlike Olivia, who was raised by two affluent parents, Annalise comes from a more working-class background than the former woman, and her professional wardrobe communicates a certain toughness.

The pilot of *Murder* also has a Quinn surrogate in Wes, a disoriented new law student through whom the audience is expected to process this world. Filtered through Wes' eyes, we see very little of Annalise's interior life. Instead, she is rendered as an imperious figure who holds the keys to her students' professional success and encourages them to compete against each other. In the spirit of this competition, Wes races to Annalise's home in the middle of the night to share a piece of information that might assist a client of hers. Bursting into her office, Wes catches Annalise having sex with a man, Nate Lahey, whom we later learn is a Philadelphia Police detective. Wes assumes that Nate is Annalise's husband, and is taken aback when he later learns that she is married to a different man, Sam Keating, a white philosophy professor at Middleton. Annalise, sensing Wes' shock and confusion, pulls him aside to apologize for putting him in the middle of this situation. She begins to cry, telling Wes that she

and her husband have been trying to get pregnant, and that the ordeal has put a strain on the marriage. Yet, Wes finds her outburst more frightening than clarifying, and quickly leaves. Following his departure, Annalise stares at herself in the mirror with eyes that seem both dead and wandering, knowing that she hasn't been entirely truthful herself. Though actors are certainly capable of playing characters who are younger than themselves, Viola Davis, the actress who plays Annalise, was 49 when the series premiered. This makes it unlikely that Annalise was trying to conceive and is instead trying to make up an excuse to deflect a curious student.

Annalise's coldness and detachment are reflected most strongly in her final scene of the pilot. While she watches the evening news with her husband, there is a breaking story about Lila Stangard, a Middleton undergraduate who has been found dead. Lila was a student of Sam's, and Annalise expresses her condolences to him before stating "I betcha the boyfriend did it." Annalise and Sam exchange cold, knowing glances before Sam replies "I guess we'll see." Later, the audience will learn that Sam was Lila's boyfriend, and that she was murdered on his orders. But in this moment, Annalise turns in the direction of the camera, looking away from the lens. The camera pans past her face and ahead three months, where her students are disposing of an unidentified body, which is revealed to be Sam's in a dizzying flashback sequence. In this instance, Annalise's detachment is a mode of skepticism that is used to protect her from her violent husband.

Though *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder* exist in the same timeline, their paths do not intersect until Season 7, Episode 12 of *Scandal,* titled "Allow Me To Reintroduce Myself." The title is a reference to "Public Service Announcement

(Interlude)," a track from Jay-Z's *The Black Album* (2003). The episode is a paean to Black feminist solidarity, during which Annalise is central to rebuilding Olivia's confidence after a series of professional setbacks. Despite their class differences, they bond as powerful Black women in the struggle. The episode opens with Olivia teaching a class at the fictional DeWitt University. Her lecture is titled "How to Survive A Scandal," and she writes the title of the lecture on the chalkboard using the same looping script Annalise uses at the beginning and end of *Murder*. Ironically, despite Olivia's authority in the classroom, she is alienated from her traditional centers of power. She has been dismissed from her position at the White House and is no longer in charge of Olivia Pope and Associates. Despite this, Annalise appears in Olivia's classroom, and wants to use Olivia's connections in Washington, D.C. to get her class action lawsuit before the Supreme Court.

Annalise's class action concerns the plight of numerous Black and brown defendants who were convicted of crimes after receiving inadequate counsel. Olivia is initially skeptical about taking the case on, and her lack of Black feminist solidarity – owed to her upper-middle class upbringing and exclusively white social circle - is a recurring issue throughout the episode. Though Annalise is a prominent defense attorney, Olivia doesn't recognize her, thus hinting at the fraught power dynamic between them that will characterize the episode. Marcus Walker, a civil rights activist who was hired by Olivia's former firm has heard of Annalise, which hints at Olivia's distance from social justice struggles despite her deep empathy and advocacy.

Along with Annalise and Marcus, Olivia is joined by Michaela Pratt, a law student and main character on *Murder* who combines the glamor of Olivia with the

intensity of Annalise. They function as a quartet of Black people leading the charge against a racist criminal justice system. But Olivia is receiving her own anti-racist education over the course of the episode. Marcus and Olivia meet for a drink, during which she asks him why he continues to support her after her non-Black colleagues have abandoned her. Marcus simply replies, "We're black. That means I'll always be here for you, and I'll always root for you. It's how we do." What Marcus is describing is “linked fate,” a term coined by Michael Dawson in his monograph *Black Visions.* Linked fate describes the idea that outcomes for individual Black people reflect the health of the broader Black community.

Marcus’ investment in Olivia’s welfare provides a stark contrast to the treatment that Olivia receives from her former, non-Black colleagues. Their disdain for Olivia has resulted in an antiblack coalition to sabotage the class action. Olivia, Annalise, Marcus, and Michaela are being sabotaged by Olivia’s former crisis management firm, which has been renamed “Quinn Perkins and Associates,” or QPA for short. Over the course of *Scandal*’s seven seasons, Quinn has been transformed from the disoriented neophyte of the pilot into a hardened boss. Jake Ballard, a Naval intelligence officer and Olivia’s former lover, relishes the opportunity to "check Olivia Pope.” Mellie Grant, the former First Lady and current President of the United States, fears that a successful class action will return Olivia to a position of influence. To compromise Olivia and the case, she leaks confidential information about the circumstances surrounding Olivia’s firing from the White House with the cooperation of QPA. Yet, Olivia is still in denial about the gravity of the betrayal that she has experienced from her white colleagues. Olivia, frustrated by Mellie’s resistance and hungry to lash out at

Annalise, blames the class action's inability to garner support in Washington, D.C. on Annalise's past, which includes the latter's struggle with alcoholism, infidelity, and involvement in multiple murder plots. However, Olivia's past is equally checkered, and her rage at Annalise is a form of deflection, reflecting Olivia's own anxieties about confronting structural power.

The simmering conflict between Olivia and Annalise comes to a head as they get their hair done in a local beauty salon. Their conversation in the salon was the most discussed moment of the episode, memed on Twitter and close-read in online publications like *Vulture.* As the two women get their hair done, a breaking news report reveals that Olivia was fired from the White House. Annalise was under the impression that Olivia voluntarily resigned from her position and confronts the younger woman as a "siditty phony" who "judged" Annalise despite struggling with her own demons. Annalise continues, arguing that Olivia "called [her] a hot mess, remember?" before concluding that both women's struggles make them "the same." Olivia takes offense at Annalise's read, calling her a "bully" who had to bring her "broke ass" to Washington, D.C. from Philadelphia "on the Megabus." She concludes her criticism of Annalise with Jay-Z's signature phrase: "allow me to reintroduce myself."

The argument between Olivia and Annalise provides a crystalline distillation of the class and color distinctions between the two women. Olivia's use of the word 'bully' to describe Annalise telegraphs the way in which dark-skinned Black women are pathologized and viewed as threatening even when they are being truthful. Olivia was an authority figure in two exclusively non-Black workplaces, and her major

romantic relationships have been with white men. Though Olivia has the last word, it is deeply defensive. Annalise is a breath of fresh air, an older sister figure who is unafraid to hold Olivia accountable for her classism and antiblackness. Annalise's challenge forces Olivia to summon the power she once held, thus "reintroducing herself" as a resilient, confident woman. Despite its hostility, Olivia's confrontation with Annalise empowers her to rediscover her sensitive side, and to hold her white former colleagues accountable. During a confrontation in a parking garage, Olivia reminds Quinn that her "QPA would be about justice," and encourages Quinn not to "compromise [her]self just because you hate me." Though Quinn is still angry at Olivia, she gives the latter woman a key piece of information that Olivia uses to convince a swing Supreme Court justice to try the class action. There are limits to the efficacy of the moral appeal. It presumes a common humanity, and our real-life political discourse is full of sad stories that failed to move the hearts and minds of people in power. Yet, in the fictional world of *Scandal,* Olivia Pope's warmth and humanity is enough to move mountains.

Cookie and Tasha: "Unprofessional" Women

In her 2018 monograph *Double Negative: The Black Image in Popular Culture,* Raquel Gates explores the liberatory potential embedded in negative representations of blackness. In the conclusion of her monograph, she offers a close reading of *Empire,* a FOX melodrama which premiered in 2015. *Empire* is a television show about the Lyon family, who manage the fictional record label Empire Entertainment. The Lyons kill and scheme to maintain control of their empire, but despite the show's depiction of the demimonde, Gates argues that the show is a "false

negative." Its negative depictions of African-Americans are canceled out by the presence of figures like show creator Lee Daniels and lead actress Taraji P. Henson, both of whom have been nominated for Academy Awards. Henson has also been widely praised for her portrayal of family matriarch Cookie Lyon, and she won the Golden Globe for Best Actress in a TV Drama in 2015. The presence of such eminent Black people in the creation of *Empire* confirms the fact that it is simply fiction and not a representation of real black deviance, like reality shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and the *Black Ink Crew* franchises.

But in her reading of *Empire'*s first season, Gates created room for a version of the show that "will push too hard against the politics of respectability, become too excessive, too dramatic, too black, in its subsequent seasons" (Gates 189). However, Gates argues that the potential melodramatic excesses of *Empire* are ripe with potential. She has her "fingers crossed" that *Empire* will "descend from its lofty perch" and "into the gutter of negative representations" (190). Gates' reading was prescient. In the season two premiere of *Empire,* Cookie appeared in a gorilla suit at a rally to fight against police brutality. Fans were very critical of the gesture, which was viewed as out of character for a woman known for her glamor. Off camera, Henson has also pushed back against the dictates of respectability, distributing cookies to other celebrities as she walked to the stage at the Golden Globes to accept her award.

But before the awards and the conversations about respectability, there was the pilot of *Empire.* As the pilot opens, the viewer is regaled with scenes from a successful record company, girded with a sense of doom on the edges. Lucious Lyon, the CEO of Empire, is working with an artist in the studio, but this is interrupted by flashbacks of

a doctor's appointment, one of many flashbacks that will occur during the pilot. Flashbacks are used by writers to provide exposition, but the *Empire* flashback is gray, blurry, grim, and generally used to contextualize the struggle that makes Empire Records possible. In the flashback of his doctor's appointment, Lucious getting an unspecified diagnosis, which later turns out to be ALS. Complicating matters is Empire's impending IPO. Believing his days are numbered, Lucious immediately gathers his three sons, Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem in his home to discuss who will take over the company, to which Jamal replies, "We King Lear, now?"

Complicating Lucious' plan is his ex-wife Cookie, who is released from prison in the pilot's next scene. Like Olivia and Annalise, Cookie has a distinct sense of style. Even though she has been incarcerated for 17 years, she leaves the prison gates dressed to the nines. She wears a white fur coat, red lipstick, bamboo earrings, and a leopard print body suit (she will later say that she was "locked up" in these clothes). No one is there to pick her up – a reality for many incarcerated Black women who do not get the same support as incarcerated men - so she takes a cab. The first person that she visits is Jamal, her middle son. Cookie's clothes are very campy and somewhat dated, but like Annalise, she uses clothing as a form of armor against misogynoir. Over the course of the series, she will be styled in various eye-popping ways, rotating a series of fur coats, wigs, bold lipsticks, animal prints (including leopard print and snakeskin), and stilettos through her wardrobe. For Cookie, fashion also freezes her in that time and place when her life was irrevocably changed. Right before her arrest, she is wearing giant gold hoops with her name written in the center. Though she has a bad feeling about the events that are about to occur, she encourages Lucious, at this point

an aspiring rapper, to continue recording, understanding that his album will provide the breakthrough success that changes the entire family's fortune even if Cookie is forced to sacrifice her own freedom to see it to fruition.

Even though Cookie's fashions are bold, they do not earn her the respect that she deserves from the cishet men in her orbit. Cookie is received coldly by her youngest son, Hakeem, who calls her a "bitch." She subsequently attacks him with a broom. When Cookie goes to Lucious' office to get "half [her] company back," arguing that Lucious "still owe[s] me what's mine," Lucious tries to assuage her by offering her a multimillion-dollar salary. However, the salary is not in her preferred department, Artists & Repertoire, which is currently occupied by Lucious' new girlfriend, Anika. Lucious' offer is insulting to Cookie, who played an important, though unwritten role in the success of Empire. In a flashback, it is revealed that Cookie and Luscious were at dinner in their hometown of Philadelphia when Cookie mentions that Luscious' voice is "too low" in the mix of his debut album. Luscious retorts by saying that consumers - many of whom are white – do not want to hear a gruff-voiced Black man talk about growing up on the streets of Philadelphia. Lucious then makes a joke about how white audiences would prefer to hear Color Me Badd, a multiracial early-90s R&B group. Lucious' comment is a cynical reflection on how white audiences prefer to consume Black cultural products without Black people. Cookie encourages him to push past the cynicism and fear, choosing to make an album that is reflective of his artistic vision. Like Olivia, Cookie is positioned as the moral center of the Lyon family, encouraging her family members to become their most authentic selves.

Cookie's love and encouragement is poured most deliberately into her queer

middle son Jamal. Like Olivia, the layered oppressions that Cookie experiences as a Black woman allow her to feel empathy with queer people. As the flashback continues, Lucious and Cookie's discussion is interrupted when Jamal, their young middle son, walks down the stairs wearing Cookie's red stilettos and a silk scarf around his head. Luscious reacts violently, carrying Jamal out of the house. He attempts to place Jamal in a trashcan outside, but a frantic Cookie follows Lucious and rescues Jamal from the trashcan. Cookie does not explicitly confront Lucious on his homophobia, but she expresses rage at him for putting his son in danger and kicks him.

In the present day, Jamal is now a struggling singer-songwriter. He spots Cookie, who has traveled directly from prison to his apartment, out of his window. The sight of his mother triggers an immediate flashback, a memory of visiting his mother in prison as a young boy. During the visit, Jamal confides that he is afraid to tell Luscious that he is being bullied. She is the first person to affirm his queerness, telling him he's "different" but that she always "got him." After present day Jamal performs the ballad "Good Enough" in a nightclub – a declaration of his queerness and humanity - Cookie asks to manage him. The request is a way of displaying solidarity with her queer son. Cookie chooses to champion his talent instead of seeing his queerness as an obstacle like Luscious. But the request also sets up an arms race between Cookie and Luscious (who has thrown his weight behind Hakeem) that will allow her to return to prominence at Empire Entertainment.

Unlike Olivia, Annalise, and Cookie, Tasha St. Patrick is a secondary character on *Power*. *Power* premiered on Starz in 2014, and its protagonist is Tasha's husband,

James “Ghost” St. Patrick. Ghost is a New York City drug kingpin who launders his money through a nightclub called “Truth.” Ghost’s desire to become a legitimate businessman is the driving force of the series, and he nearly becomes the Lieutenant Governor of New York. It is useful to read Tasha against Cookie. Both women are involved with drug dealing men and serve time on their behalf. In the pilot episode, titled “Not Exactly How We Planned,” the viewer sees Tasha from the very first frame. Unlike Olivia, Annalise, and Cookie, she is not (yet) a formidable woman in her own right, a woman who must be withheld from the viewer in order to make a dramatic entrance. Instead, Tasha steps out of the car clad in a white dress and carrying a white clutch. Tasha will make one of her final appearances on *Power* wearing a white dress, and like Olivia, the color will come to symbolize her desire to protect the vulnerable. But in the beginning of the pilot, Tasha primarily defined as arm candy who enjoys the excesses of her husband's success.

Despite her depiction as a shallow party girl, Tasha performs the domestic labor that allows Ghost the freedom to maintain his drug empire. These duties include preparing meals for her three children, Tariq, Raina, and Yasmine. She is also intimately aware of the details of her children’s lives, telling her mother that Raina is auditioning for the school play. And like Cookie, her labor was also a key part of building her husband’s wealth. When Tasha’s best friend LaKeisha expresses admiration at the designer fashions in Tasha’s closet, and expresses a romanticized idea of what it means to be a drug dealer's wife, Tasha replies that "[Ghost] wasn't rich when I met him.”

Even though Tasha is responsible for building Ghost’s empire behind the scenes,

she is portrayed in the pilot as a vapid materialistic person and her behavior and clothing are policed by Ghost. When her husband asks her what she thought he would become when they first began their relationship, she replies, "the biggest goddamn drug dealer in New York City." Ghost is frustrated by that interaction and regards it as evidence of Tasha's persistent shallowness. However, Tasha simply recognizes that Ghost is good at selling drugs, and that selling drugs has allowed their family to maintain a high quality of life. But in retaliation for her perceived vapidity, Ghost slut-shames Tasha. She wears a short black dress with cutouts that he deems to be too revealing. He tells her to dress like "look like you own the place, not like you're trying to get in for free." It does not dawn upon Ghost that Tasha could simply like the dress and chooses to wear it because it makes her feel good.

Shortly after her interaction with Ghost, Tasha changes into a more conservative dress and heads out to Truth. While at the club, Ghost runs into Angela Valdez, a beautiful prosecutor and his former high school girlfriend. Like Tasha, Angela is beautiful, but educated and respectable. When Ghost asks Angela for an update on her life since she left their neighborhood high school, she quickly rattles off a trifecta of "Choate, college, [and] law school" while insisting that she is still that same "round the way girl." Tasha jealously eyes their interaction from a distance, a gaze that threatens to reify the same stereotypes about jealous dark-skinned women that are summoned in the beauty shop interaction with Annalise and Olivia. But Tasha doesn't linger in a jealous space. On the ride back to the penthouse she shares with Ghost, Tasha reclaims her identity not as Ghost's wife, but as a woman who freely centers her own pleasure. In the backseat of the car, Tasha removes her underwear - also white -

and masturbates as Sean, her young, handsome driver, looks on. Tasha's act of defiance does not prevent Angela and Ghost from later beginning an affair. But it is not intended to do that. Tasha reveals that she has agency and is not simply waiting for Ghost to recognize her essential goodness or desirability.

In Power's series finale, titled "Exactly How We Planned," there is a sense of events coming full circle. Ghost is murdered in the same place where his journey began, his nightclub, Truth. And in this episode, it is revealed that it was neither a rival kingpin nor a politician who killed him, but his son, Tariq. The series of events that lead to Ghost's murder begin when he asks Tasha to get Tariq to confess to murder of Raymond Jones.[40] Ghost's request is presumably about accountability, but it is really to burnish his own law and order credentials in preparation for his Lieutenant Governor run. Upon hearing Ghost's request, Tasha asks him "Why don't you love [Tariq] the way that I do?" Tasha's love for her son is rooted in an ethics of care, not of punishment like Ghost's. Right before killing his father, Tariq asks Ghost: "When the fuck are you gonna pay for all the bullshit you've done, huh, Dad?" In response, Ghost tells Tariq that Tasha has manipulated him into being angry at his father, when it is Tasha who has tried to protect him. Tariq replies: "No, this has nothing to do with my mother. This is me. Up to now, you still don't even see me for who I really am. I'm you, Dad!" Tariq continues to express his rage at Ghost for abandoning the family for Angela, and subsequently kills his father. The tragedy of *Power* is not Tasha's naiveté, it is that Ghost's neglect of his family through his quest for legitimacy ultimately undid

[40] Raymond Jones is a police officer who murdered Tariq's sister Raina. Tariq murders Raymond Jones in revenge.

him. Once again, Tasha mobilizes her sexuality – one of the resources available to her as a homemaker with little formal education - as a means of empowerment. But this is not as playful as her attempt to seduce Sean in the pilot. Tasha goes to her lover Quentin's house to have sex and stashes the murder weapon in his home as he sleeps. The stakes have increased, and Tasha's actions are no longer about getting back at her husband, but now about saving her son's life.

Unfortunately for Tasha and Tariq, Quentin has an alibi for Ghost's murder. In the final sequence of the episode, the police come to arrest Tasha for Ghost's murder. Tariq desperately tries to confess that he killed Ghost, but Tasha silences him, encouraging him to go to school and "live your life." Ghost is deceased, leaving Tasha to experience the aftermath of the sacrifice that she made for Tariq. The final frames of the episode contrast Tasha's booking – in which she removes a white dress like the one she wore in the pilot, her weave, and lashes - to Tariq's first day at college. Tasha's booking photos mirror Tariq taking his college identification photo, and Tasha turns in the clothes she was booked in while Tariq picks up his orientation materials. At the end of the sequence, Tasha is taken to her cell, where she begins to cry; Tariq is in a sparsely furnished dorm room which is supposed to represent triumph but with his pensive expression, seems deeply carceral. He closes the door, presumably to begin the work of exonerating his mother. After the credits roll, viewers are subject to advertisements for three upcoming *Power* spinoffs, revealing the interconnected melodramatic threads extending from the source material.

#Abjection: The Online Life of Melodrama

In addition to placing Black women in leading roles, the four television shows

discussed are notable for having active fan engagement on Twitter. *Scandal* revolutionized how television audiences engaged social media. *Scandal* cast members watched new episodes in real time with fans, tweeting nuggets of behind the scenes information and reactions to shocking moments. But there is a dark side to this engagement, one that is reflected in fan reactions to *Power*'s Black female characters, Tasha and LaKeisha. Though criticizing a character is not necessarily negative, criticism and harassment have been disproportionately directed at Tasha (played by Naturi Naughton) and LaKeisha (played by Lala Anthony), and reveals that the abject leaps beyond the page. Naughton has been targeted for harassment by rapper Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson, who is the show's co-creator. When a picture of Naughton with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi began circulating on the internet, 50 Cent mocked her thinning hairline. Naughton told him to stop insulting her, which caused him to escalate the harassment online. Anthony's acting was often criticized. Fans have also turned scenes of violence against women into memes, including LaKeisha's murder, Ghost's assault of Tasha, and Tommy's murder of his girlfriend Holly. These events are not seen as tragedies, but just desserts for naïve women who don't understand 'the game.'

Certain fans on Twitter particularly relished moments where Tasha was being humiliated by Ghost. She is seen as a 'bird' who corrupts Tariq, even though she is the person who tries to protect Tariq in the end. Ghost leaves Tasha out of his will, which was widely celebrated by fans as evidence of his power and legacy. During the will reading, Tariq insists that he will "take care" of his mother, but he must graduate from a four-year college or university with a 3.5 GPA before he can access his inheritance.

Upon hearing this caveat, Tariq expresses anger that Ghost “is dead” but “still trying to control his life.” Tariq’s comment reveals a useful insight about the ways that abusive men use money to control their families. Similarly, Tasha mourns that she “did everything for that man,” which includes giving him “three kids” and standing “by him through prison.” Understandably, she is outraged that she got “nothing” from him in death. Tasha's mother, who has assisted her with the care of the children, asks "What are we going to do for money?" Ghost's vindictiveness has trickled down to Tasha's mother, who never crossed him. Even in death, Ghost has rendered his wife abject. But Tasha has an answer for her mother’s question: “I’ll figure it out, Mama, like I always do.” Despite her abjection, Tasha will find a way to stretch her family towards a new horizon.

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