Hissing, Bidding, and Lynching

Participation in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* and the Melodramatics of American Racism

Carrie J. Preston

On closing night of Company One Theatre's sold-out run of 2016 MacArthur Fellow Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* (27 February 2016), Elyas Harris, director of the group's Street Team, took the stage to give the standard instructions about turning off cell phones and locating exits (Williams 2016). He also announced that this was a melodrama that required participation like that of a good 19th-century audience, which meant hissing at the villain and cheering for heroes/heroines. Audience participation in *An Octoroon* was intended to support the goals of Company One's Street Team, "a group of community organizers" hoping to "eliminate Boston's social divides that occur along racial, cultural, economic and geographic lines" (Company One 2015). The night I attended, many hissed and cheered as invited, playing the role of an audience

Figure 1. Brooks Reeves as the Playwright and Harsh Gagoomal as the Assistant putting on redface and blackface in An Octoroon *by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Summer L. Williams. The Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, Paramount Center, Boston. Company One Theatre in partnership with ArtsEmerson, 2016. (Photo by Paul Fox)*

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from a time when the rules of the theatre and its racial and gendered codes were different—but also uncomfortably recognizable to me. The actors found opportunities to remind everyone to comment on the characters, as when Brandon G. Green modeled a vigorous hiss in his first racist line as the villain M'Closky: "[*ssssSSSSSS*]See here, you imp! If I catch you and your redskin yonder, poaching in my swamps, I'll cut me a switch and cane the black off of you!" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:58). His hiss was both a reminder and a challenge to the audience: *Hiss louder than this!*

Hissing and cheering were the warm up for a show that would ask the audience to participate in more intense ways, including bidding at a slave auction and cheering for a lynching. The Company One production expanded the audience participation Jacobs-Jenkins scripted in order to disrupt Boston audiences' (somewhat sanctimonious) tendency to presume they understand the play's humor and message, its parodies and pedagogies: As a fairly typical white Boston experimental theatregoer, I thought that if I didn't *already* know *An Octoroon*'s specific lessons on race and melodrama, or the tangled histories of American slavery and theatre, I would learn them easily; they were already part of my liberal, antiracist worldview. I, along with many whites in the audience, would admit that I am a member of the racist culture the play challenges, but not that I personally support bigotry. *Of course not!* This production refused the predominantly white audience that comforting certainty.

As an adaptation of Dion Boucicault's 1859 melodrama *The Octoroon: Or, Life in Louisiana*, Jacobs-Jenkins's version encourages speculation on how racism and audience participation have remained unchanged since the mid-19th century. The play suggests that contemporary interactive participatory theatre often resembles melodrama, minstrelsy, and related forms, a very different perspective from the current obsession with immersive theatre as the height of experimental and transformative performance.[1] What kind of work does *An Octoroon*'s hissing, bidding, and lynching actually do on a majority white audience? What does it teach its audience about race in this moment of renewed racial tensions and activism, evidenced by the formation of Black Lives Matter, protests over police shootings of blacks, demonstrations calling attention to the lack of diversity on American university campuses...and incendiary statements from US President Donald Trump that NFL players who protest racism by kneeling during the National Anthem "shouldn't be in this country" (in Stracqualursi 2018). In spite of the success of *An Octoroon*—and partially because of its success—I am concerned about the psychic impact of some participatory theatre. For a limited, privileged audience of already convinced progressives, participation might *feel* transformative but produce no political reevaluation or action. For others, participation might actually entrench racist and misogynist attitudes. In between, there is plenty of confusion. Jacobs-Jenkins's adaptation of Boucicault's melodrama most effectively calls attention to how people ambivalently participate in visual and mass media, ranging from

1. Josephine Machon claims that in immersive theatre, "The active decision-making and sensual involvement that is required [...] can be transformative on a number of levels; from the playful way in which a participant influences the shape of the event or physiologically, via the engagement of sensory awareness, to the radically transformative; transforming an individual psychologically or ideologically" (2013:280). Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* is not fully immersive, but it is on Machon's "scale of immersivity" in that the active vocal and physical audience participation influence the tone and duration of some scenes (93).

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theatre to Facebook. The production also underlines the limitations of these media for promoting cultural transformation.

Jacobs-Jenkins's play opens with a prologue titled "The Art of Dramatic Composition" (after a Boucicault essay) that introduces a playwright character BJJ (Jacobs-Jenkins's initials). BJJ explains his decision to mount an adaptation of *The Octoroon* with a familiarity that initially supports the audience's tendency to believe they are the play's perfect audience: savvy theatregoers ready to theatrically tackle the big problems of American culture, even race. In Boston, BJJ (played by Brandon Green, an African American, as is the actual BJJ), took his seat as one of the last audience members admitted—albeit in his underwear. He delivered his first line from his mid-row seat: "Hi, everyone. I'm a 'black playwright.' Now I don't know what that means, but I'd like to tell you a story..." (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:29). Necks craned to locate the voice, the audience giggled, and there were larger guffaws when BJJ rose from his seat, pushed across the row, came down the aisle, and arrived at the stage, in the full glory of his skivvies. He directly addressed the audience with a story about how his decision to adapt Boucicault's melodrama *The Octoroon* emerged from his sessions with a therapist (31).

> BJJ: But then all the white guys quit.
> And then I couldn't find any more white guys
> to play any of the white guy parts,
> because they felt it was too "melodramatic." (30)

After all the "white guys" refused to play the "racist whose racism isn't 'complicated' by some monologue," BJJ decided to accept his therapist's idea that he play the white roles to learn: "Sympathy? Maybe you'll... / learn to understand them?" (31–32). He double-cast himself as the villain, M'Closky, and as the hero, George. To prepare for those roles, he set up a vanity onstage and, per the stage directions, "violently" put on whiteface (31). With this anecdote, Jacobs-Jenkins tempts his audience to believe BJJ's account of the origins of the show. After all, he gave the character his own initials and introduced him as "a black playwright." Then, BJJ declared his whole opening statement a lie: "Just kidding. I don't have a therapist. / I can't afford one" (31). The monologue closes with an account of the (nonexistent?) therapist's interpretation of BJJ's dreams (31). BJJ (the character) undermined any hope that an audience could know the truth about what was *really* the impetus for the production.

Next, another Playwright (played by Brooks Reeves, a white actor) entered, also through the auditorium and in his underwear. He introduced himself as Dion Boucicault (the Irish playwright of the original *The Octoroon*), and then put on redface to play Wahnotee, a Native American, following Boucicault's precedent for the premiere of *The Octoroon* at New York's Winter Garden Theatre in 1859. This very drunk Playwright was helped by his Assistant (played by Harsh Gagoomal), who Jacob-Jenkins dictates should be "played by an Indigenous American actor/actress, a South Asian actor/actress, or one who can pass as Native American," according to the "Dramatis Personae" in which "Actor ethnicities [are] listed in order of preference" (26). The Assistant then blackened his face to play the old slave Pete and the young slave boy Paul because, as the Playwright explained, it's possible to "use Negroes in your plays now," but shockingly, "you have to pay them... 'Course, you still can't find any Indian actors—Hey, where did all the Indians go?" (41). Of course, the actor who played the Assistant appeared to be South Asian, perhaps of Indian descent, so his disgusted glare at his Playwright boss cracked up an audience already piqued by the use of the term "Indian" rather than "Native American."

The Prologue is an irreverent riff on racialized performance traditions as the actors literally put on the blackface, redface, and whiteface of melodrama. The targeted performance traditions range from 19th-century minstrelsy to the typical made-for-TV movie about a "magical negro with PTSD" who is, according to the script, "trying to get out of a generic ghetto with his obese girlfriend who is also pregnant and who also has AIDS from a history of sexual abuse [...] which some idiot's going to describe as representative of 'the Black experience in America'"

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(Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:32). The continuities in racialized performance since the 19th century include the pleasures of feeling "sympathy" (the therapist's word) for stereotypical but improbable characters designated as representatives of "the Black experience." The tragic plot of the "magical negro" and his girlfriend is as familiar now as was the trope of the tragic sale of the beautiful quadroon to a lecherous bidder for a 19th-century audience, which hissed and cheered to signal their sympathy.[2]

Figure 2. Brandon G. Green in whiteface as BJJ in the prologue of An Octoroon *by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Summer L. Williams. The Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, Paramount Center, Boston. Company One Theatre in partnership with ArtsEmerson, 2016. (Photo by Paul Fox)*

In the original play, Boucicault's Zoe is the primary magnet for audience sympathy as both the typical melodramatic fainting heroine and the titular "octoroon," a term Boucicault may have originated to distinguish his play from the tragic quadroon plot it invoked. Zoe is the daughter of the Terrebonne plantation's owner, Judge Peyton, and his quadroon mistress. Raised with as much privilege as was possible for an illegitimate mixed-race girl in Louisiana, Zoe is condescendingly ignored by the local aristocrats but adored as the apex of beauty and goodness by a group of male outsiders to elite plantation life—a foreign heir, a Yankee, and an Irishman. Zoe can pass as white so successfully that she wins the love of George Peyton, heir of Terrebonne, who has arrived from Paris after the death of Judge Peyton, his uncle.

Jacob M'Closky, the Yankee overseer who mismanaged the plantation, is both the villain and one of the outsiders who loves Zoe. M'Closky is marked as Irish by his last name and the "julep" he drinks for breakfast. Contemporary audiences might not be attuned to stereotypes represented onstage by the 19th-century drunken Irishman, but the racialization of Irish immigrants rendered them not "white enough" to be included in the Louisiana elite (Dyer 1997:52–56). M'Closky rails, "Curse these old families—a snooty lot of dried up aristocracy. Just because my grandfather wasn't some broken-down Virginia émigré, or a stingy old Creole, I ain't fit to sit down to the same meat with them (Boucicault 1859:62). Boucicault's M'Closky, with his critique of class, was already sympathetic, at least for a melodramatic villain. Jacobs-Jenkins further complicates the role by making the same black actor play him and the heroic George.

The character Wahnotee, yet another outsider who adores Zoe, extends Boucicault's critique and sympathy to domestic colonization, the genocide of Native peoples, and conflict with Mexico over the southern border. Wahnotee "speaks a mash-up of Indian and Mexican," a subtle invocation of the connected plight of Native Americans and Mexicans who were fighting for land rights in the American southwest at that time (Boucicault 1859:143).[3] Wahnotee certainly invokes all

2. Emily Clark (2013) explores the period tropes and myths surrounding the tragic mulatto, the quadroon, and *plaçage* (the custom among many white men of having extramarital relationships and even households with a free black or mixed-race woman), and warns against trusting those myths as an accurate history of 19th-century mixed-race women.

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Figure 3. From left: Harsh Gagoomal as Paul, Brooks Reeves as Wahnotee, Bridgette Hayes as Dora, Shawna M. James as Zoe, and Brandon G. Green as M'Closky on the Terrebonne plantation in An Octoroon *by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Summer L. Williams. The Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, Paramount Center, Boston. Company One Theatre in partnership with ArtsEmerson, 2016. (Photo by Paul Fox)*

the stage "redskin" stereotypes with his "ugh" and affinity for "rum" and "firewater"—the only English words he speaks in the play. With his language "mash-up" and tendency to communicate with gesture, Wahnotee is also one of the stock characters of melodrama, "the mute," who uses facial expressions and gestures to communicate, thereby demonstrating the skill of the melodramatic actor.[4] Boucicault's mixture of stereotypes with sympathetic portrayals and melodramatic stock characters invoked an unusual degree of sympathy from audiences. It was also the source of his ability to teach lessons in plays that appealed to audiences, to do pedagogical work in a popular theatre. Of course, that work was inseparable from the goal of selling tickets. Boucicault demonstrated concern for groups considered racially or ethnically inferior, for the poor, and for the subjugated or literally enslaved quite consistently in his plays and adaptations. Yet, his representation of slaves and Native peoples was also an effort to appeal to exotic tastes in his audience and to capitalize on hot-button issues.[5]

3. Early editions of the play identify Wahnotee as "an Indian Chief of the Lepan Tribe," referencing the Apache Lipan tribe that was granted land rights by the short-lived Republic of Texas (see Chiles 2004).

4. Peter Brooks writes, "The mute role is in fact a virtuoso role [...] a role that demands of the actor a deployment of all his dramatic powers to convey meaning. As such, it is a special case, a hyperbolic instance, of a more extensive recourse to muteness in melodrama" (1976:61).

5. Scholars often question Boucicault's genuine political engagement and that of melodrama more generally. Dana Van Kooy and Jeffrey N. Cox note that melodramas and the antislavery movement arose in the same period and that slavery is a perfectly spectacular and sentimental subject for melodramas. They argue that melodramas like *The Octoroon* used the drama of slavery without encouraging abolition because the melodramatic form reaffirms patriarchy and white supremacy in the end (2012:462).

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Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* was certainly drawing full houses in Boston, and this might be surprising given what the play does to its audiences, including theatrically selling them slaves along with their tickets. The slave auction scene is the first that demands forms of participation exceeding the hissing and cheering that audiences were encouraged to voice throughout the play, and it is a big leap from hissing to bidding. To set the scene: The Terrebonne plantation is so encumbered with debt that the family must sell the slaves, including Zoe, although before he died the Judge signed free papers for his daughter. He had not realized that a lien on Terrebonne at the time he signed prevented him from diminishing the value of the estate. Many in the audience at Boucicault's melodrama in the late 1850s would have known that Zoe could have been sold at the "yellow" or "fancy-girl" auctions. These performance venues featured nearly white women dancing and singing; they were usually stripped naked so that potential buyers could see the flesh available for purchase (Roach 1996:216–17). While the Boston audience of *An Octoroon* might have been less aware of those practices, Jacobs-Jenkins's M'Closky made it clear that he was bidding on Zoe as a sex slave.

Figure 4. Brandon G. Green as the villain M'Closky, plotting to purchase the octoroon Zoe (Shawna M. James) as his sex slave in An Octoroon *by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Summer L. Williams. The Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, Paramount Center, Boston. Company One Theatre in partnership with ArtsEmerson, 2016. (Photo by Paul Fox)*

In the stage direction leading up to the auction scene Jacobs-Jenkins writes, "There is either 1 or 99 people playing various bidders. Or maybe there's some clever way to force the audience into doing this" (2015:102–03). The Boston production distributed about 20 bid cards to the audience (Ostrowski 2016). The auctioneer, Lafouche, encouraged the audience to bid through gesture and showed excitement when bidding wars developed between characters and theatregoers. The more the audience bid, the longer the extremely uncomfortable scene extended, forcing the auctioneer and other characters to adapt. After the slave sale went on too long during one performance, the production team, including dramaturg Ramona Ostrowski, discussed strategies for ignoring the bidding and moving the scene forward (Ostrowski 2016). During the bidding war over Zoe, the audience might have thought they were, like George, attempting to save her from becoming M'Closky's sex slave. Even Dora, the wealthy plantation heiress whose desire for George was foiled by his love for Zoe, invaded the male sphere of the auction in an attempt to outbid M'Closky. But however much the audience, George, and Dora might imagine they were trying to save Zoe, they were also participating in the sale of human beings authorized by an institution that assumed one race, defined by as little as "one drop in eight" of black blood, was rightfully *owned* by another (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:76).

One reviewer, Damon Krometis, declared that the slave auction challenged the ethical position he had staked while hissing at villains and cheering for heroes, yet was still "manageable." He wrote that during the auction scene,

> we started to lose our place of moral authority by reducing a human life to a price tag. This sensation was unsettling, yet still manageable. Due to the exaggerated acting of the

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company, the two-dimensionality of the scenic design and the tinny sound of the music, I felt I was still within a theatrical conceit. (Krometis 2016)

Krometis began to experience his participation as *unmanageable* during the lynching scene in act 4, the third instance of audience participation encouraged by Company One. At the opening of the act, the reconstruction/remake of Boucicault's *The Octoroon* is interrupted when BJJ and the Playwright/Boucicault "step forward from the tableau" to give a lecture on the structure of melodramas (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:113). They inform the audience that this "most important of all the acts in a melodrama" will be too "tough" to perform because act 4 contains the "moral of the play" and the "Sensation Scene": "You basically sort of give your audience the moral, then you overwhelm them with fake destruction" (115). In Jacobs-Jenkins's interpretation, the moral is found in a speech against the vigilante "lynch law" and the defense of Wahnotee after he is accused of murdering the slave boy, Paul:

> [I]t is against my nature to believe him guilty; and if he be, this isn't the place, nor you the authority to try him. I appeal against your usurped authority; this lynch law is a wild and lawless proceeding. You call yourselves judges—you aren't—you're a jury of executioners. (Boucicault 1859:172; Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:119)

Figure 5. Brandon G. Green as Terrebonne's heir George and Bridgette Hayes as the wealthy enamored neighbor Dora in An Octoroon *by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Summer L. Williams. The Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, Paramount Center, Boston. Company One Theatre in partnership with ArtsEmerson, 2016. (Photo by Paul Fox)*

In Boucicault's melodrama, the speech belongs to Salem Scudder, the good but foolish Yankee overseer whose plantation-ruining "improvements" and inventions included a camera with a "self-developing liquid" that produced a photograph without multiple washes in darkrooms (Boucicault 1859:150). Jacobs-Jenkins cut the character of Scudder and gave the speech to George, thereby simplifying the plot and consolidating the play's moral authority and inventiveness in the hero.

In both *Octoroons*, Wahnotee is saved by the discovery of a self-developed photograph showing that M'Closky killed Paul with Wahnotee's tomahawk to steal a letter that would save the plantation. He stood over Paul's body reading the letter (improbably) long enough for the camera to capture the image on the plate. The photographic evidence leads Scudder (in Boucicault's melodrama)/George (in Jacobs-Jenkins's version) to contradict the moral argument against vigilantism and encourage the lynching of M'Closky. The camera and its miraculous, justice-promoting photograph are also part of the "Sensation" of the melodrama's act 4. But, according to BJJ and the Playwright, cameras are no longer sensational:

> PLAYWRIGHT: You know, it's really hard to describe how this scene works
>
> BJJ: because it actually would have been really exciting to audiences 150 years ago—having someone caught by a photograph.

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PLAYWRIGHT: They were a novel thing,

BJJ: which is why this whole plot is more or less centered around a camera. But photographs to us?

ASSISTANT: Boring. (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:120)

BJJ and the Playwright claim that to produce a "novelty" comparable to a photograph for the 19th-century audience, one that would give the audience "a sense of having really witnessed something," they would have to set fire to the entire theatre and bring the audience "as close to death as possible" before rescuing spectators one by one (121). But theatre fires are too dangerous and would destroy the play's run, not to mention any chance for new productions. They considered "sacrificing an animal onstage" but worried about animal cruelty laws and the irrelevance of such a ritual.

BJJ: Anyway, I tried to figure out the next best thing—something actually related to the plot. I hope it isn't too disappointing,

PLAYWRIGHT: in which case, I apologize ahead of time.

(ASSISTANT has wheeled out an overhead projector. He projects a LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPH onto the back wall. Perhaps it goes away. Perhaps it doesn't.) (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:122)

The Boston production used multiple photographs, each of which included and even foregrounded a mob participating in the lynching. The notable presence of the crowd suggested that the audience was positioned as a mirror image of the lynch mob, spectators enjoying and participating in the same atrocity. Adding to the immediacy of the experience was the presence of the overhead projector onstage, a relatively obsolete apparatus of visual media. (Jacobs-Jenkins might have chosen the more cinematic technique of projecting the "lynching photograph" from the back of the auditorium.) The sequence ended with Tyler Shields's photograph of a naked black man pulling on the rope that hangs someone dressed in a white Ku Klux Klan costume from a tree. The image appears in Sheilds's series titled *Historical Fiction* that seeks to "reflect some of the most traumatic events in America's history" and "portray the perspective of those who witnessed such tragic events rather than those who fell victim to them."[6] As the image faded BJJ said, "Where was—okay sorry, I lost my place. I'm going back" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:122). In the Boston production, this line was performed as meaning that BJJ could not find his place in that reimagined lynch scene with its reversal of victim and perpetrator.

Jacobs-Jenkins's lynching photographs were "related to the plot," as BJJ claims, because Boucicault's melodrama featured a lynch mob interrupted by a photograph. But the photographs shown in the theatre depicted events and even a kind of mob violence against blacks that was not prevalent until after emancipation and reconstruction. Most states had laws against killing slaves, although they were certainly maimed and murdered by their masters as well as by mobs that called themselves "committees of safety" (Berg 2011:39–41). The term "lynch" first emerged in the 1830s, generally associated with a humiliating punishment like whipping/tarring/feathering.[7] Boucicault's scene reflects the mid-19th-century rise in deadly vigilantism in the South and West that targeted "undesirables," including Native Americans and Irish American–Yankees as well as blacks. So, *An Octoroon*'s display of lynching photographs from the civil rights movement was intentionally ahistorical.

6. Shields's 2015 *Historical Fiction* series, including "Lynching," was exhibited at the Andrew Weiss Gallery (see Workneh 2015).

7. The etymology of the term "lynch" is uncertain, but historians often link it to Colonel Charles Lynch of Virginia who established extralegal courts aimed at fighting crime and loyalist activities during the American Revolution (Berg 2011:3). For one of the first histories of lynching cited by historians, see Cutler (1969).

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Figure 6. Lynching *from Tyler Shields's series* Historical Fiction*, Andrew Weiss Gallery, 2015. The last of the "lynching photographs" projected at the Company One/ArtsEmerson production of* An Octoroon*. (Photo by Tyler Shields)*

When the first photograph appeared, many in the audience were evidently deeply disturbed by the depiction of torture, death, and dismemberment taken from the perspective of the triumphant white lynch mob. According to dramaturg Ramona Ostrowski, "You could hear them catch their breath, their stomach drop. And they were silent for the rest of the show" (2016). Jacobs-Jenkins then encourages a level of audience participation that went far beyond gasps of shock, horror, and sympathy. The characters ask the audience to join the mob onstage as they shout for a lynching. Jacobs-Jenkins sets up this participation by turning from the projected photographs back to Boucicault's plot, where the mob repeatedly calls, "Lynch him!" to support M'Closky's demand for the execution of Wahnotee. The mob aims the same phrase at M'Closky after the photograph is recovered showing that he killed Paul: "Lynch him! Lynch him! Down with him!" (Boucicault 1859:171–74). Jacobs-Jenkins's version lacks a mob because, as BJJ acknowledges at the opening of act 4, "I grossly underestimated the amount of white men I would actually need here—" (2015:113). There is only BJJ, who also plays George and M'Closky in whiteface; the Playwright who performs Wahnotee in redface; and the Assistant, who plays Pete and other slaves in blackface. And rather than adding their voices to the mob, BJJ and the Playwright force the overworked and overlooked Assistant to say the crowd's first lynch line alone:

PLAYWRIGHT: And the crowd's like,

(*No one says anything for a second. BJJ and PLAYWRIGHT look at ASSISTANT expectantly.*)

ASSISTANT: "Lynch him!" (117)

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When the crowd turns on M'Closky, the Assistant encouraged the Boston audience to participate by gesturing to them and saying:

ASSISTANT: And everyone's like,

EVERYONE: (*a loud*, *harsh*, *clear whisper*)
Guilty! Lynch him! (124–25)

"Lynch him!" is repeated three times in the script, with the Assistant egging "everyone" on (124–25). The absence of the crowd onstage makes the lynch mob lines all the more necessary for audience participation.

Many in the Boston audience followed directions and joined the mob, shouting, "Lynch him!" I couldn't do it, but I felt tugged in two directions at once: the impulses both to join in the audience community and to assert my difference—even superiority—by refusing to participate. And then I was troubled by my desire to feel superior to the rest of the audience, *as if I knew why they yelled or that my refusal to do so would exonerate me from my own racism*. The notion that theatregoers could perform an enlightened perspective on race was one of the reasons many came to Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon*. Whether they cried, "Lynch him" or not, they were in fact participating in the mob that extended from the stage into the house, a participating audience that mirrored the mobs in the lynching photographs. While my own problematic desire for moral superiority encouraged my silence, it propelled others to yell out. Such was the case for Krometis, the reviewer, who wrote:

> I was living a contradiction. I was on the side of the good, demanding a racist murderer be punished, but I was also a man in those photographs, smiling below the dangling feet of a dead African American. I was joyous over the white character dragged off to "justice," but horrified it was a black actor playing the role. (2016)

Krometis associates his contradictory feelings of joy and horror with the fact that he was calling for the lynching of an Irish character played by a black actor in whiteface who had murdered a slave boy (played by an apparently South Asian/"Indian" actor in blackface). The production's use of redface, whiteface, and blackface characters undermined the desire to imagine fixed identities associated with "good" or "bad" sides in racial violence. Krometis could not find "the side of the good" when the "racist murderer" was played by a black actor. Of course, a black person can also be a "racist murderer"; anyone can. The fiction that an individual's morality is determined by skin color is part of the logic of racism. So is the idea that black actors must play certain kinds of roles and that a "black playwright" must create certain kinds of roles as well as work toward racial liberation. Such assumptions persist, even after BJJ enters and addresses the entire audience: "Hi, everyone. I'm a 'black playwright.' / (*beat*) / Now I don't know what that means [...]" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:29).

Like Krometis, who felt the lynching scene but not the slave auction "destroyed" his moral position, I was more disturbed by "lynch him" than the bids for Zoe. This seemed to be a common feeling in the audience, judging by the enthusiastic participation in the auction and the reluctance during the lynch trial. I think these responses warrant particular attention as they expose complex intersections of attitudes about race and gender. Both scenes reveal the crucial role of the audience participating in slave sales and lynchings, as well as the theatrical elements of these events as black bodies were exhibited to the audience, judged, sometimes forced to dance and sing, then either sold or tortured and murdered. Contrasting the two atrocities—sex slavery vs. lynching—in an attempt to determine which is worse would be offensive. Yet, the Boston production of *An Octoroon* led its audience into behaviors many present in the theatre considered not just *unmanageable* but deplorable—from hissing and cheering at clearly identified villains and heroes to physically bidding on slaves and a light-skinned black woman,

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an "octoroon," to demanding the lynching of a villain played by a black actor. Ostrowski described the strategy:

> You can boo because everyone else is booing without wondering why [...] then wave your card without thinking. That is the superficial, easy part. Hopefully since you've gone that far, when the expectations are shaken up, other expectations might be shaken loose as well. (2016)

For Ostrowski, the shake-up primarily happened in act 4 when, she explained, "We are calling for the lynching of a black body, but we don't realize until we've done it." Through its staging and dramaturgy, the production gradually indoctrinated the audience into participating in more egregious actions, and in the process, suggested that participating in a lynching is worse than participating in a slave auction.

Boucicault's *The Octoroon* does not raise the question of whether it is worse to join a lynch mob or bid for a slave woman, but his Zoe is forced to decide whether to become M'Closky's sex slave or commit suicide. She chooses death, in spite of her desire to live, begging Dido to give her poison: "You can protect me from that man—do let me die without pain" (1859:177). Jacobs-Jenkins's revision suggests that Zoe primarily kills herself not to refuse sexual slavery but to save George the pain of imagining her in that condition. His Zoe delivers Boucicault's plaintive line, "I sat outside his door all night and heard his sighs—his agony—torn from him by my coming fate; and he said, 'I'd rather see her dead than his!'" (Boucicault 1859:177; Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:132–33). But, then, in the Jacobs-Jenkins, she adds, "I cried for hours before I rose up with the resolve to end my own life! For his sake!" (133). Not in the Boucicault, this line gives precedence to the feelings of the man who cannot stand for his beloved to belong to another man, that is, to jealousy and male competition. It presents Zoe's suicide as a sacrifice for George's "sake" rather than a refusal to live a life she finds unacceptable. Jacobs-Jenkins might have added this line to make explicit the privileging of men's lives and feelings in Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, and in melodramas more generally. But his adaptation does not comment on or confirm this assertion.

I am not suggesting that Jacobs-Jenkins ignores the intersections of racism and misogyny; he makes Zoe both the most sympathetic, beautiful, and adored woman onstage as well as the primary example of the horrors of slavery. In this, he follows Boucicault as well as 19th-century abolitionists who used a white-appearing woman threatened with sex slavery to appeal to desires to "rescue" a woman in distress, racist preferences for lighter skin, and concerns about perceived sexual improprieties and miscegenation over other abuses of slavery (see Merrill 2012). If Jacobs-Jenkins was hoping to comment on the misogyny implicit in this abolitionist strategy, however, his message is not clear. And it could have been clearer in a play that allows the male characters to engage in extensive metatheatrical commentary throughout the Prologue and in act 4's lynching scene. Imagine if Zoe, like BJJ, turned to the audience and began complaining about the melodramatic conventions that made her a pawn of male desire—conventions that led audiences to expect she would take her own life.

Jacobs-Jenkins added three very funny slave women—Dido, Minnie, and Grace—to his *Octoroon*, but they are not afforded the same privileges of irony and critique as the men. Neither they, nor any other women actors, are double cast. All four men play multiple roles that conflict with their apparent race and even species in the case of Br'er Rabbit. According to the list of Dramatis Personae, Minnie, Dido, and Grace should be played by "African-American actresses," while Zoe should be played by "an octoroon actress...or actress of color who can pass as an octoroon," and the rich heiress Dora is "played by a white actress, or actress who can pass white" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:25–26). The addition of the slave women characters allows for the Playwright's hysterical and racist comment, "You can actually use Negroes in your plays now [...] But can you believe you have to pay them? So we could only afford three negresses" (41). The

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implication is that "negresses" do not warrant the capital "N" of "Negroes" and that black women actors are cheaper, which is true and fascinating in a production whose stage manager produced performance reports listing the final price of the slaves, as in "Zoe sold for $26,001.00 tonight," although Pete went for as little as $200 and audience bids could push Zoe's price to $70,000.00.[8] All of the scenes Jacobs-Jenkins added to Boucicault's melodrama feature the three slave women, who comment on other characters, the plot, and their condition as slaves with tremendous energy and humor—in lines that resemble black urban speech in rhythm, pronunciation, and content:

Figure 7. Obehi Janice and Elle Borders as Minnie and Dido, two of the humorous slave women characters added to An Octoroon *by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Summer L. Williams. The Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, Paramount Center, Boston. Company One Theatre in partnership with ArtsEmerson, 2016. (Photo by Paul Fox)*

> MINNIE: I know, right? Grace's ass always talking about running away now that Massa dead and I'm like, Bitch, you need to calm your busybody ass down. Haven't she heard these slave catchers got these new dogs nowadays that can fly and who are trained to fuckin drag yo' ass out of trees and carry you back [...] That kind of naïveté is how niggas get kilt. (50)

In contrast, the male slaves speak the stereotypical southern slave dialect Boucicault wrote, following the conventions of the 19th-century stage. The upper-class white characters speak Boucicault's standard English, although such figures would have spoken a southern dialect. Jacobs-Jenkins cleverly defends his choice to have the slave women speak in black urban language with a note in the script: "(*I'm just going to say this right now so we can get it over with: I don't know what a real slave sounded like. And neither do you.*)" (43). While it's true that many in Jacobs-Jenkins's audience don't know how slaves spoke, some indication is provided by "Voices from the Days of Slavery," the almost seven hours of recorded interviews of former slaves held by the Library of Congress and accessible online (American Folklife Center n.d.). Linguists debate the relationship between slave speech and the contemporary speech patterns of some urban American blacks, weighing the relative contributions of the West African languages slaves spoke, regional English dialects, the English spoken by Irish immigrants, and Caribbean Creole English (see Wolfram 2015; Wolfram and Thomas 2002). African American [Vernacular] English (AA[V]E) (also called Ebonics) is associated with slave speech to some extent, but that does not appear to be Jacobs-Jenkins's point with the dialogue of the slave women, or so the note about not knowing "*what a real slave sounded like*" would suggest. Another possible message would be that there are black women who continue to live in horrible, *slave-like* conditions in urban ghettos. But again, Jacobs-Jenkins does not clearly establish these continuities.

8. Ostrowski provided descriptions of the nightly performance reports, which also noted when an audience was "very vocal" and when participation was a "detriment to the show," and how well the cast handled those situations.

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Instead, Dido, Minnie, and Grace perform a litany of stereotypes including, according to the stage directions, the gossipy, jealous, "super-nice, super-fake" black women who "act kinda ghetto" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:49, 100) and celebrate getting sold to be slaves on a steamboat; they imagine "coasting up and down the river, looking fly, wind whipping at our hair and our slave tunics and shit and we surrounded by all these fine, muscle-y boat niggas who ain't been wit a woman in years" (102). It's all clever and funny, and audiences in Boston certainly supported Dido, Minnie, and Grace's scenes with strong laughter. A young black woman at an audience talkback shared her impression that there were many in the audience who were "*just* laughing" at stereotypical "black girls" (Ostrowski 2016). One reviewer associated Dido and Minnie with the popular television show about a women's prison, *Orange Is the New Black*, and particularly the characters Tastee and Poussey, both widely thought to play demeaning stereotypes (Derr 2015). Jacobs-Jenkins is certainly well acquainted with the stereotypes that bolster racism. His BJJ describes the typical role for a "black guy" in popular theatre and entertainment:

> a football playing illiterate drug-addict magical negro with PTSD and anger management issues who's secretly on the DL [...] God forbid any actor of color not have to jump at the chance to play an offensive bag of garbage so far from his own life but which some idiot's going to describe as representative of "the Black experience in America." (2015:32)

The passage works by accumulating a litany of familiar stereotypes that expose the ways in which both those sympathetic to racism and those opposed perpetuate such beliefs about blacks, partially so that audiences can wallow in sympathy and feel good about how advanced and liberal they are. Call it racial catharsis—which Jacobs-Jenkins refused to provide his audience. He might be making a similar point with the women slaves, but they are not afforded the same level of self-consciousness as that exhibited by the male characters. The women slaves seem to function as *merely* humor and stereotypes: they don't get to discuss their own perceived identities and "garbage" roles.

In the Boston production, the discrepancy between *An Octoroon*'s treatment of race and gender, masculine blackness and feminine blackness, was reinforced by the audience participation. The strategy of asking the audience to engage in ever more uncomfortable and disorienting activities, from hissing to bidding on a slave to supporting a lynching, unintentionally taught the audience that participating in a slave auction that will result in sexual slavery is less horrific than participating in a lynch mob. The strategy also highlighted the different presentations of race and gender in the play and in American culture more generally. Take this thought experiment: Instead of adding three ghetto-speaking black women slaves, what if Jacobs-Jenkins had inserted three comparably stereotypical black male characters? Their ghetto speech would have meant something different at a moment when high-profile police shootings indicate the vulnerability of black men and their perceived threat to white authorities. Although the Black Lives Matter movement was largely initiated by black women who identify as queer, their work is already obscured as the cultural response pits #blacklives against #bluelives, i.e., the police*men*—that's how much masculine power and authority *matters* in the deadly contest played out on American streets and neighborhoods (see Cohen 2016).

Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* has important lessons to teach about audience participation in the racial dramas of this moment, particularly as they are recorded on digital devices by bystanders and disseminated through social media. BJJ and the Playwright are absolutely wrong when they insist that photographs are "boring" to us now, and that "the kind of justice" represented by the discovery of a photograph that documents the murder of a black boy by a white overseer is "actually a little dated" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:120). As I began to think about this essay, cellphone videos recorded the controversial and deeply disturbing deaths of two black men at the hands of police officers—just a day apart. On 5 July 2016 in Baton Rouge, two white police officers tackled Alton Sterling, pinned him to the ground, and shot him at close

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range. Video of the shooting was captured by Stop the Killing Inc., a Baton Rouge antiviolence group that listens to police scanners and attempts to witness and document violent incidents. The group posted the video on Instagram and Facebook, where it quickly went viral (Lowery et al. 2016). The cellphone footage was crucial to launching a federal investigation into the incident, although both federal and state officials determined there was not enough evidence to file criminal charges against Officers Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake II. In another dramatic turn of events 21 months after the shooting, the Baton Rouge Police Department released footage from police body cameras, on 30 March 2018, moments after announcing disciplinary actions against the officers; Salamoni was fired, and Lake was suspended for three days (Toohey 2018). The footage surely played a role in this decision, even if it cannot and should not be considered definitive evidence or proof of being "convicted [by] Heaven," to echo the description of the photograph recovered during the lynch mob scene in *The Octoroon* (Boucicault 1859:173).

Even more reminiscent of the photograph of M'Closky armed with a tomahawk standing over Paul's body is the opening of Diamond "Lavish" Reynolds's video of the death of her boyfriend, Philando Castile, the day after Sterling was killed (Right Now News 2016). The first frame, like a melodrama's "discovery tableau,"[9] reveals a police officer, Jeronimo Yanez, with his gun still pointed at the bloody and groaning Castile. Reynolds streamed the excruciating 10-minute recording live on Facebook, so some viewers witnessed the tragic event unfold in real time, while four million watched the video in the following 24 hours. That number soared to 5.7 million Facebook views in the next two weeks, with countless more as the video circulated in news reports and other media (Wardle 2016). Viewers joined an audience much larger than the capacity of any theatre. They witnessed Reynolds filming her dying boyfriend, with her four-year-old daughter in the back seat.

Reynolds reported as she filmed, claiming that Officer Yanez asked Castile for his license and registration after pulling him over for a broken taillight in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. Then, Reynolds claimed, "He [Castile] let the officer know that he had a firearm, and he was reaching for his wallet, and the officer just shot him in his arm." Yanez screamed, "I told him not to reach for it." Reynolds responded, "You told him to get his ID, sir, his driver's license." Facing a panicked police officer with a gun, Reynolds was careful to address him politely and calmly as "Sir." She also addressed her Facebook audience, "They threw my phone, Facebook." She seemed to feel less safe without the phone, believing her Facebook Live audience might help prevent further violence. Her daughter retrieved the phone and helped Reynolds continue filming after she was handcuffed.

The live-streamed cell phone video shot by Reynolds *with the help of her young daughter* is surprisingly reminiscent of the conventions of melodramas, although it recorded the real death of a black man. The melodramatic conventions Jacobs-Jenkins invoked in *An Octoroon* are still familiar to us from popular media, including reality TV, film, and even cable news. The vast social media audience for Reynolds's video is asked to witness the gut-wrenching trauma experienced by mother and child. Emotional expressions reach melodramatic extremes as Reynolds narrates, prays, and wails, as the police scream obscenities and bark orders, as the child cries and, in the final moments, comforts her mother. The first frames of the video resemble a discovery tableau revealing the bloody Castile and the gun still pointed at him, and it would remain pointed for 3 minutes and 39 seconds, as the police dashcam video revealed (PoliceActivity 2017). It's all recorded by the "eye of the Eternal" in the camera (Boucicault 1859:173). As with the documentation of the Sterling shooting, Reynolds's video ignited tremendous public outcry and was viewed by millions, at least partially because it resembled the familiar melodramatic structures in our popular entertainment. It also became evidence for both the prosecution and defense in the trial that acquitted Jeronimo Yanez of manslaughter.

9. On the discovery tableau in melodrama, see Meisel (1983:47).

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Boucicault predicted what Jacobs-Jenkins describes as a particularly modern "kind of justice" (or lack thereof) as juries and other audiences on social media view the violent encounters between authorities and people of color that have been captured on film (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:120). Body cams, dash cams, nanny cams, and other electronic surveillance devices are ubiquitous. If the death videos of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were unprecedented in their circulation via social media, there were many earlier incidents. In just the two years prior to these murders, 2014–2016, online footage of no less than 14 black men or boys killed by police officers has circulated.[10] Watching the recordings of these deaths produces a painful experience of witness but also the hope that the documentary technology will protect the oppressed and contribute to justice, a democratic potential Boucicault imagined very early in the history of photography. The cameras have not, in the case of recent police shootings, fulfilled Boucicault's ideal of an "eye of the Eternal" or a trial in which "Heaven has answered and convicted you" (1859:173).

Civilian documentation might be able to promote justice, yet the lynching photographs projected in Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* remind those who care to pay attention that, in a racist society, the privileged have been able to document atrocity with impunity; the photograph that might have served as evidence may have been a souvenir for participants in the lynch mob. The spectators in the foreground of the lynching photographs selected for the Boston production mirror the audience in the theatre in 2016. The production worked to put its audience *in* the lynch mob; they had already been hissing at bad guys and bidding for slaves, and they were encouraged to call for the lynching of Wahnotee and then M'Closky. For many, including me, that participation was very disturbing, but what did it teach?

One of the lynching photographs, the most troubling for me, focused on the image of a girl in the foreground pointing at the mutilated body of the black victim. Consider what such events taught the children who were present at lynchings, but also what participation in the virtual lynch mob of *An Octoroon* might teach children—and the inner child of an adult. I remain concerned about the psychic appetite for racist pleasure that the scene satisfied, even when the spectators thought they were knowingly, ironically—perhaps even with a Brechtian critical distance—participating. I'm also concerned that an ironic participation could foster a self-satisfied belief that "we" would never have been part of a lynch mob, under any circumstances. These divergent risks haunt the forms of participation sponsored by productions that work to engage the politics of race. In attempting to confront audiences with their own racism, certainly a worthy goal, these plays might unintentionally reinforce racist tendencies in some. And when audiences believe they are too savvy to allow that to happen, the plays might (equally unintentionally) reinforce a liberal audience's belief that it is "beyond" the racist logic of its culture. That child in the lynching photograph could have been any of the people in the Boston theatre; that child should challenge any certainty that "we" would never find ourselves or people like us in a lynch mob. The child challenges me, but does she remain to do so after the image fades back into the melodrama?

The Assistant says at the very end of act 4, "Anyway, the whole point of this thing was to make you feel something" (Jacobs-Jenkins 2015:129). The Boston production of *An Octoroon* did make audiences *feel* progressively more uncomfortable with their participation in the play. If the play does not also provide answers to the problem of racism, if its pedagogical mission is less pronounced than its affective or sentimental mission, that is appropriate both to Boucicault's melodrama and the melodramatic extremes of contemporary American racism: The US was led by a black president at a time when protesters responded to footage of police

10. Jason Harrison, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Kajieme Powell, 12-year-old Tamir Rice, Jerame Reid, Charly Keunang, Phillip White, Walter Scott, Laquan McDonald, Christian Taylor, Samuel Dubose, Freddie Gray, and Walter L. Scott were all killed by police or died from their injuries in custody. For links to these graphic videos, see Cave and Oliver (2016).

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killings with demonstrations to convince the public that #blacklivesmatter. Jacobs-Jenkins's work suggests there are no easy answers to the melodramatics of American racism. The audience reaction he hopes to achieve is ambiguous and ambivalent, with confusion as his stated and desired outcome: In an interview, Jacobs-Jenkins said, "My dream was always to have an experience where an audience member would turn to another audience member, a stranger, and be like, 'What did we just go through?' And, like, kind of begin to talk" (in Gray 2015). Jacobs-Jenkins's work certainly gives his audience "an experience." Stranger, I want to talk.

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