

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-

2020

Metatheatre and Critical Race Theory: A Combination for Compelling Storytelling and Effective Changemaking

Andrew Coleburn
University of Central Florida

 Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)
Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020- by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation

Coleburn, Andrew, "Metatheatre and Critical Race Theory: A Combination for Compelling Storytelling and Effective Changemaking" (2020). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-*. 30.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/30>

METATHEATRE AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY:
A COMBINATION FOR COMPELLING STORYTELLING
AND EFFECTIVE CHANGEMAKING

by

ANDREW COLEBURN
B.A. Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2020

Major Professor: Belinda C Boyd

© 2020 Andrew Coleburn

ABSTRACT

Vaclav Havel once said that “[t]heatre is always a sensitive seismograph of an era, perhaps the most sensitive one there is; it’s a sponge that quickly soaks up important ingredients in the atmosphere around it.” One of the more important “ingredients” in our cultural atmosphere in modern America is the issue of identity. In his book on metatheatre, Richard Hornby posits that theatre is “a kind of identity laboratory, in which social roles can be examined vicariously.” In this thesis, I examine Hornby’s theory of the five different modes of metatheatre, critique each, and argue for the addition of a sixth mode. I then explain the basics of critical race theory, and argue for the use of it as a theoretical lens in the theatre and for the creation of a body of “critical race theatre.” Using the framework of metatheatre and the theoretical lens of critical race theory, I analyze both Branden Jacob’s Jenkins’ *An Octoroon* and Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment* as seminal works of critical race theatre. I argue the necessity of applying critical race theory to the theatre and creating such a body of work if the theatre is to play a part in striving for racial justice. By analyzing the use of metatheatrical devices to confront race in both of these plays, I additionally make the case that metatheatre is the best frame within which to craft a body of critical race theatre.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While the actual writing of this paper was a solitary endeavor, it would not have happened without countless others to whom I owe great thanks. I'd be remiss to not give a special thank you to my thesis chair Belinda Boyd, who agreed to take on the challenge of heading my committee and working with me as I completed this paper from five different states over the past two and a half years. Thank you as well to my committee members Jim Brown and John Shafer, for agreeing to join the committee of a student they barely knew, and for their invaluable insight on this paper. Many thanks also to Lauren Becker, who has helped me navigate all of the registrations, forms, and deadlines of completing my degree remotely with enduring patience. To David Reed, who gave me the clarity and courage to step off the wrong academic path (and introduced me to *An Octoroon*), and to Dr. Julia Listengarten, who helped me find the right one, thank you. Thanks also to Aaron C. Thomas, who helped me hone the scope of this paper and introduced me to *The Shipment*. To my undergraduate advisor Chris Hatch, thank you for your constant support and encouragement at every step on my graduate school journey. Thanks to Chris Woodworth, for the ever helpful WWG and the process of "sh*tty first drafts," and to Heather May, for proving to me that theatre can (and maybe must) be a force for real change. And finally, to the many friends and family members who edited countless drafts, listened to countless frustrations, inspired countless parts of this paper, and kept me moving forward, thank you.

This paper is your victory as well as mine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: METATHEATRE.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Mode One: Play-Within-the-Play	7
Mode Two: Ceremony-Within-the-Play.....	9
Mode Three: Role-Playing-Within-the-Role	10
Mode Four: Literary or Real-Life Reference.....	12
Mode Five: Self-Reference.....	14
A New Mode: Involving the Audience.....	15
Conclusion	17
CHAPTER THREE: CRITICAL RACE THEORY	19
Introduction.....	19
Tenets of Critical Race Theory.....	20
Application to Theatre	23
Conclusion	24
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF <i>AN OCTOROON</i>	27
Metatheatre: Play-Within-the-Play	27

Metatheatre: Ceremony-Within-the-Play.....	28
Metatheatre: Role-Playing-Within-the-Role.....	31
Metatheatre: Real-Life Reference.....	32
Metatheatre: Self-Reference	33
Metatheatre: Involving the Audience.....	34
<i>An Octoroon</i> as a Critical Race Play.....	37
CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF <i>THE SHIPMENT</i>	43
Metatheatre: Overview.....	43
Metatheatre: Play-Within-the-Play	44
Metatheatre: Ceremony-Within-the-Play.....	48
Metatheatre: Role-Playing-Within-the-Role.....	51
Metatheatre: Literary and Real-Life Reference	54
Metatheatre: Self-Reference	55
Metatheatre: Involving the Audience.....	58
<i>The Shipment</i> as a Critical Race Play	61
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION	65
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	69

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

This Martin Luther King Jr. quote, popularized by President Barack Obama during his campaign and presidency, has now long been a kind of battle-cry for the American political left and those searching for positive social change. However, many have rightfully criticized this message as implying futility of action, and encouraging complacency. The original quote from the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker that inspired Dr. King’s one-liner, while less rhetorically snappy, leaves less room for complacency:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice. (Parker)

The arc of history indeed bends toward justice, Parker’s sermon implies, but only through our own conscience and actions.

In other words, the arc needs to be actively bent. Change, especially around our largest issues, must be actively pursued. Throughout my own studies and practice of theatre, I have often wondered the level of its true effectiveness in creating or helping to create the change we seek. Allow me to set proper expectations now, as this paper holds no answer to the question of whether or not theatre is an effective change-making tool—though I believe history points to the answer being yes. Rather this paper will, making the assumption that proper artistic structure and

focus are necessary to maximizing theatre's change-making potential, argue for and provide an expanded, firmer framework of metatheatre, as well as make the case for focusing works through the lens of critical race theory.

Race is the fundamental issue of the United States. From native genocide, to slavery, to modern day policy brutality and systemic inequality, the racial history of our country is a dark and painful one. While there are those who would claim that we have made significant progress, that we have entered a "post-racial" society, these issues are still dramatically salient for individuals and groups alike. If we are to do our part in attempting to bend the arc of history in the proper direction, it is important for us as practitioners of theatre to tell stories that grapple directly with these issues in a way that encourages in our audiences not only contemplation, but a shift in perspective, a change in behavior, and concrete action for good.

In my view one of the largest challenges with using theatre as a tool for change-making is its potential for entertaining and passive escapism. Comedy, tragedy, romance, musical; it does not matter. Too much opportunity (and, perhaps, too much demand) exists for a theatrical exchange in which a passive audience is whisked away from their real lives and the issues of our real world into a separate place where those can be forgotten for a while and where any poignant lessons or questions raised may be safely left behind at the theatre doors at the end of the night. In order to address this, we must intentionally craft theatre within a frame which actively engages—even implicates—the audience, one which leaves little to no room for passivity and escapism. A theatre which does not just encourage but, to the best of its ability, forces the

audience to grapple with difficult questions is the only theatre with a chance at making change. I argue that a strong metatheatrical framework can create such theatre.

In chapter two of this paper, I will lay out a brief history of metatheatricality and the key scholarship around the topic which I will analyze, critique, and build off of. I will mainly rely on Lionel Abel—who may fairly be called the father of the term “metatheatricality”—and Richard Hornby, whose more concrete layout of different modes of metatheatricality is in my view the strongest and most thorough available to build off of. I will explain and illustrate Hornby’s modes, mainly utilizing examples from Shakespeare’s canon. Building on Hornby’s arguments to further explain the strengths and weaknesses of each mode, I also propose adding an additional distinct mode of my own. I will explain and argue the effect that use of these modes creates in an audience.

In chapter three, I will lay out the basics of critical race theory, a paradigm from the legal profession, and how it can be applied to the theatre. Additionally, I will argue for the conscious creation of a body of “critical race theatre” to address the most pressing issues of our time. Finally, I will make the case that the metatheatrical frame is best suited to the creation of such works.

Chapters four and five contain analyses of two separate works that I believe are illustrative examples of the metatheatrical frame, as well as flagship pieces of critical race theatre. These works are *An Octoroon* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and *The Shipment* by Young Jean Lee. Both of these scripts were chosen for their clear and nuanced usage of each metatheatrical mode discussed in chapter two, as well as their clear focus on race as a central

theme. I specifically chose *An Octoroon* due to my personal connection to the script, having portrayed Playwright/Wahnotee/Lafouche in TheatreUCF's 2017 production during my time as an MFA acting student. I draw on this experience and reference our TheatreUCF production at several times throughout this paper.

Whether or not the art of theatre can serve as an effective and worthwhile tool for making change remains a question. However, if we wish our art to have a hand in "bending the arc," we must have strong frameworks and tools to do so. One such framework is metatheatre.

CHAPTER TWO: METATHEATRE

Introduction

“Meta,” in its original usage, is a prefix meaning “above and beyond” in Greek, often used to refer to something of a higher level of abstraction or analysis (Dictionary.com). For example, “metaphysical realm” describes a world beyond our physical one. However, in recent years, “meta” has entered into the popular lexicon and consciousness as a standalone term. Its meaning has shifted. As linguist Ben Zimmer explains to NPR, it has come to refer to anything which is self-referential, self-parodying, or even just self-conscious or aware—like the live *30 Rock* episode where the characters discuss the virtues of live television on a live episode of a TV show about a fictional TV show. The idea of meta has driven many pop culture successes, from the aforementioned *30 Rock*, to the dreams-within-dreams-within-dreams enigma of the movie *Inception*. Thanks to the instantaneous feedback loop created by social networking and internet communication in general, we live in a world where anything and everything can become meta (NPR).

But how does “meta” apply to the theatre? What makes a play a “meta-drama?” The term has been used in theatre theory and criticism rather loosely since the late 1950s and early 1960s, particularly since Lionel Abel’s seminal work *Metatheatre* in 1963. As the first half of the 20th century passed and scholars engaged with the peak works of modernism, nearly all forms of art took on a sense of “meta” (Puncher). As Pérez-Simón notes, many scholars have advocated for a distinction in terms between that which is merely theatrical or theatricalist, and that which is truly metatheatrical (Pérez-Simón). Modernist drama carried with it an inherent theatricality that

was in direct contrast to Stanislavski's illusionist theatre. Stanislavski believed in a rigid and unbreakable fourth wall, and that the audience was an anomaly to be corrected. His entire system is geared toward the goal of restoring "the natural laws which have been dislocated by the circumstances of an actor's having to work in public" (Stanislavski). Modernist theatre or theatricalist works call attention to themselves as pieces of theatre through the use of devices such as asides, prologues, choruses, and others which can be said to be unique to the theatre (Pérez-Simón). Metatheatrical works are more difficult to define.

The first thing that comes to mind when pondering the concept of metatheatre is the play-within-the-play. However, Lionel Abel, in his ground-breaking 1963 book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, claims the concept goes further than this one device, defining metatheatre more broadly as:

[t]heatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew that they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them...unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality. (60)

While he provides many examples of what he views as metatheatre, Abel—who can fairly be called the father of that term—does little beyond the above quotation to connect the examples or give a more concrete view of what constitutes metatheatre. To do so, we must combine this ethereal sense of theatre-about-life-theatricalized with a firmer framework of devices and methodology.

In *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Richard Hornby does just that. He defines metatheatre as “drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself” (Hornby 31). If we accept this definition, we begin to view a large swath of theatre—perhaps even all of it—as metatheatre. This is not useful; we need to be able to systematically analyze the mode by which a work of drama is metatheatrical, and to what extent. Hornby presents five overt modes of metadrama: the play-within-the-play, the ceremony-within-the-play, role-playing-within-the-role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference (Hornby 32).

Essentially, while Richard Hornby’s theories are in the right direction, current definitions of metadrama and metatheatre seem inadequate. I will use Hornby as a jumping off point to propose my own definition. In the following pages, I will break down Hornby’s five overt modes of metadrama, argue their “metatheatrical strength,” propose a sixth mode, and offer my own definition of metatheatre and metatheatrical effect. In this chapter, I will also reference various characters and stories from the works of Shakespeare to illustrate my definitions, interpretations, and critiques of Hornby’s modes.

Mode One: Play-Within-the-Play

The first mode, the “play-within-the-play,” is straightforward. It occurs when a piece of theatre contains at least two plays: an inner play and an outer play. This mode can be further broken down by which of these plays is primary. The first subtype of the play-within-a-play mode is the inset play, where the inner play is secondary to the outer. The second subtype is the frame play, where the outer play is secondary to the inner (Hornby 33). The mechanicals’

presentation of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a perfect example of the inset type of the play-within-a-play mode. The mechanicals, a rag-tag group of amateur performers, prepare a production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to put on for the Duke's wedding day. This functions as a separate dramatic event within the theatrical event of *Midsummer*. For Shakespeare's characters it is, of course, its own theatrical event, as they are not aware that they are characters in a larger play. In contrast, both *An Octoroon* and *The Shipment* are frame plays, albeit in very different ways.

Both the frame play and the inset play are undeniably metatheatrical. Arguably, the play-within-the-play is the first (and perhaps only) thing that comes to the average person's mind when presented with the concept. There is no way to place one play within the text of another and not arouse an awareness of the constructed theatricality of the moment, the scene, the entire play. The power of this particular mode exists on a sort of sliding scale, depending both on whether the device in use is the inset or frame play, as well as the intention of the playwright or director. Take again as an example, the mechanicals' casting, rehearsal, and eventual performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is most definitely metatheatrical, but not very powerfully so. It is an inset play, set in a world which the audience understands to also contain theatre—even a casual viewer of Shakespeare is surely aware of the history of performing plays for royalty. Additionally, it would be hard to argue that Shakespeare intended the mechanicals' production to spur us audience members into a greater thoughtful awareness of some important and weighty question. It is a gag, built for laughs.

The frame play has a more powerful effect, allowing for and almost necessitating serious intent on the part of the playwright. With a frame play, the playwright has an opportunity to explicitly “set up” the main play within the frame in exactly the way that they want. As the play goes on, the frame can be brought back into focus, referenced (knowingly or not) by characters in the main play, reverted to explicitly for a scene, or interspersed jarringly with the main play. All of these heighten our awareness in a manner that an inset play cannot, even at its most powerful. Supercharge the frame play with an explicit and focused intention from the playwright—as I will argue we see in *An Octoroon*—and even the most inattentive escapist audience member cannot help but contemplate the questions presented by the work.

Mode Two: Ceremony-Within-the-Play

The “ceremony-within-the-play” mode is quite common. In fact, “ceremonies within plays are ubiquitous. In all drama of all cultures at all times we find plays that contain feasts, balls, pageants...funerals, coronations, initiations” (Hornby 49). According to Emile Durkheim’s theory of meaning making, the meaning of an object or event is not intrinsic to it, but is found in that object’s relationship to society (Durkheim). We develop and codify those relationships—and therefore those meanings—through ceremony. For example, a graduation ceremony codifies the meaning of the educational system as a social institution, and the diploma itself as a singular object. It is hard to find a play without some form of ceremony within it. Given the fact that ceremony is present in almost all theatre, its metatheatrical effect can be somewhat muted. However, when used specifically and intentionally to create that effect (by either the playwright or the director) it can still be present. The importance here is the intentionality. For example,

while a feast is technically a sort of ceremony, it is doubtful that Shakespeare intended the forest banquet interrupted by a hungry Orlando in *As You Like It* to have any sort of metadramatic effect. However, as I will discuss later, Young Jean Lee certainly intends such an effect during many ceremonial moments in *The Shipment*. Because of the abundant use of ceremony-within-the-play, the key rests in the intention of the playwright or, on occasion, the director.

This is a good time to mention that—particularly in modern drama—while the bulk of a play’s metatheatrical quality will be dictated by the playwright, the it can also be influenced by the director’s choice in certain circumstances. When a playwright has left a good deal of room for interpretation or simply not given much explicit instruction, a director may impact the metatheatricality of the production through their choices. By highlighting particular moments, or even through larger structural choices such as staging the play in the round, a director can make a play more or less metatheatrical.

Mode Three: Role-Playing-Within-the-Role

The “role-playing-within-the-role” mode is where things get a little more complicated. It occurs often in conjunction with the play-within-the-play mode, when a character from the outer play takes on a role within the inner play, in a voluntary role-within-the-role. However, a character does not need to participate in a play-within-a-play to engage in role-playing-within-the-role. This mode of metatheatre can also come about when a character is simply “putting on a mask,” such as Hamlet’s pretend madness or Iago’s false honesty (Hornby 67). Like the play-within-the-play mode, it can be broken down into several subtypes.

The first is voluntary, where a character takes on a role willingly and for a clear goal. For example, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola disguises herself as a page named Cesario in order to gain access to the Duke's court. The second type is involuntary, where a character is manipulated by an outside force into playing a role different than themselves. Malvolio, also in *Twelfth Night*, is a prime example of this when he is tricked into strange behavior by the other characters. The third type is allegorical, where a character takes on a stock role not known or acknowledged by those within the world of the play, but obvious to those viewing it.

Allegorical roles are those stalwart stock characters, stereotypes defined by a single trait. The boisterous party goer. The grieving widow. The masculine jock. The drunken Indian. The violent gangster. Often, we see these roles and "know" instantly what they represent. They need not be engaged with on a deeper level, or so our lazy, heuristic driven brains tell us. This isn't an issue when it is a one-line character in a musical, or a stock character on the latest primetime TV procedural. However, as we'll discuss later, when these characters have their basis in race and racial history, as they often do, the allegorical role can become a salient, sharp tool for a playwright making race their theme.

Role-playing-within-the-role reminds us that all roles are relative; identity is learned, not innate (Hornby 72). In our lives we are constantly playing out many different social roles depending on the context. Interacting with our parents, we play the role of child. Interacting with a teacher, we play the role of student. Interacting with our significant other, we play the role of partner. Each of these roles comes with a set of rules that we expect ourselves and each other to follow. When someone does not act in accordance with the social role they are currently

expected to fulfill, they are reprimanded in an attempt to get them back in line; a child argues with his parent and is sent to a time out. Arguing is not a forbidden behavior, or even an innately detrimental one, but it is certainly not a behavior that is typically accepted within the social role of “child.”

Theatre allows us to play around with different roles in different contexts. Additionally, it is an art form uniquely suited to illuminating the performative nature of how we each go about our way in the world. As sociologist Erving Goffman noted in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, whether we are actively conscious of it or not, we are always performing, navigating between a hidden “backstage self” and many different “front stage selves” that we present to the world. In our modern world, where issues of identity (with special respect to sex, gender, and race) are being discussed more widely, perhaps we will see a surge in the use of the role-playing-within-the-role mode, and of metatheatre more broadly. Our latest grapples with identity may see metatheatre grow, both in prevalence in the theatre world and salience to our collective societal consciousness.

Mode Four: Literary or Real-Life Reference

The fourth mode of metatheatre Hornby presents is “literary or real-life reference within the play.” It occurs when there is a direct, conscious allusion to specific works or people that are both recent and popular. The degree to which this mode is truly and effectively metadramatic is directly related to how well the audience recognizes the allusion (Hornby 88). It can take the form of citation—a direct quote—or that of reference, allegory, parody, or adaptation (Hornby 90). Hornby himself admits that, more often than not, this mode does not produce a

metadramatic effect. To do so, the use of the literary or real-life reference must be “an odd intrusion” on the play that breaks the dramatic illusion, calls attention to the work as fantastical theatre, and creates metadramatic tension (Hornby 96).

Much like the ceremony-within-the-play, this mode hinges upon the intention of the playwright or director. Additionally, it must not simply be an “odd intrusion” on the play, as Hornby says, but a jarring one. Oberon and Titania’s fairies fighting to a soundtrack of the latest hit song from Fall Out Boy (as a director very well might choose to have them do) could certainly be called an odd intrusion into Shakespeare, but it is probably not going to jar the audience into a sudden awareness of the theatricality of the stage and of the world they live in. After all, it has become so common place to put bizarre twists on Shakespeare’s classics that to *not* do so has been satirized in popular media (Onion). However, as I will discuss later, Young Jean Lee successfully uses this technique in a metatheatrical way in several instances in *The Shipment*.

This mode is certainly not the strongest; its effect depends on audience members “getting” the reference, which fewer and fewer will over time. Most references are likely to fade into obscurity. But then again, so are most plays. Theatre is by nature an ephemeral art form, and if a playwright intends to create a meta-effect and uses real-life references to do so, those references only need to be topical for the play’s lifetime. Additionally, we can assume that any playwright trying to intentionally create metatheatricality will not solely rely on this feebly powered method of doing so. If it is a piece of theatre in which the intrusion of such a reference

would be jarring enough to create metadramatic effect, it is likely that the effect was already present in a heavy dose through other modes.

Mode Five: Self-Reference

The final and potentially most powerful mode of metadrama conceptualized by Hornby is “self-reference.” It occurs simply when the play directly references itself. The effect is similar to that generated by the play-within-the-play mode, but it is much more direct and powerful (Hornby 104). This form has become more rare in modern drama, but occurs numerous times in Shakespeare’s plays; for example, when Cassius remarks to the rest of the conspirators in *Julius Caesar* having just slain the emperor, “How many ages hence/Shall this our lofty scene be acted over/In states unborn and accents yet unknown!” In this moment the character of Cassius, within a dramatized account of the killing of Caesar, remarks on how their act will be dramatized for eternity, thereby referencing the play from within itself.

There is no more jarring a way to call an audience’s attention to the theatricality of a work than to reference the play itself. Hornby explains that when a play references itself:

It always has the effect of drastically realigning the audience’s perception of the drama, forcing them to examine consciously the assumptions that lie behind and control their response to the world of the play. Since these assumptions, the drama/culture complex, are also the means by which the audience views the world at large, self-reference has the effect of challenging, in a sudden and drastic manner, the complacencies of the audience’s world view. (117)

I think that there is a danger in this mode of metadrama which stems directly from its strength. The abrupt “realignment” of the audience’s perception could perhaps produce too strong a *verfremdungseffekt*, to borrow Brecht’s term. If we emphasize too strongly the theatricality and illusory nature of our dramatic work, we give our audience an easy out. “This is just theatre,” they might say, “this isn’t real life.” In doing so, they do not take the final crucial step of evaluating their own world view.

The other danger with this mode, paradoxically, is the potential for its shock-based power to wear off. As has been previously discussed, metatheatres is effective in examining issues of identity. In our current society, issues of identity are more salient than ever as we deal with the intricate interplays between gender, sex, race, sexual orientation, and other dimensions. It stands to reason that the relevance and prevalence of metatheatres may well increase as we continue to grapple with these issues of identity. A powerful effect like that created by the self-reference mode could quickly fade in effectiveness if it becomes too common in our collective work. Just as our brains ignore constant stimuli, like the tip of the nose in front of the eyes, or the ever present whir of an air conditioner, we may pay no mind to self-referential metadrama if it becomes too common.

A New Mode: Involving the Audience

Hornby’s system for classifying and analyzing metatheatres is robust, but I would like to add to the discussion an additional classification, which I will term “involving the audience.” It occurs whenever an actor on stage directly involves the audience in the action of the play, going beyond a simple breaking of the fourth wall. A perfect example of this is the opening of Aaron

Posner's *Stupid Fucking Bird*, in which the lead actor almost aggressively confronts the audience, telling them that the play will not start until someone says to "start the fucking play" (Posner). The audience becomes complicit in the action of the play once they are given an amount of agency within it. Again, this requires more than a simple break of the fourth wall. Romeo making an aside during the balcony scene, leaning towards an audience member to ask them, "Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?" technically involves them in the story, but it does not fully transform them into a character with agency in the story; Romeo does not expect a response from them, nor would most audience members be apt to give one.

Involving the audience becomes metatheatrical when the audience is forced to interact with the story. When this occurs, they no longer have the ability to remove themselves. By their involvement, voluntary or not, they become complicit in the issues of the play and should—to avoid cognitive dissonance if nothing else—work to discuss and confront those issues in the real world. As a result, this mode could be used to neutralize the potentially counterproductive removal effect of the strong self-reference mode.

While there are certainly similarities, even overlap, between this framework of metatheatre and Brecht's epic theatre and *verfremdungseffekt*, the involving the audience mode helps to generate a clear distinction. Brecht's theatre is "an episodic narrative drama, mimetic in conception, that incorporate[s] techniques of distancing in order to provoke a critical response, rather than empathy, toward the characters on stage. The aim [is] to give spectators an understanding of social environment necessary to effect changes and remake the world" (Gerould 36-37). While meta-theatre can also seek to make spectators more aware and

understanding of the social environment in order to make change, it does so through the opposite of the “alienation effect.” It does not alienate or distance spectators, but rather brings them in, actively involving them in the story. A critical response may still be had, but through increased, not decreased, empathy, through the involvement of a formerly passive audience. Additionally, a key difference between Brecht and this framework of metatheatre is the intention of the effect on the audience. Epic theatre seeks to stimulate the audience into imagining alternative realities for the future of society (Gerould 37). Metatheatre, in contrast, seeks to bring audience into a more heightened awareness of present issues.

Conclusion

I mentioned at the start of this chapter that the key to metatheatre involves both the use of one or more of these modes, as well as explicit intention on behalf of the playwright or director. Of course, the playwright’s intention goes without saying. Their written word is theatrical law, and an occasionally fiercely enforced one at that. Whether by the structure of how they’ve written the play or instructions left within their notes, prefaces, and stage directions, rarely is the playwright’s intention in doubt. However, directorial intention can play a significant role as well. Shakespeare presents a wealth of opportunity for this. Whether it is our old friend *Pyramus and Thisbe* or the ceremonial coronation of Macbeth, Shakespeare leaves nearly no instruction on how these scenes should be played. A savvy director can utilize these moments of metatheatrical potentiality to bring their audience out of a complacent state of merely watching the theatre and into a more active state of engaging with whatever questions or ideas the theater-makers hope for them to grapple with.

Taking from Abel and Hornby, I offer my own definitions of metatheatre and of metatheatrical effect: metatheatre is a play that it is, on some level, about the theatricality of life—about drama itself. It uses one or more of the six modes that I have presented—the-play-within-the-play, role-playing-within-the-role, ceremony-within-the-play, literary or real-life reference, self-reference, and inclusion of the audience—with the specific intent of creating a metatheatrical effect. By this I mean, forcing an audience into a deeper awareness of the theatre that they are watching, the questions that the piece of theatre poses, and the impact of those questions on their real life.

Some of the most impactful and important questions of our modern age surround the issues of race and racial identity. As many more intelligent scholars before me have noted, the theatre can and has always served as a sort of identity sandbox, both for individuals and society more broadly. With that in mind, it is possible that the theatre may have a key role to play in grappling with and solving these issues. Metatheatre especially, with its enhanced ability to force us to look in the proverbial mirror, could serve as an important and effective tool. However, to truly grapple with issues of race through the theatre, it is necessary to apply an additional theoretical lens: critical race theory.

CHAPTER THREE: CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Introduction

Critical race theory began in the legal field in the 1970s, following the end of the civil rights movement. Realizing that gains in civil rights were stalling or even rolling back, scholars saw a need to combat the subtler forms of racism that were still prevalent, what we now refer to as “microaggressions” (Delgado and Stefancic).

The cornerstone of critical race theory is the treatment of race as a central issue. Drawing from both critical legal studies and radical feminism, it examines the relationships between race, racism, and power. Critical race theory has been described as an academic discipline with an activist dimension. Its proponents actively question and critique the foundations of the liberal order, particularly when it comes to race (Delgado and Stefancic).

Theatre, as an institution and art form, can certainly benefit from these same critiques and questions. As discussed later in this chapter, the theatre of today leans emphatically leftward and can be seen as a participant, or at least a follower, in the liberal order which critical race theorists challenge. In this chapter I will attempt to lay out the basic tenets of critical race theory, relying largely on Delgado and Stefancic’s comprehensive introductory text, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. I will then explore what it means to apply this framework to theatre, eventually defining what a “critical race play” is and calling for the creation of more such works.

Tenets of Critical Race Theory

The first basic tenet of critical race theory is the idea that racism is ordinary. It is not a sporadic pattern of rare and egregious actions, but the normal and everyday reality of people of color (Delgado and Stefancic).

The second is the idea of interest convergence. Essentially, this boils down to the idea that racism benefits large swaths of the population, giving them little incentive to eradicate it. Racism materially benefits white elites, allowing them to reap tangible economic rewards from systemic injustices. The white working class benefits from racism psychologically. Perhaps the systems of society do not tangibly benefit them just as they fail to benefit people of color, but the deeply ingrained beliefs of racism—both egregious and of a microaggression level—allow the white working class to feel superior to people of color. Thus, whites are deeply motivated to perpetuate racism, whether they are conscious of this or not (Delgado and Stefancic).

Critical race theory also holds that race is entirely a social construct. It is, for all intents and purposes, “made up” and manipulated by the dominant group. There are no real (read: biological) differences between white people and people of color, except for those we have imagined in our collective social consciousness. The dominant group manipulates the construct of race to fit its needs (Delgado and Stefancic). A clear example of this differential racialization can be found in the treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were largely regarded as welcome citizens, even valued for their contribution to the agricultural labor force. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, however, the

racialization of Japanese Americans shifted as they were rounded up and forced into internment camps.

The lack of any biological basis of race has been a foundation of neo-liberal “post racial society” arguments. Proponents of critical legal studies held that race completely does not exist, due to the lack of biological basis, a key rift that led to the origins of critical race theory. Those critical legal studies scholars and neo-liberal ideologists ignore the reality of race as a social construct, and the material consequences that reality has on the day-to-day lives of people of color, both as individuals and as a group (Martinez). Within that lens, race is of course very real, and even a key component of individual and group identity.

While race is a key component of identity, particularly for people of color, critical race theory also acknowledges that everyone has many overlapping and potentially conflicting identities. The potential for what social psychologists refer to as “role conflict” is high for all of us. Role conflict is when one key part of our identity—say, our status as a parent—is put in direct opposition to another key part of our identity—say, our career.

A key practical component of critical race theory is the idea of legal storytelling and narrative analysis. This builds off of W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous idea of “double consciousness” wherein people of color constantly see themselves through others, fragmenting their identity (Du Bois). Basically, it is incredibly hard for white people to grasp what it is to be non-white, while people of color can see the privileges and benefits of being white, and therefore the differences and the inequalities that they face.

This is clearly manifested in the “comforting tale” that white people commonly tell about the United States’ troubled history when it comes to race. For example, they may recount the horrors of slavery and denounce its existence, while perhaps qualifying that not all slaves were treated horribly. They say that slavery ended with the Civil War, and that we have been making steady progress with civil rights ever since. While the gap between whites and people of color is still there, it will eventually close, they say, and society must be careful not to give too much help to people of color, lest we create a state of welfare dependence that will preclude us from ever fully closing the gap. They believe that today we are in, or close to, a post-racial society that operates largely as a meritocracy, judging each of us not “by the color of [our] skin, but by the content of [our] character.”

Meanwhile, people of color tell a much more uncomfortable narrative, one that tells of all the horrors of slavery, and its effects that persist to the present day. It shows that racism is still very much alive, and that the gap between white and nonwhites in many important metrics is not closing, but stagnating or getting worse. It sees vast institutions built in ways that systematically benefit white people while oppressing minorities. It is a much more accurate and uncomfortable narrative (Delgado and Stefancic). How can we reconcile these opposing stories? Is it possible for us to get white people as a whole to acknowledge that their comforting tale is just that, a tale, and to accept the more accurate version people of color know to be true in order to make real progress?

Application to Theatre

The theatre is a special kind of storytelling. It is one thing to read a story, or to be told one, or even to see it play out on a screen. It is a completely different and special experience to see real live human beings acting out a story in front of you, and to see others having the experience of watching with you. Storytelling is powerful, and the theatre especially so.

Critical race theory recognizes the power of storytelling in a very practical way, applying it to a reevaluation of the law in order to drive us towards a society that is more just and fair.

A critical race play does the same. It treats race as an absolutely central theme and destroys the “comforting tale” in favor of the gritty, uncomfortable truth. It shows us explicitly what critical race theorists know to be true: that racism is ordinary. It is a pervasive and everyday phenomenon; its beneficiaries are strongly incentivized against dismantling it and its victims are powerless to do much of anything about it.

The practice of law is also a form of storytelling, with each side gathering up the parts of the story that present the narrative the way they want it to be presented, emphasizing them and omitting the rest. Talented trial lawyers are great weavers of narrative and story, on par with our best playwrights and novelists.

But what makes a play a “critical race play?” These works must evoke some sort of racial theme or tone, that much is certain—but that is not enough. If it were, one could argue that the inclusion of the arguably problematic character of Caliban makes Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* a critical race play.

First, to be a critical race play, a play must treat race and racism as a central tenet of both the world of the play and the lives of the characters within that world. Second, it must intentionally grapple with the concept of race as an integral facet of identity, as well as grappling with the duality that race is also a complete social construct—a made up thing. If a play is doing both of these things fully, it is likely that it will grapple with and illuminate the issues of interest convergence and shifting racialization—two more key tenets of critical race theory as discussed above. As I will discuss later, *An Octoroon* clearly contends with these issues, as characters try to ignore the societal rules regarding what constitutes race, as well as interracial relationships, for the benefit of the protagonists, George and Zoe. However, I do not believe that a play must explicitly address these last tenets of critical race theory in a script or production in order to qualify it as a critical race play. The ideas of interest convergence and shifting racialization orchestrated by the majority are almost implicit in the ongoing story of race, especially race in the United States. A critical race play will at least illuminate these issues—if not directly address them—by virtue of telling a story where race is central. In summation, a critical race play is one which treats race and racism as a central component of the play’s world, while acknowledging and actively contending with the duality of race as both a social construct and a valid and significant segment of identity.

Conclusion

The theatre of today leans emphatically leftward. Why should it not? The average viewer of the theatre is well-educated and well-paid, demographics likely to have left-leaning views. Being a business like any other, the theatre must produce a product that its audience is willing to

buy. The theatre world of today also leans left internally. Perhaps, with the identity lab the theatre represents, the profession attracts more individuals who may grapple with identity in similarly non-conservative ways. Yet, for all the progressive chest thumping, vast problems of representation and inequality still exist. Like the legal profession (and indeed almost any institution of the western world) the theatre has a problematic history surrounding race, and while progress has certainly been made, we haven't come nearly as far as we'd like to think and there is still much work to be done. The structures that ultimately perpetuate these issues are still in place. As *The Guardian's* Lyn Gardner put in 2017, "as long as the top-down structures at management and board level continue to favor those who are white, male and from social elites, these organizations will find themselves ill-equipped to bring about radical change."

This is why a body of critical race theatre, is necessary. To well and truly confront and ultimately attempt to solve the issues that have dogged our society and our art, we must treat race not as a central focus of our work, but as *the* central focus. This is what Lee and Jacobs-Jenkins do in *The Shipment* and *An Octoroon*.

As a framework, metatheatre is well suited to critical race plays. Many of the metatheatrical modes we have discussed can shine a spotlight on the very idea of identity itself, as well as simply providing more room for characters, actors, and the work as a whole to "play around" with identity and explore exactly what makes up its components. While of course any play can place issues of identity front and center, metatheatre can do so in a unique and powerful way. Given the intricate examinations of identity I believe a play must undertake to be called a

critical race play, it seems that the metatheatrical frame may be the best one within which to create these compelling and important works.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF *AN OCTOROON*

Metatheatre: Play-Within-the-Play

An Octoroon is a textbook example of the frame play subtype. In the prologue we see two characters—BJJ and Playwright—discuss in roundabout fashion the nature of drama while setting up the circumstances of the inner play, an adaptation of Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*.

An Octoroon is arguably three plays, utilizing both the frame play and inset play type. The frame play (hereinafter referred to as play A) is *An Octoroon*. It has three characters: BJJ, Playwright, and Assistant. We are firmly situated in this play during the prologue, and throughout much of the fourth act, with there being several subtle nods to it throughout the rest of the play. The first inner play (hereinafter referred to as play B) is Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, the story of George Peyton's fight to save his late uncle's plantation, or, at the very least, the octoroon girl with whom he has fallen in love. This is a textbook melodrama, with characters who, to the modern eye, read as comically over the top and theatricalized. The second and final inner play (hereinafter referred to as play C) is less explicit than the others, and is not easily directly named. It is the story of Minnie, Dido and Grace—the slave women, as well as their old companion Pete. They exist as characters in the melodrama, but seem to live in a world outside of it. When they are alone, the style of the play shifts from melodrama to a more contemporary realism. The slave women use contemporary slang such as “hung like a horse” and “old as hell” (Jacobs-Jenkins 18). They speak in “21st century sitcom dialogue” that contrasts dramatically with the frequently verbose and affected speech of the white characters (Foster 298). We even see them at times shift between play C and play B, putting on the role expected of

them by the white characters in the melodrama. This is especially extreme in the case of Pete, who dramatically changes both his physicality and manner of language whenever white characters are on stage with him. His shift is intense and habitual, as evidenced by Dido's remark to Minnie, "He do this every morning. You'll get used to it" (Jacobs-Jenkins 20).

The play-within-the-play structure is imperative to what Jacobs-Jenkins is trying to achieve. The three distinct plays allow him to highlight and satirize racial divisions. We watch the slave characters traverse across the boundary of play B and C, performing their racial stereotypes in comic caricature. Add the frame of play A, and the issues brought forth in the prologue, and it is impossible to ignore what Jacobs-Jenkins is asking of his audience. He implores us to evaluate how we expect individuals of certain races to act in specific contexts in our everyday lives.

Metatheatre: Ceremony-Within-the-Play

Jacobs-Jenkins does not overwhelmingly utilize ceremony within the play, but there are a few key moments worth discussing as salient moments of metatheatre. The most prominent example is the auction in act three. Jacobs-Jenkins explicitly inputs emblems of such a ritual—putting the "property" for sale up on an auction block, giving the auctioneer a gavel, and specifying that Lafouche should use "fast auction speak" (43). These are signals of cultural meaning to the audience, and while there are certainly nuances to be discussed, the main signal is clear: property is being sold, and that "property" is in fact human beings. We all know what an auction is like. We've been to one ourselves, or we've seen them on TV. We enjoy them. Even

with the horrific reality of the scene being a slave auction, the audience of *An Octoroon* may even laugh at Lafouche's over the top rapid auction speak. It is fun.

However, the reality of the scene makes it unsettling. It is unavoidable to think that, in a not-too-distant era of our history, such a scene actually played out for real. It had an audience then too, having a good time just as we are in the theatre of *An Octoroon*, watching human beings be bought and sold. Combined with the fact that Branden Jacobs-Jenkins draws the audience into active participation in the auction, suggesting in the stage directions that "maybe there's some clever way to force the audience" into becoming bidders, the effect is exceptionally powerful (Jacobs-Jenkins 43). We will discuss this involvement of the audience in more detail later.

Additionally, the prologue of the play presents us with the same ceremony twice: that of an actor preparing to play a role. We see BJJ meticulously apply his makeup and get dressed before Playwright enters, mocks him, and then sloppily applies his own makeup while getting gradually more and more drunk off of the liquor that BJJ has consumed. The twin ceremonies of these two actors preparing to perform creates a metatheatrical effect in two ways.

The first, and less powerful, comes through breaking the ceremony in some way. When BJJ gives himself a giant wedgie, when he chugs a bottle of vodka, or even when either character directly addresses the audience, the ceremony of "actor preparing for a show" is perverted in some way. This can jar the audience into a more heightened awareness of their experiencing a piece of theatre.

The second, more powerful avenue in which these ceremonies create a metatheatrical effect is in combination with self-reference. As the prologue plays out, it becomes clear that every action that BJJ takes does not have any effect on him but instead has an effect on Playwright. Jacobs-Jenkins instructs very specifically that BJJ “finds a bottle of wine or some alcohol in a drawer, opens it, and chugs the entire thing. The alcohol has no visible effect on him, now or ever...he slowly turns around and, without taking his eyes off the audience, very, very slowly and very, very stoically gives himself an incredibly powerful wedgie” (Jacobs-Jenkins 9). The alcohol does nothing to him; he is stoic about the wedgie. Meanwhile, once Playwright is alone on stage, he “very vividly and very intensely picks a mysterious wedgie that’s been bothering him. He also seems to become progressively drunker, more belligerent” (Jacobs-Jenkins 13). By mirroring each actor’s “ceremony” in this manner, Jacobs-Jenkins creates a powerful moment of self-reference, the play referring back upon itself.

From the example of *An Octoroon*’s prologue, it is clear that the ceremony-within-the-play mode can indeed generate a metatheatrical effect, but its effect is muted and is better coupled with another mode such as self-reference in many cases.

Other than the prologue and the auction, it could be argued that the melodrama of play B is in itself a ceremony. All ceremonies are performative, and melodrama is performative to the extreme. We see and hear the emblems of period costume pieces, presentational gesture, indicated emotion, and affected vocals, and instantly we know: this is a piece of *theatre*. However, the effect created here is not a result of the ceremony of melodrama, but of the melodrama’s placement in the play-within-the-play mode. Without that, there would be no

effect; we would accept the “rules” of the melodramatic world of play B as its own reality were we not to have the foils of play A and play C in contrast.

Metatheatre: Role-Playing-Within-the-Role

An Octoroon adeptly employs the role-playing-within-the-role mode to great effect in order to accomplish Jacobs-Jenkins’ goal of getting the audience to confront and question their thoughts about race. In the character breakdown, he specifies that three actors should each play three different roles. The actor playing Playwright also plays Wahnotee and Lafouche and the actor playing BJJ also plays George and M’Closky, while the actor cast as Assistant also plays Pete and Paul.

It is often the case that the role-playing-within-the-role mode goes hand in hand with the play-within-the-play mode, and *An Octoroon* is no exception. In the prologue, we see BJJ, Playwright, and Assistant—characters of the first play—all don their costumes and make up to perform their parts in the second play while on stage. These are voluntary roles: BJJ and Playwright each don their racial makeup for the goal of playing their part in the melodrama. Counter to this are the involuntary roles that the slave women are forced to play. While we hear them speak in contemporary, realistic language with each other, when they interact with any of the white characters, their demeanor changes. Involuntarily, as a result of their status as enslaved, they take on specific roles. For example, in the beginning of act five, Zoe addresses Dido as “Mammy” and Dido almost immediately falls into that role, fetching Zoe the medicine she requests and attempting to take care of her (Jacobs-Jenkins 55). As soon as Zoe leaves and is replaced by Minnie, Dido exclaims with exasperation, “And you know she kept calling me

“Mammy”! And I was like, bitch, what? We are basically the same age!” (Jacobs-Jenkins 56).

Instantly, now that her only company is a fellow slave, she returns to herself.

It is almost painfully obvious what Jacobs-Jenkins wants to achieve here. We are all going about our lives playing out different roles in different social contexts. We even occasionally—especially in cases of racial difference—force others into taking on involuntary roles, whether we intend to do so or not. By making the slave women’s primary roles live in a realm of contemporary realism, the link to the present day is all the more pointed. The audience has almost no choice in asking the question: what roles, racial and otherwise, are we forcing each other to play? What effect is that having on us as individuals and as a society? If *An Octoroon* is any guide, the effect is division and resentment.

Metatheatrical: Real-Life Reference

There is not much literary or real-life reference to speak of in *An Octoroon*. While the play does make reference to Dion Boucicault and the original *The Octoroon*, there are two things that disqualify that from counting as a metadramatic literary or real-life reference. First, the play is a full-blown adaptation of *The Octoroon*, going far beyond mere reference. Second, Boucicault and *The Octoroon* are not famous or modern enough for the average consumer to catch the reference. This is a case that shows that, even if successful in creating metadramatic effect, the power of the real-life reference starts to diminish instantly and perpetually from the time of publication or first performance, as temporal distance renders the reference too obscure for most to notice.

Metatheatre: Self-Reference

Self-reference is used extensively throughout *An Octoroon*. The very first line of the play is self-referential: “Hi, everyone. I’m a “black playwright.” I don’t know exactly what that means, but I’m here to tell you a story” (Jacobs-Jenkins 7). The prologue is rife with self-reference, continuing on as BJJ mentions Dion Boucicault and *The Octoroon* and discusses his attempts to write the adaptation that the audience/reader is currently seeing/reading, as well as his repeated reminders of the phrase “black playwright.”

It doesn’t stop with the introduction of the character Playwright. His half of the prologue is likewise full of self-referential moments, from referring to the theatre he is currently standing in to discussing the dynamic of the play that the audience is about to see re: the race of the actors and the characters they are playing. The effect is not a subtle one, and Jacobs-Jenkins does not allow it to wear off. In fact, with each of these characters commenting so specifically about the roles they are about to play as they apply their unsettling makeup in front of the audience, every single time that either of them appears on stage later in the play becomes a moment of self-reference. We cannot forget that behind the pale whiteface makeup is the “black playwright,” nor that behind the offensive redface is Dion Boucicault. This constant self-reference is even made explicit at one point, when George—or is it BJJ?—asks Lafouche—or is it Playwright?—why he keeps scratching at his face. Lafouche responds that he “hitched a ride from an uncovered wagon” and got “sunburned” (Jacobs-Jenkins 35). While this is a clever explanation of why Lafouche is in the same redface as Wahnotee, it draws laughter from the audience because it is a direct acknowledgement of what we already know is happening.

Act four is almost constant self-reference. BJJ talks about how he “fucked up” in writing the scene we are watching, before he goes on to explain the mechanics of it with the help of Playwright. They interrupt the action of play B frequently, jolting us back to play A as they lament the difficulties inherent in staging play B. These are constant reminders of the nature of the play we are watching. This comes to a climactic moment when Wahnotee—or is it Playwright?—murders M’Closky—or is it BJJ?—at the end of the act. All of the jumping back and forth between different characters, all of the quick jaunts across the barrier of the plays, and the frequent reference to one from within itself or the other, purposefully overwhelms and confuses the audience. When Wahnotee is dragging a screaming M’Closky off stage with a noose, we cannot ignore that these same people, mere minutes before, were finishing each other’s sentences as they expounded on the tribulations of theatre.

In this climactic act of the play, all of the modes of metatheatre are coming together, working in such a way that it is difficult, if not impossible, to extricate them completely. We cannot fully discuss the play-within-the-play with discussing the roles-within-the-roles, and it is impossible to examine the switches between them all without acknowledging the self-reflexive nature of the triple-cast character tracks. It all places racial identity squarely in a spotlight, and a harsh one at that. However, the true power of the piece comes with the inclusion of a mode of metatheatre not discussed by Hornby: involving the audience.

Metatheatre: Involving the Audience

An Octoroon involves the audience in its action from the very first line: “Hi, everyone” (Jacobs-Jenkins 7). Jacobs-Jenkins immediately gives the actor playing BJJ the opportunity to

pause and wait for the audience to reply during the first line of the play. The rest of the prologue, with both BJJ and Playwright, is all addressed to the audience. However, it goes beyond the convention of an aside, extending for several pages. Questions are asked directly to the audience, sometimes gently, sometimes aggressively, and often with space for the audience to respond, or at least attempt to (for example, when Playwright yells, “HOW MANY THINGS DID YOU INVENT? (*Beat.*)”) (Jacobs-Jenkins 14).

Jacobs-Jenkins continues to involve the audience throughout the play through the use of Br'er Rabbit, as he wanders in throughout the second act. Each time he does, the stage direction instructs that he “notices the audience from afar” (Jacobs-Jenkins 28). It is a subtle acknowledgement of their presence that seems to implicate them in whatever is happening on stage at that moment.

The style of the play allows for numerous other opportunities to involve the audience. For example, in our production at TheatreUCF, we frequently used the character of Assistant to engage the audience in creating sound effects. This was a playful engagement which warmed them up to this unconventional dynamic between audience and performers. Such comfortability was important in ensuring that the more provocative engagements in act three and four would be able to work.

Acts three and four increase the intensity of the involvement of the audience. In act three, in a stage direction before 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” (Jacobs-Jenkins 43). We should be clear about what he is calling for here: convincing

the audience to participate in a slave auction. Continuing into the fourth act, when it is discovered that M'Closky murdered the boy Paul, the script calls for "Everyone" to say, "Lynch him!" (Jacobs-Jenkins 52). It is clear at this point that Jacobs-Jenkins does not intend "Everyone" to mean merely the characters on stage; when he writes "Everyone," he means everyone in the theatre. Within the span of two acts, he includes the audience in a slave auction and a lynch mob.

Verna Foster says that with this play, "Jacobs-Jenkins induces his audience to question their own and each other's racial reactions, even as they are caught up in the play" (Foster 285). Every audience member should have at least one of those proverbial "oh shit" moments in seeing this show. Hearing and seeing themselves and their fellow audience members bid on slaves and borderline gleefully call for a lynching hopefully gives most people pause. Anyone with a conscience viewing a well-staged production of *An Octoroon* should, as a *Chicago Tribune* critic put it, feel "harrowed to the bone" (Jones). By utilizing these metadramatic modes, Jacobs-Jenkins has created a powerful work that forces us to question our assumptions about race and the United States' past and present, issues of identity, our labels for others, and even our notions of the theatre itself.

Sociologists from Erving Goffman to Charles Cooley have used theatre as a metaphor or a framework to explain how real everyday human life works. We put on our costumes, say our lines, and play our parts; human life is inherently performative and theatrical. In making us evaluate and challenge our notions of theatre and how we are involved in it as an audience member, Jacobs-Jenkins implicitly leads us to the same evaluations of our everyday lives. We

intuitively, if not consciously, view ourselves as the main characters in the dramas of our lives. Life is theatre is life. Metatheatre like *An Octoroon* has a unique power to tap into that intuitive feeling, and get the audience to ask the right questions and attempt to answer them.

An Octoroon as a Critical Race Play

It is impossible to view *An Octoroon* as anything other than a critical race play from the very first line: “Hi, everyone. I’m a “black playwright.” I’m not really sure what that means, but I’m here to tell you a story.” It takes BJJ a whole 5 words to get to the “race issue.” By the end of this first line, there can be no doubt: we’re being told a story here, and that story is going to, at the very least, be heavily informed by the race of the playwright. By the third page of the script, we know it is more than that, as we watch BJJ meticulously apply his whiteface in preparation to perform. He’s a black playwright—he wants us to remember that—and he’s playing white characters. Couple that with the drama of play B centering around characters—including slaves—attempting to ignore, subvert, or manipulate societal rules regarding race and racial identity, there is no doubt that *An Octoroon* intentionally grapples with the concept of race as an integral facet of identity, as well as a complete social construct.

Additionally, *An Octoroon* specifically engages with further tenets of critical race theory, such as interest convergence, shifting racialization, and narrative analysis. The white characters of *An Octoroon*, specifically George and M’Closky, for example, are a very clear example of interest convergence at work. George, Dora, and the other white elites of the play clearly benefit materially from racism. They reap economic rewards and social status from their plantations

built on the backs of slave labor. They have little incentive to eradicate slavery or racism, and are strongly economically incentivized to perpetuate it.

M'Closky does not have the same economic incentives. He reads as a distinctly lower-class foil to George's aristocracy, and has been the long-time overseer of the plantation for George's uncle. Overseers were white men employed on large plantations to direct the daily work of the slaves (National Humanities Center). They occupied a difficult position, being tasked by the plantation owner with producing a profitable crop, while keeping the slaves contented. With slaves of course having little reason to improve the plantation's efficiency, stories of cruel overseers are common enough to almost be called a trope. (Encyclopedia.com). Jeff Forret sums up the overseer's state nicely in his book *Race Relations at the Margins*, saying:

[The plantation owner] expected him to run a smooth plantation for little compensation or job security. But even if an overseer met all of a slaveholder's requirements, the master still usually treated him as the social inferior he was. With the slaveowner outranking him in social status, the overseer found getting slaves to obey him a frustrating task, as the slaves themselves recognized that he lacked the ultimate power over them (117).

Generally, overseers were from among the lowest of social classes white people could occupy at the time, not reaping any real tangible benefits from the institution of slavery themselves. In M'Closky's interactions with the other characters, it is clear that he fits the overseer stereotype. The slaves disrespect him, to which he responds with violence (Jacobs-Jenkins 23), while he rails against the treatment given to him by the other white characters, saying "It makes my blood so hot I hear my heart hiss!" (Jacobs-Jenkins 25).

Despite not directly reaping much benefit from racism and slavery, M'Closky is the foulest character to the slaves, the one class over which he can assert his social dominance. In this way, he demonstrates clearly the “psychological benefit” that lower-class whites have always gained from the institution of racism, explaining why he viciously enforces the status quo.

Meanwhile, the only time we see or hear a white character within play B address the issue of race in a progressive manner is when George is falling in love with Zoe, but has been told that she is “an unclean thing...an octoroon” (Jacobs-Jenkins 31). Suddenly, George wants to circumvent society’s rules. He wants Zoe to be treated as his equal; he wants her to be treated as white. His personal interests have converged with the interests of those under the thumb of a racist society, and so he is suddenly on the same side as people of color.

Shifting racialization meanwhile, could be argued to be the most central theme of *An Octoroon*. The very idea of “an octoroon”—a person who is one-eighth black—gets at shifting racialization. As Zoe says to George in act two, “the one black drop gives me despair, for I’m an unclean thing—I’m an octoroon!” (Jacobs-Jenkins 31). Nowadays, politicians get into hot water for claiming minority ancestry that amounts to such a sliver of their heritage. Especially in a production such as ours at TheatreUCF in 2017, with Zoe being played by a white woman, it becomes clear how manipulated the very idea of race can be. George and M'Closky—both white men and members of the majority—attempt to shift the racialization of Zoe to fit their own interests. George, wanting to marry Zoe, notes the ridiculousness of racial distinction when saying to her “I love you nonetheless....must we immolate our lives on their prejudice?” (Jacobs-

Jenkins 31). Meanwhile, having discovered an issue with Zoe's free-papers, M'Closky seeks to reveal Zoe's technical slave status and purchase her at auction, telling the audience, "If I sink every dollar I'm worth in her purchase, I'll own that octoroon!" (Jacobs-Jenkins 26). The majority (i.e.: white men), personified by the characters of George and M'Closky in the body of one actor, attempts to shift the racialization of Zoe to their advantage.

In the same scene of Zoe revealing her racial background to George, we can see the idea of narrative analysis. George is nearly incredulous that they should have to ignore their love for the sake of others' "prejudice." A lifetime as a landowning white man has rendered him almost unable to fathom the reality of being branded even one-eighth black. He sees his own "comforting tale," one in which they will either be accepted by those around them, or they will be able to run off with each other to escape the prejudices of their world. Zoe, of course, knows that there is no real escape, even though she may pass as white.

Finally, the last piece of evidence for *An Octoroon* qualifying as a critical race play comes from the play's metatheatrical nature, specifically from the action and very existence of play C (the slave characters alone with each other). As previously discussed, when the slave characters are alone with each other, the play moves starkly from melodrama to a more realistic style, with the characters dropping their vocal affectations and adopting modern slang and mannerisms. This conspicuously illustrates the idea of race as a social construct. When among the rest of "society" of play B, they act and speak "appropriately," the way they are expected to as black slaves. But alone, they revert to their real selves. Jacobs-Jenkins, by creating such a clear disparity between this realism and the melodrama which modern audiences are wont to find

both humorous and a little absurd, seems to be making a powerful point: the way we construct race today is just as silly and ridiculous as these over the top melodrama characters.

The slave characters, by virtue of their switching back and forth, seem to have an awareness of acknowledgement of these social constructions, and play within them, acknowledging their inherent absurdity with subtle looks, eye rolls, and asides throughout the script. And yet, it is clear at the end that, even though much of the social construct of race is flimsy and absurd at best, race—and even their status as slaves—is an integral part of their identities. In their conversation to end the play, Minnie and Dido draw a clear distinction between themselves and “light skinned haters” like Zoe who “hang out wit all these damn white people all the damn time” (Jacobs-Jenkins 57). They also openly opine on the state of their lives, how they feel about them, and what they are even supposed to do, reaching the conclusion that “[w]e ‘bout to be on a boat, and it may not be heaven, but it’s sho’ as hell different from this here swamp, and that’s got to mean something” (Jacobs-Jenkins 58). This is in reference to their new status...as slaves on a river boat bought by Capt. Ratts at the estate auction. Even in discussions about their identities and their lives, even when Minnie says, “you are not your job” (Jacobs-Jenkins 58), race and slavery are central to their identities.

With all of this taken together, *An Octoroon* provides a clear example of a critical race play: one that treats race and racism as a central component of the play’s world, while acknowledging and actively contending with the duality of race as both a social construct and valid and significant segment of identity. It does so in large part through its metatheatrical

structure. Metatheatre's unique ability to raise questions of identity and practically force the audience into grappling with those questions makes it well suited to creating critical race plays.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF *THE SHIPMENT*

Metatheatre: Overview

While *An Octoroon* is obviously metatheatre from the outset, with a clear play-within-a-play set up from the very beginning, *The Shipment* engages the metatheatrical in a more cumulative fashion. There are certainly clear and jarring instances, but the meta-effect is one built up by a slew of ceremonies and plays-within-the-play, roles-within-roles, real-life references, self-references, and involvement of the audience, occasionally mashing several modes together into one moment.

One particular example is the very beginning of the script in which Lee fits five or six of the modes into as many minutes. The play starts with “A bare stage. Stark lights. Ominous white noise in the background” (Lee 7). This is self-referential, calling attention to the stage and the theatre itself, nonverbally screaming, “what you are about to see is a play, a construction, a façade.” The next moment, “A rock song—Semisonic’s “F.N.T.” —begins” (Lee 7). This is a clear literary/real-life reference. Then, the lights come up again on two dancers, who proceed to perform what appears at times to be a part of a minstrel show. I hesitate to call this minstrel show a “play-within-the-play,” but it is somewhere between that and a ceremony, with the additional dimension of a sort of real-life reference, at least for any audience members knowledgeable about the history of minstrelsy. That dance ends, and the music changes. “A rap song, Lil Jon’s “I Don’t Give a Fuck,” begins as the dance ends” (Lee 8). This second musical literary/real-life reference is the walk-on song for Stand-Up Comedian, who is introduced with the name of the actor playing that role. This is both a clear self-referential moment, as well as—as I will

elaborate on later—a glimpse of a role-within-a-role. He begins his stand-up comedy routine, a medium which historically involves the audience extensively. The first spoken line of the play is “(Name of city!) (Name of city) mothafuckin’ (Name of state or country) up in this!” (Lee 10). Soon after that, Stand-Up Comedian “singles someone out in the audience and imitates a white guy voice” (Lee 10). The audience is heavily involved throughout Stand-Up Comedian’s act.

Within the first three pages of the script, the first 5-10 minutes of viewing the play, Lee hits the reader/audience with play-within-a-play, ceremony-within-a-play, involvement of the audience, and several instances each of real-life/literary reference and self-reference. Six modes, three pages. The cumulative effect of Lee’s usage of metatheatre only builds throughout the script, coming to a startling conclusion in the play’s final line, putting the strength of this framework on full display.

Metatheatre: Play-Within-the-Play

While the structure is not quite as concrete as *An Octoroon*, the effect of the play-within-the-play is clearly present in *The Shipment*. The first and second half of the play—which Lee notably decided not to delineate as separate acts—are distinctly different plays. In her author’s note at the beginning of the script, Lee sharply delineates them in style from the get-go saying, “The show is divided into two parts. The first half is structured like a minstrel show... The second half of the show is a relatively straight naturalistic comedy” (Lee 5). The stage directions within the dramatic text itself also clearly define this dual-play dynamic. In the first half, the actors are directed that they should not “put on any kind of accent. They should deliver their

lines as flatly as possible.” This starkly contrasts with the second half, which carries no such directive, and which Lee has set up as a “relatively straight naturalistic comedy.”

Despite the stark contrast, each half of the play is inextricably linked to the other. There is no intermission between them, just a live and explicitly theatrical scene change. It is not hidden, nor rushed, nor emphasized, but carefully crafted to remind us of the construction we are viewing, a construction mirroring that which has upheld the hierarchies and tensions of racial identity throughout American history. Two stagehands—who Lee mandates be white middle-aged males—appear as the singers at the end of the first half “minstrel show” exit, and set the stage methodically for the second half comedy. This is the only moment in which we see white skin on stage. These white stagehands—who, while they perform stagehand duties are essentially characters in the broader story of the play—literally set the stage. They set the framework within which we will view the rest of the play, just as white people have always set the frame for what race is and what race means and how we interact with race. White people as the majority have historically controlled 100% of the broader racial narrative.

Additionally, the same group of actors each play a character (or several) in the first half, as well as a character in the second half. Lee is clear which actors are to play which parts. This could be discounted as merely logistical, if it weren't for one single track: the character of Desmond. Desmond in the second half is played by the same actor who portrays Drug Dealer Desmond in the first half. Lee is an exacting playwright; this is no mistake. If it were not for this dual-Desmond track, we could perhaps separate the two halves of the play, but Desmond links them inextricably. Having that one track with the same actor playing characters of the same

name creates a certain dissonance in the heads of audience members. We are forced to wonder if this is the same person. After all, it is the same actor, in the same costume, playing a character with the same name. It is yet another in the long list of moments the Lee creates in the play that seem designed to make the audience raise an eyebrow, but shrug off in the moment as a mere coincidence or some other non-consequential occurrence, until confronted with the totality of these moments by the play's final scene.

Also, it is important to note that Stand-Up Comedian—the first character whom we see speak on stage—is not named, but rather takes the name of the actor playing the part in each production, and is announced as such: “Please put cho mothafuckin’ hands together for the one, the only, (*Name of actor playing Stand-Up Comedian!*)” (Lee 9). This could be viewed as a simple moment of self-reference. Most of the audience has perused their programs as they have waited for the show to begin, and they likely have at least a passing familiarity with the names of the cast. Therefore, naming a character after one of the actors in the production can be seen as self-referential, and it does create a metatheatrical effect through that mode. More importantly, however, it is another piece of evidence for what Lee has done in creating this play. Taking it all into consideration—Stand-Up Comedian, the white stagehands, the character tracks, the nature of the whole script—it is clear that Lee has accomplished something bold. She has made *The Shipment* a frame play, using the inherent and oftentimes absurd theatricality of race in our everyday lives *outside* the theatre to serve as the frame for her script, which all together forms the inner main play. The identity of race in everyday modern America is, both now and historically, so ridiculously performative as to be a play itself, within which Lee frames *The Shipment*.

Uniquely, it is important to further understand the process Young Jean Lee took in writing *The Shipment* to fully understand its metatheatricality and use of the play-within-a-play mode. I argue that *The Shipment* is a frame play, containing within it two separate inner plays (the minstrel show, and the comedy). It begins with Lee's author's note:

The show is divided in two parts. The first half is structured like a minstrel show—dance, stand-up routine, sketches and a song—and I wrote it to address the stereotypes my cast members felt they had to deal with as black performers. Our goal was to walk the line between stock forms of black entertainment and some unidentifiable weirdness to the point where the audience wasn't sure how they were supposed to respond. The performers wore stereotypes like ill-fitting paper-doll outfits held on by two tabs, which denied the audience easy responses (illicit pleasure or self-righteous indignations) to racial clichés and created a kind of uncomfortable, paranoid watchfulness in everyone. The second half of the show is a relatively straight naturalistic comedy. I asked the actors to come up with roles they'd always wanted to play and wrote the second half of the show in response to their requests (Lee 5).

Both sections of the play are in direct response to the actors' input. The first, the roles they are forced to play, the second, the roles they wish they would play. These are two inset plays within the frame of the life of the black performer specifically, or the black person more generally. As race is a concept we have invented and constructed ourselves, it is entirely performative. It is performed by the names we use, the way we talk, how we dress, the way we dance. As the majority shifts the racialization of minorities, minority group members are forced

to play the part. They are forced to play the part by both the majority and members of their own group, a salient experience especially to those of a mixed-race background. Each and every day of their lives, the actors of Young Jean Lee's original troupe for which she wrote *The Shipment* were already playing a role: black person/black performer. The two plays that exist within the script are insets of that larger frame, an inescapable performance the minority actors constantly live.

Metatheatre: Ceremony-Within-the-Play

Young Jean Lee uses the ceremony-within-the-play mode in *The Shipment* almost similarly to how Jacobs-Jenkins uses the play-within-the-play mode in *An Octoroon*. It isn't quite as jarring, but it is just as effective.

To analyze any one instance of ceremony-within-the-play in *The Shipment* in isolation does not do justice to the effect that they create cumulatively. The effect comes from the usage of ceremony over and over again. There is the minstrel show dance at the very beginning, Stand-Up Comedian's act following that (particularly his entrance), Rapper Omar's sporadic, symbolic rapping (particularly when he "performs" for the group of inmates), the grandmother's parable, and more, just within the first half of the play. In fact, the entire first half of the play itself feels like some grotesque and warped ceremony, thanks to Lee's instruction that the actors "deliver their lines and move as flatly as possible." (Lee 16). And it all occurs within the broader "ceremony" of a sort of minstrel show, which Lee has structured the first half of the play to resemble. This blurs in some way the line between a play-within-a-play and a ceremony-within-a-play. What makes a play a play, rather than a ceremony? Is a minstrel show—and by

extension, the first half of *The Shipment*—a play, or a ceremony? Regardless, it is unsettling to read or to watch, precisely as Lee intends. She takes the ceremony (or perhaps the play) of a minstrel show, and she twists and breaks it throughout the first half of *The Shipment*. The “ill-fitting paper doll” stereotype performances that Lee has written all but force the audience into a consideration of those stereotypes and their own reactions to them.

The ceremonies within the play do not stop with the advent of the second half, though they are not as ubiquitous. The party/gathering that sets the scene is a kind of ceremony itself. The awkward tensions, silences, and meaningless, downright clichéd small talk are identifiable to anyone who has ever suffered through a suburban cocktail party or conference networking event. They are rituals/ceremonies we endure in our regular real lives.

At a few moments in the second half of the play, a spotlight is shone on the ceremony at hand, most notably, when Thomas proposes an awkward toast to the alcohol that they are drinking, a toast by which “everyone looks weirded out” (Lee 40). Even the characters on the stage react to the breaking of this common ceremony. We as the audience feel a sort of secondhand embarrassment at the tangible crass awkwardness of Thomas’ toast. This is only continued and compounded a moment later when Thomas abruptly announces that it is his thirtieth birthday—news to all the party’s attendees who are supposedly his friends—brings out a birthday cake, sings loudly to himself, and blows out the lone candle before removing it and throwing it violently to the floor. Then, aggressively refusing a knife to cut the cake, he digs into it with his hands (Lee 41).

This behavior is so erratic, the breaking of any sort of typical birthday ceremony so jarring for the characters on stage, that they question Thomas' sobriety; however, it is clear that Thomas is not so intoxicated as to write off his behavior as drunken foolery.

When it comes down to it, a play itself—even the strictest naturalistic performance—is merely a complicated ceremony, one where we accept the constructions of the actors as the characters, the set on stage as the location, etc. Lee emphasizes this ceremonial aspect of the theatre in the first half of *The Shipment* by highlighting the performativity of it both positively and negatively. Positively, by mandating that all performers wear visible wireless microphones; negatively, by removing expected props, and mandating actors make few physical and vocal choices, but instead “deliver their lines and move as flatly as possible” (Lee 16).

We do not view the ceremony of theatre objectively, but through the lens of our own biases and worldview, hopefully filtered by an aperture controlled by a skilled playwright and director. Lee throws the aperture wide open at the very end of the play when it is revealed that the characters we've been viewing as black—by nature of the skin color of the actors portraying them—are in fact white. We are smacked with this fact in just the final two lines of the play, given no time to process it before the lights cut out in a stark blackout. The reader/audience is forced by this device into an examination of themselves and their view of the characters that they have watched for the preceding hour. By having black actors play white characters—suggesting that these are the roles they've always wanted to play but have never been given the chance to play—without giving the audience any clue that that is the case until the play is done, she shines an unforgiving light on the viewer's/reader's internal stereotypes and biases that they hold

regarding race. There is no escape for them from, at least for a moment, sitting stunned in the theatre with the problematic schemas in their own head.

This is the crux of Young Jean Lee's brilliance in using the metatheatrical form. Any introductory theater student is taught in script analysis to find the major dramatic question of the play. Metatheatre, when deployed as deftly as it is by Lee, helps anyone to deduce the dramatic question right away. Lee leaves as little room as possible for the audience to pretend that that question has no impact or relevance on real life outside of the theatre.

Metatheatre: Role-Playing-Within-the-Role

To fully grasp the level of role-playing-within-the-role that is occurring in *The Shipment*, one must understand the racial dynamics against the backdrop of which Lee has written. Race, especially in the United States, and especially for African Americans, is a central component of identity. And identity itself is performative by nature. Whether the reader knows it or not—whether they admit it or not—everyone has notions in their head of how a black person, or a white person, or an Asian person, or an insert-identity-here person is “supposed” to behave, talk, etc. In the world of theatre and show business, so often dominated by ideas of “look” or “type,” these notions are amplified further. When Young Jean Lee first brought together the troupe that would originate *The Shipment*, they were all already in the midst of playing a constant role: the role of “black actor.” Lee builds the play around this role, asking her company about the roles that they felt forced to play by virtue of being black actors, and about the roles that they always wished they could play instead. These roles that Lee puts to paper in the script are framed within the ever-present role of “black actor.”

This is an involuntary role African-Americans are forced to play—written and rewritten, and rewritten again, since European colonialists demarcated supposedly immutable biological differences between peoples as justification for their conquest and proof of their superiority. When identity, as Debby Thompson elegantly puts it, is “radically theatrical and performative, constituted by repeated poses, postures, acts and gestures,” it is “real only to the extent that it is performed.” (Thompson 131). It is constantly made and remade, as critical race theorists would argue, by the majority. Lee illustrates the binds of this involuntary role, illuminating how it plays out in the theatre world itself by crafting the play based on the roles her actors had to “deal with,” in contrast to the ones they “always wanted to play.” The outer play of Lee’s *The Shipment* is the ongoing and pervasive performance of race itself in America. In the outer play, the role being played is “black actor.” It is an involuntary role in the ongoing “play” of racialized identity.

In addition to being apparent through examination of Lee’s process in writing *The Shipment*, as noted in her author’s note and stage directions, this unique frame is also clear through examining character track of Desmond across the two halves of the play.

Drug Dealer Desmond of the first half, and plain old Desmond of the second, are inarguably meant to be linked. It is the only pairing of characters with the same name that is also played by the same actor in both halves. He unsettlingly links the two halves of the play together for the audience, especially considering he is never referred to explicitly as “Drug Dealer Desmond” in the first half and he comes on stage in the second wearing the same costume. He even acts in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the first half, with his initial lack of response to

other characters and his expressionless, short answers when he eventually does (Lee 33-34). We might be able to ignore all of this if it weren't for the fact that Lee gives Desmond the final line of the play. After Thomas' barrage of racist Library jokes, and Omar's uncomfortable reply of "I just don't think we'd be doing this if there were a black person in the room," Desmond replies, "I guess that would depend on what kind of black person it was" (Lee 53). The blackout that follows barely gives the audience the chance to process what we have just learned. These characters are not black, as we assumed. And what do we think of Desmond's "what kind of black person" response? What are the "kinds" of black people that come into our heads? Do we challenge the idea of "kinds of black people," or do we immediately think of his "drug dealer" role from the first half of the play, and the "crackhead," "extreme," "rapper" and "ho" characters with whom he interacted?

These questions are even more salient when framed by Stand-Up Comedian's set at the top of the show, where he says:

I don't talk the same way onstage that I do in real life. I even been accused a playin' a stereotype to cater to a white audience. Well that's true, but mostly I talk this way because I'm fuckin' terrified a black people! (*imitating thug voice*) 'Yo, who this nigga think he is, tryin' a sound like a white man an' shit! Let's fuck that nigga up!' Shee-it! Bein' black can be fuckin' inconvenient! (Lee 14).

This sums up the original "role" and the outer frame play within which the entirety of *The Shipment* is set. Expected to play a certain part among their peers, a certain part among white people, and perhaps even a third part in the context of the show-business industry, these black

actors must constantly perform the play of race to succeed and even—as Stand-Up Comedian implies—survive.

Metatheatre: Literary and Real-Life Reference

There isn't one single instance of literary/real-life reference in *The Shipment* that produces a metatheatrical effect. Rather, it is the accumulation of jarring, out of place references that do so. From the modern rock song implanted into the minstrel show, to the vulgar rap song that jars us out of it, to the video game references in the characters' movement, Lee sprinkles these literary references—if such a term can be used to describe the Grand Theft Auto game franchise—throughout the play. Some, like the Semisonic rock song that overlays the opening dance number, fit in simply and do not call much attention to themselves. It is not unreasonable to us as the audience that someone would be dancing to this song. We may recognize the song or not, or maybe recognize the singer's voice from better known works. It is not out of place.

Not so with call outs like the “Grand Theft Auto” movements (Lee 19). A fan of the game franchise might notice them as such, but to others, it appears as this odd, repetitive, stereotyped movement pattern. Drug Dealer Desmond, like all the characters in the first half of the play, is exactly this kind of gross stereotype that we tacitly accept in media like the Grand Theft Auto games. Draping this over the actors like an “ill-fitting paper doll,” Lee's commentary is multi layered. She calls out media—including the theatre—for using these base stereotypes, and she calls out the audience for accepting them.

Metatheatre: Self-Reference

As discussed previously, self-reference is perhaps the most powerful mode of metatheatre, with the ability to abruptly snap the audience into an awareness of the theatrical construct they are viewing. There are three key instances of self-reference in *The Shipment*.

The first—or perhaps more accurately, the first group of self-referential moments—occurs during the stand-up comedy act at the beginning of the show. Stand-Up Comedian is not given a name in the script, but is referred to by the actor's name. With the audience no doubt aware of the cast members' names from perusing the program during preshow, this is self-referential. We aren't expecting the actor himself to come out and do stand-up comedy. We are expecting a character, a play. Of course, the actor is playing a character, but it may not be far from the involuntary role he is forced to play off the stage. Stand-Up Comedian, in the style of the genre, calls out the name of the city the theatre is located in, and cracks location-specific jokes. This primes the audience for the feeling that they are an integral part in the narrative they are seeing play out. They are implicated. Stand-Up Comedian also involves the audience quite a bit (as stand-up comedians are wont to do), but more on that later.

The second major self-referential moment is the shift between the first and second half of the play. This transition is not hidden, or rushed, but explicitly staged and choreographed. Notably, the two stagehands are mandated by Lee's script to be middle-aged white men. These white men come out and literally set the scene for the second half of the play. They build the frame through which we will view the latter half of the play's action. These middle-aged white men are representative of the proverbial majority, with the power to—as critical race theorists

put it—shift the racialization of others to meet their needs. Similarly, our stagehands shift the mode of the play, from the uncomfortable, flat, “ill-fitting paper doll” show of the first half, to the “straight naturalistic comedy” of the second half. We watch them do it, and again it is presented to us as if in neon lights: this is a play. What you are watching is made up, a construction, a falsehood, even. So too might be the structures within which your lives are lived.

The final moment of self reference comes in the final lines of the play:

OMAR. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but I have to say that I’m really uncomfortable with all of this. I just don’t think we’d be doing this if there were a black person in the room.

(Pause.)

DESMOND. I guess that would depend on what kind of black person it was.

(Blackout.) (Lee 53).

For the audience, this moment must be a shock. For the past hour or so, they have watched five black actors performing. They have assumed, erroneously, that the characters the actors were performing were also black. Perhaps, given that context, they allowed themselves to laugh along with the racially-tinged jokes that Omar eventually becomes uncomfortable with. And then, right at the close of the play, it is revealed that these characters we have been watching are in fact white. In an instant, the audience (or even the reader, as this writer can personally attest to the shock of even just reading those lines) is confronted with the fact that this play, this construction they have been viewing, is not what they thought it was. They have been viewing it the wrong way, through an incorrect and racially-tinged lens. Short of instantaneously finding a sufficient

amount of sand in which to stick their heads, the audience must also wonder: what else have I been viewing incorrectly? What else am I viewing through this racial lens? For looking back, they even had clues, starting with the white stagehands setting up a stereotypically “white” living room for the second half to play out in.

In this one moment of self reference, calling attention to the basic construction of the play and the theatre itself—that these people on the stage are not in fact the characters they play—Lee shines a blinding light not only on the construction of the theatre, but the construction of our own world and our own identities, the ways our biases may be shaping our views, and how we are racializing each other.

Additionally, while it cannot be reduced to a single moment, the entirety of the first half is set up to be self-referential, to aggressively call attention to the play’s theatricality. Lee is very specific in her instructions:

In the following sketches, none of the performers should put on any kind of “black sounding” or “white sounding” accent. They should deliver their lines and move as flatly as possible. All props are mimed. They all wear visible wireless mikes. The performers should not hold for laughs until they get to the naturalistic play that closes the show. (Lee 16)

By taking away the things we expect to see—vocal and movement choices, physical props—drawing attentions to microphones we might expect to be hidden, and breaking comedic convention, Lee creates an unsettling effect. It isn’t necessarily avant-garde; the characters and situations are recognizable, having a certain reality woven through their garish stereotypes. It

traps the audience into an awareness of the work's theatricality with such a variety of techniques as to negate the concern of dulling the effect discussed in chapter two. It is a clear metadramatic effect, which certainly—as Lee puts it—“[denies] the audience easy responses... to racial clichés, and create[s] a kind of uncomfortable, paranoid watchfulness in everyone” (Lee 5).

Of course, one could argue that a viewer of *The Shipment*, or any piece of theatre, no matter how metatheatrical, no matter how strange, can simply accept the absurdity presented to them as “the world of play” and remain unengaged with the greater questions of the work. I would suggest that these viewers are less likely to attend *The Shipment* and are probably not the viewers Lee hopes to affect. It is the rest of us who view the play and cannot help but to ask the difficult questions about the theatricality of race that the play presents.

Metatheatre: Involving the Audience

In *The Shipment*, Lee uses the involving the audience mode less so than Jacobs-Jenkins does in *An Octoroon*, but does so enough to illicit the same kind of effect. Most, if not all, of the audience involvement comes in the first half of the play. It begins with Stand-Up Comedian.

As discussed earlier, Stand-up Comedian has the first spoken line of the play: “(Name of city!) (Name of city) mothafuckin’ (Name of state or country) up in this!” (Lee 10). Lee has left room in the script for this character to address the audience directly and involve them. This is not a stand-up act that is occurring within the broader confines of a play, but almost a stand-alone comedy set that is inserted into the script. It feels almost out of place, as the audience is expecting to watch a play, not a comedy set.

Soon after that, he “singles someone out in the audience and imitates a white guy voice” (Lee 10). Later on in his set, he “singles out an audience member with a knowing look” (Lee 12). The audience is heavily involved throughout Stand-Up Comedian’s act. Stand-up comedy as its own genre tends to involve the audience, or at least has much more potential to than other performance mediums. Hecklers—while they can be found in many areas—are almost synonymous with stand-up, so much so that all comics have prepared lines or general tactics to deal with inevitable hecklers. It isn’t inconceivable that Stand-Up Comedian would need to deal with a heckler during a performance.

Starting the play with this comedy routine is another integral part of Lee’s metatheatrical puzzle. It is where the bulk of the involvement of the audience occurs. A few other incidences occur in the first half of the play, such as the very end of the first half when three singers “stand in a line looking around at the audience in silence. They look at the audience for an uncomfortably long time. As they sing...they continue to look around at the audience. They don’t move or change expression, but they sing with feeling” (Lee 29). This moment qualifies as involving the audience due to the extremity and uncomfortability of the moment. It is odd for us as audience members to watch these motionless, expressionless performers sing with passion and feeling, and the longer their eyes are locked on us, the more we are brought into the moment ourselves. It is too long of a moment, too intense for the audience to not feel actively involved.

Even though the audience is only explicitly involved in the first half of the play, the effect carries over to the second half, thanks to Lee inarguably linking the two as previously

discussed. We must acknowledge, as we are involved in the first half, that we the audience are involved—or perhaps more appropriately, implicated—in the second half.

Stand-Up Comedian at the beginning of *The Shipment* serves a similar purpose to the Assistant character in *An Octoroon*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Assistant constantly draws the audience into the action of the play—or at the very least there is room in the script for him to do so—leading to the audience being implicated in the act four slave auction and subsequent lynching. Stand-Up Comedian in *The Shipment* draws us in similarly. He singles us out. He jokes with us. He makes us laugh. He calls our city by name. Maybe we heckle him. Maybe he heckles back. With him, for about 15 of the play's opening 20 minutes, we are actively involved. Then—jumping to the end of the play—it is the same actor, in the same costume, now playing the character of Thomas, who reads aloud the group's racist jokes in a game of Library. We are already accustomed to laughing at the jokes he makes from the beginning of the play. As an audience it is likely that we—like the audience of the original production at the Kitchen in NYC—will laugh as Thomas reads the undeniably racist jokes (*The Shipment* 2009). It may be a nervous laughter, an uncomfortable laughter. But we may feel it is ok; after all, it is a black character reading these jokes. Then we are hit with reality that the characters we've viewed all through the second half as black are in fact white.

As Assistant implicates us in the lynch mob, Thomas implicates us in the group's racist jokes. More importantly, he implicates us in the broader societal issue he shines a light on. We have viewed these characters as black, racialized them, made assumptions about them, and changed our own thoughts and behaviors based upon that racialization. This is, at the core, the

same mechanism of consciousness that, pushed to its extreme, has been used throughout history to justify discrimination, apartheid, slavery, and genocide.

The Shipment as a Critical Race Play

To review, I have defined “critical race play” as a play which treats race and racism as a central component of the play’s world, while acknowledging and actively contending with the duality of race as both a social construct and valid and significant segment of identity.

One of the clearest moments that makes *The Shipment* a critical race play is the inclusion of the stagehands in between the first and second half of the play, who set the stage. Lee does not waste this opportunity to add to her point here and is as exacting in her direction of the stagehands as she is with the dialogue. “They are both white males over the age of fifty, wearing blue jeans. Stagehand 1 wears a lilac hooded sweatshirt and Stagehand 2 wears a blue T-shirt” (Lee 30). These are the only visibly, identifiably white people we see on stage for the entirety of the production; the entire cast is black and, as previously discussed, portraying roles related somehow to their race. But Lee mandates the stagehands be white. The people who we see literally set the stage for the second half of the play, who physically set up the space within which we will view the action to follow, are the only visibly white people in the production. In doing so, Lee has created a powerful visual metaphor for the fact that our everyday conceptions of race are always, have always been, controlled by the majority, specifically by white men. They control the frame within which we view race, in this case literally by physically constructing the world in which we will view the second half of the play.

Additionally—and perhaps uniquely—we must take into consideration Lee’s process of creating *The Shipment* to fully comprehend its fit of our definition of critical race play. Again, Lee is an exacting playwright who has made sure to include every possible note in her script that she would want a future director or actor to know. Her author’s note which explains the process is just as important to understanding the play as the dialogue of the play itself. She tells us that she wrote the first half of the play “to address the stereotypes my cast members felt they had to deal with as black performers,” while she wrote the second half “in response to [the actors’] requests” regarding roles that they had always wanted to play but, presumably, had never been given the chance to (Lee 5). If it were not clear enough in the content of the script, Lee lays it out explicitly in framing the play with this note. The play is meant to address racial stereotypes and clichés, and to force the audience into thinking deeply about them through “[denying] the audience easy responses” to them.

The final and most important piece of the puzzle that makes *The Shipment* a clear critical race play is the final moment of the second half comedy:

OMAR. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but I have to say that I’m really uncomfortable with all of this. I just don’t think we’d be doing this if there were a black person in the room.

(Pause.)

DESMOND. I guess that would depend on what kind of black person it was.

(Blackout.) (Lee 53)

Again, this is a shock to the audience, as we suddenly realize that these characters we have been observing, who have been making racially incentive jokes that we have perhaps laughed nervously along with, are in fact white people. In this one moment, our conceptions of who these characters are, our concept of their identities, is shaken dramatically as we are shown that we have viewed their race incorrectly. In the same moment, Lee manages to shine a spotlight on both how constructed race is, and how integral race can be to identity—both internally and externally.

Lee's use of names is also important to note when discussing identity in *The Shipment*. Names are an integral part of each of our identities. They're how we interface with others and the world around us. Lee names her characters in the first half of the play after the stereotypes they are uncomfortably portraying. We have the rapper, the sidekick, the drug dealer, and the crackhead, among others. Most of them have actual names as well—they are Rapper Omar, Sidekick Michael, Drug Dealer Desmond, and Crackhead John. For the most part, characters in the first half refer to each other simple by their actual names: Omar, Desmond, etc. However, exceptions are salient. Crackhead John is always referred to as "Crackhead John." Video Ho is always only "Video Ho." They are only, and completely, the stereotype they are portraying. While, with the more central main characters, we may be fooled momentarily into a sense of greater depth, it is clear as well that they are just the racial stereotypes that they are ultimately named for.

Taken all together, *The Shipment* provides another strong example of a critical race play: one that treats race and racism as a central component of the play's world, while acknowledging

and actively contending with the duality of race as both a social construct and valid, significant segment of identity. It does so explicitly through its use of the six metatheatrical modes, creating layers of characters, ceremonies, and audience involvement to force the viewer or reader into contending with the difficult racial questions raised by the play. This is both achieved and heightened not by alienating or distancing the audience from the play, but involving them directly in it. This is one of the key strengths of metatheatricality, making it uniquely suited to the creation of critical race plays.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

It is clear that works of metatheatre can have a powerful effect on audiences. To best capture and deploy this effect, I strongly believe we must have a concrete framework, a system to deploy. My hope with this paper is that I have, in some small way, helped to further strengthen and solidify such a framework by my analysis of Hornby's five modes and the addition of my own "involving the audience" mode. Some may be stronger than others, but all can play an important role in building a metatheatrical effect. When deployed with intention and precision by both playwright and director, these modes can elicit a special awareness in an audience, an awareness that hopefully has some staying power beyond the theatre doors, an awareness capable of spurring further thought, discussion, and engagement with serious issues.

Adding a critical race theory lens to these modes focuses that awareness on the most challenging group of issues of our time, issues that arguably define our identity as a country. Critical race theory treats racism as everyday and ordinary, a central component of our world, while grappling with the duality of race as both a social construct and valid and significant segment of identity. Critical race plays must do the same, and we must have more of them.

While critical race theory has branched out from its origins in the legal field, there is currently little application of it to the theatre. Clearly, critical race plays already exist, such as the two discussed at length in this paper. However, just as it is important to be specific and intentional in the use of tools like metatheatre, it is necessary for us to be specific and intentional in creating works of theatre with a critical race lens. This paper is in part my humble attempt at

making a fresh contribution to the theatrical academe by suggesting critical race theory as a new paradigm for writing, staging and analyzing theatrical works.

Throughout this project, I have repeatedly been reminded of an ongoing debate I had with another undergraduate theatre student when I was at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. His position was that theatre had tremendous ability—even obligation—to change the world, and he approached all of his work with that focus. My position was that theatre was for storytelling, and that a focus on driving social change as more important than creating widely compelling stories was ineffective across the board. My position now is much less certain. To me, at least, the question remains whether or not theatre is an effective tool for making change in our world. While I am unsure whether theatre is the tool for the job, I am sure that any tool must be well-honed to have any chance at being effective. Stanislavski was correct in saying “all masters of the arts need to write to try and systemize their art.” A coherent system is a whetstone, a way to sharpen the tool of our artform so that if theatre can produce meaningful change, it will do so strongly. I hope that my analysis of the metatheatrical and my small contribution to systematizing this approach will help to hone theatre broadly and the metatheatrical effect specifically into more effective tools.

With the metatheatrical effect’s ability to force an audience into a deeper awareness of the theatre they are watching, the questions that the piece poses, and the impact of those questions on their real life, and especially its ability to actively draw the audience into the work itself, I believe that metatheatrical is a strong framework for creating critical race plays. Especially with how easy it is for audience members to absolve themselves as “non-racist,” it is important

to bring the audience into the work, force their awareness, and even implicate them, as Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Young Jean Lee and have done with *An Octoroon* and *The Shipment*. The metatheatrical framework and the critical race theory lens go hand in hand.

There are a number of directions I can see this research going in next. The framework of metatheatricality can be further theorized, tested, and refined through the active production of such works. There is opportunity, and perhaps utility, of further systematizing and even quantifying the strength of the metatheatrical effect created by different modes. Additionally, there is a wealth of work to be done in applying critical race theory to the theatre. I have scratched the surface with this paper; there are more existing plays to be analyzed and critiqued with this lens, and many more to be written with it as a firm guide. Specific tenets such as narrative analysis may prove exceptionally fruitful for theatre artists to explore. I would encourage other theatre scholars to further explore critical race theory in much greater detail.

To conclude, a body of intentional critical race theatre is necessary. Race is the defining issue of our country, our history, and our current era. Practitioners of theatre must put forth a body of work that specifically addresses race through this critical lens, if we are to have any small part in bending the “arc of the moral universe.” As this paper has hopefully begun to demonstrate, the metatheatrical frame is exceptionally well suited to exploring, examining, and deconstructing the complicated issue of identity, race, and racism. The unique ability of metatheatricality to force an audience into a deeper awareness of the theatre that they are watching, the questions that the piece of theatre poses, and the impact of those questions on their real life is indispensable in creating works which treat race and racism as a central component of a play’s

world, while acknowledging and actively contending with the duality of race as both a social construct and valid, significant segment of identity. We should follow the example of Jacobs-Jenkins and Lee in *An Octoroon* and *The Shipment*; we should write and produce more of these works so that, looking back, the institution of theatre might be able to say that we had a small but significant role to play in bending the arc of the moral universe toward racial justice.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Abel, Lionel. *Meatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.

Billington, Michael. "An Octoroon review - blackface meets whiteface in quicksilver drama."

The Guardian 26 May 2017. Web.

Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New

York Univeristy Press, 2017. Print.

Dictionary.com. *Meta-*. n.d.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Project Gutenberg, 1903. Web.

Encyclopedia.com. *Overseer and Driver*. 30 November 2019. Web. 2019.

<<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/overseer-and-driver>>.

Escolme, Bridget. "Public Eye and Private Place: Intimacy and Metatheatre in Pericles and The

Tempest." *Shakespeare Bulletin* (2018): 111-130.

Esslin, Martin. *An Anatomy of Drama*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

Foster, Verna. "'Meta-melodrama: Branden Jacobs-Jenking appropriates Dion Boucicault's 'The Octoroon'." *Modern Drama* (2016): 285-343.

Gerould, Daniel. *Theatre/Theory/Theatre: The Major Critical Texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*. New York: Applause, 2000. Print.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York : Anchor Books, 1959.

Hatch, Ryan Anthony. "First as Minstrelsy, Then as Farce: On the Spectacle of Race in the Theater of Young Jean Lee." *The New Centennial Review* (2013): 89-114.

Hornby, Richard. *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*. Bucknell University Press, 1986.

Isherwood, Charles. "Off-Center Refractions of African-American World: Theatre Review ." *The New York Times* 13 Jan 2009: C1.

Jacobs-Jenkins, Branden. *An Octoroon*. Dramatists Play Service, 2015.

Jones, Chris. "The price of 'An Octoroon!'" *Chicago Tribune* 25 July 2017.

Lee, Young Jean. *The Shipment, LEAR*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2010. Print.

Leonard, Nathaniel. "All 'Metatheatre' is Not Created Equal: The Knight of the Burning Pestle, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and the Navigation of the Spectrum of Dramatic Representation." *Shakespeare Bulletin* (2018): 49-67.

"Majestic Repetory's 'An Octoroon' reflects on America's Racist past." *Las Vegas Weekly* 10 Nov 2017.

National Humanities Center. *Making of African American Identity: Volume 1, 1500-1865*.

March 2007. Web. 2019.

<<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/enslavement/text4/text4read.htm>>.

Newman, Harry. "Reading Metatheatre." *Shakespeare Bulletin* (2018): 89-110.

NPR. *This story is so 'Meta'* . 5 May 2012.

Parker, Theodore. *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker: Sermons, Prayers*. Trübner, 1879.

Pérez-Simón, Andrés. "The Concept of Metatheatre: A Functional Approach." *Trans-Revue de littérature generale et comparee* (2011).

Philosophy, Internet Encyclopedia of. *Emile Durkheim*. n.d.

Posner, Aaron. *Stupid Fucking Bird*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2016.

Puncher, Martin. "Introduction." Abel, Lionel. *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form* . New York: Holmes & Meier, 2003. 1-24.

Saal, Ilka. "On the Portability and Meanings of Blackness in Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment*." *De Gruyter* (2017): 98-111.

Schroeter, Sara. "'The way it works' doesn't: Theatre of the Oppressed as Critical Pedagogy and Counternarrative." *Canadian Journal of Education* (2013): 394-415.

Shakespeare, William. "Twelfth Night." *The Applause First Folio of Shakespeare in Modern Type*. Ed. Neil Freeman. Folio Scripts, 2001.

Shakespeare, William. "A Midsummer Night's Dream." *The Applause First Folio of Shakespeare in Modern Type*. Ed. Neil Freeman. Folio Scripts, 2001.

Shakespeare, William. "Julius Caesar." *The Applause First Folio of Shakespeare in Modern Type*. Ed. Neil Freeman. Folio Scripts, 2001.

Smith, Emma. "'An Octoroon' urges viewers to question race." *The Geore-Anne* 8 Nov 2017.

Stanislavski, Konstantin. *Building a Character*. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Art Books, 1949.

Stoll, Anita. "Teaching Golden Age Drama: Metatheatre as Organizing Principle." *Hispania* (1992): 1343-1347.

The Shipment. By Young Jean Lee. Perf. Mikéah Ernest Jennings, et al. The Kitchen, New York, NY. January 2009. Web. 2018. <<https://vimeo.com/165430199>>.

Thompson, Debby. "'Is Race a Trope?': Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity." *African American Review* 37.1 (2003): 127-138. Web.

Willis, Emma. "Metatheatre and Dramaturgies of Reception in Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We Are Proud to Present...*" *De Gruyter* (2016): 196-211.

Witt, Mary Ann Frese. "From Saint Genesius to Kean: Actors, Martyrs, and Metatheatre."

Comparative Drama (2009): 19-44.

Zapkin, Phillip. "Compromised Epistemologies: The Ethics of Historiographic Metatheatre in

Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* and *Arcadia*." *Modern Drama* (2016): 306-326.

Zimmer, Ben. "Dude, this headline is so meta." *The Boston Globe* 6 May 2012.