

# From Freakshow to Sitcom: Metatheatrical (Dis)Continuities in Contemporary African American Plays

Jade THOMAS

Vrije Universiteit Brussel / Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the past thirty years, experimental plays by Black playwrights<sup>2</sup> have been progressively thriving both on Broadway and Off-Broadway – their successes ranging from Anna Deavere Smith’s well-received verbatim theater and Suzan-Lori Parks’s first OBIE award in the 1990s to Jeremy O. Harris’s nomination for a record twelve Tony Awards for his *Slave Play* in 2020 and recent Pulitzer Prize wins by Jackie Sibblies Drury and Michael R. Jackson. Although African American playwrights<sup>3</sup> are well-received on the American stage, the social reality that Black people daily face in the U.S. is less embracing. Debates on police violence and systemic racism sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement since 2013 confirm that normative ways of being discriminated based on racial heritage still mark the lives of African Americans. It is therefore no surprise that

---

<sup>1</sup> The research conducted for the present article is funded by the FWO research grant FWOTM1084 (“Representing Blackness”: Metatheater and Genre Remediation in 21st-Century African American Plays).

<sup>2</sup> Although this article follows MLA style, MLA does not yet capitalize the adjective “Black” when designating people and cultures of African descent rather than skin color alone. I do capitalize the adjective “Black” as well as the derived noun “Blackness,” referring to the shared cultural identity of Black people (see Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black”). However, quoted passages that do not apply this capitalization are inserted in this article without changing the spelling of the original text.

<sup>3</sup> MLA style does not hyphen names if each separate part of the name of an ethnic or national group is an independent term, even if the name is used as a noun or adjective (“Are African American and Native American hyphenated?”). In this case, I follow MLA Style as the use of the non-hyphenated spelling variant treats both cultural terms as equal parts of one’s identity.

the Black playwrights mentioned above explicitly address stereotypical ways of representing Blackness on stage and receive increasing critical attention for their engagement with what is generally referred to as “the white gaze.”<sup>4</sup> The present article explores how contemporary African American playwrights paint a complex picture of the persistent impact of the white gaze on the Black body by inserting metatheatrical devices in their playtexts. As the article will seek to demonstrate by comparing Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018) to Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* (1995), representations of Black bodies in African American experimental theater have changed in the last decade, and the different employment of metatheatrical devices plays a central role in this respect.<sup>5</sup>

Since twenty-three years separate the playtexts of *Venus* and *Fairview*, the critical reception of the ways in which performances of the playtexts reference cultural stereotypes varies. One year after its completion, *Venus* opened Off-Broadway at the Joseph Papp Public Theater to mixed reviews. Although Parks was praised for not displaying the main character, Sarah Baartman, as a helpless victim of her situation, director Richard Foreman was criticized for presenting the play’s themes of racial and sexual exploitation too obviously (Brantley, “Of an Erotic Freak Show and the Lesson Therein”). Several scholars also evaluate *Venus*’s playtext based on Foreman’s *mise en scene*. Jean Young, for instance, argues that Parks reifies imperial attitudes (700), but, according to Harvey Young, Jean Young mistakes Foreman’s production for *Venus*’s textual representation of its Black protagonist, thus prompting Young to contend that “*Venus* operates as one of the

---

<sup>4</sup> The white or imperial gaze is generally connected to colonial surveillance, which implies that the colonized subject’s identity is fixed in relation to the colonizer because the latter possesses the power to observe the former from an elevated viewpoint. In the system of colonial surveillance, the white gaze “defines the identity of the subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalterneity and powerlessness” (Ashcroft et al. 207).

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, not just Drury but other contemporary African American playwrights write in a metatheatrical mode. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ *An Octoroon* (2014), for example, adapts Dion Boucicault’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century eponymous melodrama by experimenting with both genre expectation and audience involvement (Foster, “Meta-Melodrama”).

exceptional cases in which the original production actually creates an obstacle to a clear interpretation of the play text” (“Touching History” 137). *Fairview*, in turn, was largely well-received upon its Off-Broadway premiere at Soho Repertory Theatre. Termed a “glorious, scary reminder of the unmatched power of live theater to rattle, roil and shake us wide awake” (Brantley, “Theater as Sabotage in the Dazzling *Fairview*”), the play was seen as another addition to a range of recent American plays that take up racial alienation and division (ibid.). Its British Young Vic premiere, on the other hand, although praised for the ensemble’s performances, caused critics to question the unchallenged dominance of white narratives on which Drury’s play is premised in view of recent theater hits that rewrite history from a Black point of view such as *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda (Billington, “A daring challenge to the white gaze”). In an interview with *The Guardian*, Drury herself expressed the hope that the racial stereotypes *Fairview* thematizes will become obsolete soon so that her play will not know a long production history.

However, while the critical reception of *Venus* and *Fairview* clearly differs, the plays do connect in topic and style. Firstly, they both thematize the influence of the white gaze on the conceptualization of Blackness by inscribing the audience as a key constituent of the performative action into their playtexts. Secondly, the playwrights both insert metatheatrical strategies such as mimicry, the play within the play and direct audience address in their playtexts to innovatively represent Blackness on stage. Thirdly, the article also explores the connections between the plays’ appropriations of historical and contemporary performance genres in portraying Blackness. *Venus* draws on the format of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century freak show,<sup>6</sup> whereas *Fairview* frames the theatrical action

---

<sup>6</sup> The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines the freak show as an “exhibition of exotic or deformed animals as well as humans considered to be in some way abnormal or outside broadly accepted norms”, and as a distinct American phenomenon of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century (Chemers). The subsequent analysis distinctly views the re-enactment of Sarah Baartman’s historical display in *Venus* as a freak show spectacle rather than a ‘human zoo’. Whereas human zoos were specifically devoted to exhibiting the ‘primitive’ manners of colonized people, Baartman’s Black body and enlarged buttocks are displayed parallel to other, non-Black people in *Venus*’s freak show format.

as a modern-day sitcom narrative. Although some contributions have already noted the insertion of popular genres separately for each of the two plays under scrutiny (Kornweibel, “A Complex Resurrection”; Breaux, “Seeking a Fairer View”), no study to date has compared the plays in this respect and explored the ways in which both use popular media and performance genres for framing Black bodies through a normative white lens.

Methodologically, the analysis of metatheater in both playtexts draws on Joanne Tompkins’ theory of metatheater in postcolonial drama (1995). Tompkins argues that, in a postcolonial context, metatheatrical strategies do not only disrupt the theatrical illusion but also function as a “strategy of resistance” that deliberately dislocates colonial power (42). She distinguishes three types of postcolonial metatheater that consciously renegotiate past and present: counter-discursive metatheater, allegorical metatheater, and mimicking metatheater. Borrowing from Helen Tiffin’s discussion of counter-discursive rewriting in the postcolonial novel (42), Tompkins calls metatheater that rewrites classical texts to challenge colonial representation and discourse “counter-discursive” (42-43). Whereas recipients can only perceive a play’s counter-discursive dimension when they recognize the source text, other metatheatrical strategies are rather “allegorical” and deal with rewriting history and ways of seeing (44). In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Bill Ashcroft et al. contend that Euro-centric historiography is sustained by allegorical representations such as paintings or colonial statues that celebrate imperial dominance (7). Appropriating allegory as a postcolonial strategy enables writers to contest the Euro-centric view of history and progress and hence becomes a valuable form for postcolonial writers to exert forms of counter-discourse (7-8). Theater can be said to be a particular effective medium to incorporate postcolonial allegory because of its spectatorial dimension. Especially the play within the play device, which refers to an inner play within the larger action, can create a double vision

that derives from a split gaze because the spectator simultaneously watches the actors as they are watching the action on stage. A play within a play hence functions as a postcolonial allegory, revising representations of cultural others in dominant imperial historiography (Tompkins 45). Likewise, direct audience address can refer allegorically to colonial ways of perceiving others because of its acknowledgment of a secondary, fictional level. Mimicking metatheater similarly refers to the double vision postcolonial subversion creates because of mimicry's "desire to imitate *and* to parody" (47, original emphasis). By comedically overperforming racist stereotypes, for example, colonial discourse is ironized (47-48). Although the application of postcolonial theories on African American artists is often contested because of the U.S.'s status as a global neo-imperialist nation (Gilbert and Tompkins 7), this case study analyzes Parks's explicit thematization of the white gaze and considers in how far Drury similarly draws on metatheatrical strategies of postcolonial resistance based on Tompkins' three types of postcolonial metatheater.

In addition, the analysis of how *Venus* and *Fairview* incorporate features of popular (media) genres such as freak show, sitcom, melodrama, and minstrelsy will draw on Irina O. Rajewsky's systematization of inter- and transmedial references. Rajewsky defines intermedial references as a narrower subcategory of intermediality, which in the broader sense denotes those configurations that transgress the borders of different media as opposed to transmedial phenomena – e.g., a motif or aesthetic – that appear across media (46). In the specific case of intermedial references, only one medium is physically present but evokes the structures of another medium through its own medium-specific means (52-53). As the analysis will show, the two playtexts evoke the televisual genres of melodrama and sitcom.

For now, the article hypothesizes that both Parks and Drury employ postcolonial metatheatrical strategies but with a different dramaturgical effect, firstly, to implicate audiences in

the dynamics of the white gaze and, secondly, to point at the persistent influence of popular (media) genres in framing Black bodies through intermedial references. By comparing these playtexts with regard to their uses of metatheater and intermediality, this article raises the following question: how do self-reflexive and intermedial strategies comment on the ethics of spectating?

### ***Venus*: Postcolonial Rewriting as Effective Resistance?**

Parks's *Venus* retells the life history of Sarah Baartman, a Khoisan woman who was displayed as the 'Hottentot Venus' in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century London and Paris in freak shows and pseudo-educational ethnographic shows because of European fascination with her steatopygia, an enlargement of the buttocks and thighs. After her death in 1815, Baartman's body was dissected by the French naturalist Georges Cuvier, and her remains were exhibited until 1982 at the Parisian Musée de l'Homme (Strother 1). In 31 scenes, *Venus* theatricalizes her life story, starting with her relocation from South Africa to The Mother-Showman's London Circus of 9 Human Wonders, followed by her trial on account of indecent behavior, her pseudo-scientific display in Parisian anatomical theaters by the Baron-Docteur (a character based on the historical Georges Cuvier), and ends with her untimely death. The playtext's opening image recalls Baartman's display as a human curiosity: a Black woman rotates counterclockwise while the other characters introduce themselves to the spectators (*Venus* 1-2). Yet when they finally arrive at the 'Venus Hottentot', they inform the audience that "[...] the Venus Hottentot iz dead. There wont b inny show tonite" (*Venus* 3). The playtext subsequently invites the audience to witness a theatricalized account of the events leading up to the Venus's death: "THE VENUS HOTTENTOT [...] AND ONLY ONE STEP UHWAY FROM YOU RIGHT NOW / COME SEE THE HOT MISS HOTTENTOT / STEP IN STEP IN" (*Venus* 7). By addressing the spectators immediately from the start, the

playtext superimposes the historical audience of Baartman's display with the present audience, casting the latter in the role of passive voyeurs of her racialized Black body.

As the play's opening address refers directly to a secondary fictional level, where Baartman's historical display is reperformed, *Venus* can be characterized as "allegorical metatheater", in the sense that Parks revisions historical, colonial ethics of spectating by doubling Baartman's exhibition with the act of watching her display (cf. Tompkins 45). The opening scene's use of direct audience address, and its freak show setting reminds the audience of the illusory quality of the theater and awkwardly juxtaposes racist colonial history with the pleasurable atmosphere of an entertaining theater evening. By directly addressing the spectators, *Venus* doubles the gaze of the audience and refracts their own spectating through the fictional freak show visitors onstage. The play's freak show format enhances the theatricality of Baartman's exhibition and allegorically alludes to the act of revisioning colonial history, and thus, contrary to her historical objectification, the play troubles the white gaze in the very act of staging.

*Venus*'s use of mimicry has already been examined by multiple scholars (cf. Saal, "The Politics of Mimicry"; Kornweibel, "A Complex Resurrection") who contend that by consciously imitating and parodying colonial discourse, the character of Baartman reclaims pride over her surveilled body while the performance as a whole mirrors both the historical and the contemporary theater audience's voyeurism (Saal 61-62). Parks's Baartman is thus given more agency in her entrapped position as freak show 'wonder' than the historical figure had. A notable example thereof is Baartman's self-assured answer to the court's inquiry regarding whether she has ever been indecent: "To hide your shame is evil. I show mine. Would you like to see?" (*Venus* 76). The court members – previously playing the freak show's onstage spectators – are both horrified and fascinated by her open invitation to observe her Black body. Several historical accounts, however,

indicate that Baartman complied unwillingly with her exhibition, often appearing sad, suppressed, or sullen (Strother 32). By making the fictional Baartman experience pleasure in overperforming a stereotyped version of her body, agency in *Venus* is foremostly geared at implicating the audience in highly racialized ways of looking at Black female bodies.

Metatheatrical strategies further pervade the playtext as *Venus* is regularly interrupted by the performance of the play within the play *For the Love of the Venus*, which is loosely based on the 1814 Parisian Vaudeville play *The Hottentot Venus* by Théaulon de Lambert (Strother 30) and amounts to a racist warning against the dangers of miscegenation. Adolphe, naïve and intrigued by stories of so-called ‘femmes sauvages’ wants to marry a Black woman. His cousin, Amélie, tries to change his mind by dressing up as ‘The Hottentot Venus’, but to no avail. It is only when a chevalier shows Adolphe a ‘horrendous’ picture of the true Venus that he decides to change his marriage plans (30-31). Lambert’s source text thus spells out a racist attitude of sexualizing Black bodies which holds as long as the fetishization does not interfere with white matrimony. In Parks’s playtext, a character named the Bride-to-Be is anxious that her fiancée, The Young Man, will not marry her because he is fascinated by the performances of the Hottentot Venus in town. Lambert’s Amélie corresponds to Parks’s Bride-to-Be who aims to trick The Young Man in believing that she is the Venus (*Venus* 122). Eventually, the Young Man buries his fixation after his white bride has shrugged off her Venus disguise to ‘reveal her core’ (*Venus* 154). *Venus* hence bears features of counter-discursive metatheater because *For the Love of the Venus* rewrites an existent racist text to dislocate colonial power. However, whereas spectators likely recognize that characters’ relationships in the inner play mirror those of the main plot,<sup>7</sup> it is highly questionable that *Venus*’s audience is able to identify *For the Love of the Venus* as a rewrite since Parks’s playtext does not

---

<sup>7</sup> The Young Man’s sudden disinterest in the ‘Venus Hottentot’, for instance, uncannily echoes the Baron Docteur’s accusation of Baartman as indecent to hide that he may have infected her with gonorrhoea (*Venus* 143).

explicitly refer to Lambert's source text. Moreover, it is not so much the content of Parks's rewrite that refutes the racist message of Lambert's original source text, as its warning against miscegenation remains intact, but its formal embeddedness as a play within a play, allegorically creating a double vision on historical, colonial ways of framing Black people. Consequently, the counter-discursive dimension of *Venus's* play within the play as a strategy of resistance is potentially limited.

According to Tompkins, counter-discursive texts from the 1990s onwards increasingly draw on popular rather than canonical source texts (44). Parks's decision to adapt a popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century play and frame the main action partly through a freak show spectacle attests to this development. Moreover, the playscript stipulates that *For the Love of the Venus* should be played on stage while the Baron Docteur watches the play and is concurrently observed by the 'Venus':

A play on a stage. The Baron Docteur is the only  
person in the audience. Perhaps he sits in a chair.

It's almost as if he's watching TV.

The Venus stands off to the side. She watches the Baron Docteur. (*Venus* 25)

By framing the Baron Docteur's spectating in relation to the TV medium, the play within the play constitutes an intermedial reference which serves to uncover the power popular media exert on framing (discourses on) Black bodies.

The increasing appropriation of popular forms in postcolonial (meta-)drama is also evidenced by Parks's play within the play itself, for *For the Love of the Venus* bears narrative features of the popular melodrama genre. Melodrama is foremostly a "mode of cultural production" (Poole and Saal 2), emerging almost instantaneously with the foundation of the U.S.

Having had a lasting appeal in Hollywood, the genre still “contribut[es] to the formation and reconfiguration of American identity(ies)” up until today (ibid.). In its most traditional form, a melodrama scrutinizes the surface of daily middle-class life and centers on the resistance of virtue and innocence through excessive pathos and affect (ibid.). In *For the Love of the Venus*, Black femininity is depicted as a threat to ‘morally just’ white matrimony as The Young Man’s mother metaphorically compares her daughter-in-law to the sun as opposed to Venus’s dark, sinful nature:

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. A Hottentot!

THE MOTHER. Blow yr nose.

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. *Hottentot Venus!*

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. Wipe yr eyes.

My Sons gone wild

but I have a plan.

Listen up!

(Rest)

His head has turned from yr bright sun.

He roams in thuh dark.

Let me speak plain:

He dudhnt love you inny more.

THE BRIDE-TO-BE. Aaah me! (*Venus* 121)

Apart from stressing the Bride-to-Be's virtue, the latter's pathetic reaction to her fiancée's infidelity recalls melodrama's excessive acting style. Parks hence interrogates the relationship between popular melodrama's ideology of white matrimony and mass diffusions of colonial attitudes towards race, thus expanding the traditional definition of counter-discursive metatheater to conscious appropriations of popular genres.

Another formal strategy that highlights the counter-discursive quality of Parks's play is that *For the Love of the Venus* is preceded by an introductory scene, in which the Negro Resurrectionist – functioning as a sort of narrator – provides the spectators with contextual information in a so-called 'footnote' to the play, or a self-announced dramatic aside:

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST. Footnote #1:

*(Rest)*

Historical Extract. Category: Theatrical.

*(Rest)*

The year was 1810. On one end of town, in somewhat shabby circumstances, a young woman, native of the dark continent, bares her bottoms. At the same time but in a very different place, on the other end of town in fact, we witness a very different performance.

Scene 29:

Presenting: "For the Love of the Venus."

A Drama in 3 Acts. Act I, Scene 3: (*Venus* 24)

That the performance of *For the Love of the Venus* is called a 'footnote' further attests to *Venus*'s intermedial dimension. Here and elsewhere, the playtext features different kinds of 'footnotes' that are explicitly framed as historical extracts of different written media types (including advertisements, musical theater, anatomy reports, etc.) that racialize Baartman in various ways. In this case, the intermedial reference helps the audience to identify *Venus*'s counter-discursive strategies, as the 'footnotes' explicitly imitate the structural features of the media that have

historically framed Baartman in a stereotypical way. Since *For the Love of the Venus*'s intermedial reference is created by means of the metatheatrical play within the play, postcolonial allegory expands its reflection on the ethics of spectating to popular genres.

*Venus*'s postcolonial metatheatrical strategies are foremostly used to implicate the audience in highly racialized ways of looking at Black bodies. The agency that the fictional Baartman acquires through mimicry contributes to the dramaturgical juxtaposition of the historical and contemporary audience. However, apart from *Venus*'s occasional resistance against her objectification, it remains questionable in how far parody and counter-discursive writing move Baartman's portrayal beyond the colonial binary of the colonizer/colonized, as The Negro Resurrectionist closes the play with the same death announcement he utters in the play's opening scene, while the fictional Baartman asks the audience to visit her corpse in the museum (*Venus* 160-162).

### ***Fairview*: Staging the Limitations of Postcolonial Metatheater**

*Fairview* also thematizes the persistence of the white gaze but rather focuses on contemporary (popular) attitudes towards Blackness. Sustaining a realist framework,<sup>8</sup> *Fairview* is set in a suburban living room (*Fairview* 7) and unfolds as a trivial, contemporary sitcomsque narrative. The Black Frasier family is preparing Grandma's birthday party, but everything seems to go wrong: dad Dayton brought the wrong silverware, Uncle Tyrone, a lawyer, will probably not arrive on time, daughter Keisha's uninvited friend Erika will be dropping by, and mom Beverly faints on realizing her cake is burnt. Act two, however, takes an unexpected turn as the Frasier family

---

<sup>8</sup> *Venus* breaks with conventions of realist performance from the very beginning, starting with an Overture during which the characters introduce themselves by explicitly acknowledging the presence of the audience (*Venus* 1-2).

reperforms the actions of act one in pantomime whilst rapid, spontaneous voices – named Jimbo, Suze, Mack, and Bets – can be heard (*Fairview* 32).<sup>9</sup> At first, the voices do not seem to have a clear-cut connection to what is happening on stage, but as soon as they debate the hypothetical question ‘what race would you choose, if you had the choice?’, it is clear that they (often awkwardly) relate to the onstage action (*ibid.*). Several dialogical exchanges between the voices imply that they belong to white characters, for instance, when Mack doubts whether a Slav is really a ‘different’ category of race (*Fairview* 48). Similarly, Jimbo jokingly proposes to kidnap Suze and dye her skin black in order to turn her into an African American (*Fairview* 50). When discussing what a Black woman should be like, it turns out that Jimbo, Suze, Mack, and Bets – just as the audience – are watching the Frasier family. Hence, the first act was not a sitcom-like family drama but a play within a play all along, which the white voices are commenting on:

MACK. [...] Like black women are ... fierce.

(I think there could be something really... empowering,

being a black woman.)

Like look at the way they [Beverly and Jasmine] talk to each other.

(Beat, they watch.)

There’s just so much ... attitude.

(Beat, they watch.)

---

<sup>9</sup> During the entire second act, these characters are only present through their voices. The playtext does not state that they appear onstage, whereas the entrances of the Frasier family are explicitly marked (e.g., *Fairview* 32; 39; 41).

I just love that. Do you see what I mean?

(Beat, they watch.) (*Fairview* 56)

As the above fragment illustrates, the invisible white characters are watching the sitcomsque action and, as Mack's comments demonstrate when he associates Beverly and Jasmine with loud, entertaining and 'fabulous' individuals, their comments include stereotypical views of Black femininity. The voices' stereotypical – and racist – viewpoints become even more apparent when they equate dancing Black people with sexuality:

MACK. And then you'll realize dancing helps you

to keep on getting laid.

JIMBO. And if you like doing black things you might be-

MACK. That's not what I'm talking about ok,

I am saying that dancing-

BETS. That dancing is sensual and fun- (*Fairview* 61)

The above conversation follows after the white characters watch Keisha (re)perform a dancing ritual together with aunt Jasmine to which Bets, Mack, and Jimbo awkwardly cry out: "Yeess (Yaaas) (Yeeeah), black people love [...] to siiiiiing and dance around!" (*Fairview* 58). Their comments on a contemporary, middle-class Black family reiterate the racist projections cast on Baartman's 'entertaining' body in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century freak show that Parks's play mimicks.

The play-within-a-play structure in act two further reinforces the intermedial reference that already characterized the performance of the Frasier family in act one because the white voices –

just like the insertion of canned laughter in TV sitcoms – can only be heard but not seen. The fact that the white voices remain unseen when commenting on the action onstage creates a voyeuristic effect also typical of other televisual genres such as reality TV. Consequently, *Fairview*, just as the melodramatic *For the Love of the Venus*, mirrors and exposes the ethics of spectating and framing (racial) others. The audience first watches the Frasier's' celebration routines in act one, followed by the white voices' racist comments on their day-to-day life in the second act, and is thus made to feel guilty about having laughed at the situational comedy in the first act. However, while, in *Venus*, the prime observer of the play within the play – the Baron Docteur – is visible to the spectators, *Fairview*'s second act does not visualize the white voices, suggesting that “whiteness doesn't need to be seen for its effects to be felt” (Frisina 202).

Moreover, even though, unlike *Venus*, Drury's playtext does not rework colonial history, it can also be categorized as counter-discursive metatheater in Tompkins' sense because it does not just appropriate the popular genre of the sitcom but also that of minstrelsy. Sitcom and minstrelsy are typically associated with different media and historical periods, i.e., 20<sup>th</sup>-century television (for sitcom) and 19<sup>th</sup>-century theater (for minstrelsy). Blackface minstrelsy was a widely popular racist performance genre through which Black culture was appropriated by white Americans to depict slavery as amusing and natural (Lott 23). Especially early minstrel shows (1843-1860s) reveal an obsession with the Black body, which is clear from the genre's primary emphasis on dancing, singing and other burlesque actions that comedically imitated Black life rather than investing in serious narrative (Lott 27). According to Eric Lott, minstrelsy performance embodied a so-called “racial unconscious”, or an ambiguous mixture of white desires, fantasy, and fear of the Black body (36). Drury's play mainly refers to minstrelsy via sudden outbursts of (comedic) dancing that intersperse its recognizable, simple, and amusing plot. Twice Jimbo even

compares the onstage action to a cakewalk (*Fairview* 63; 67), a dance originally performed by enslaved people to mock the manners of Southern whites that was culturally appropriated in racist blackface performances to falsely portray plantation life as enjoyable (Thompson 109). On Jimbo's second reference to the cakewalk, all Black characters burst into a random dance, which continues while they set the table (*Fairview* 77-78). In this scene, the playtext replicates the burlesque features of minstrelsy by highlighting the absurdity of setting the table whilst dancing without any apparent reason, and this absurdity is further underscored by the exaggerated abundance of (fake) food on the dining table (*ibid.*). In combining the traditional, comedic tone of the sitcom narrative of act one with the racialized minstrel performance of act two, Drury confronts spectators with, and implicates them in, the awkward 'pleasurability' of racist representations in these popular genres. At the same time, by infusing the Frasier family's contemporary sitcomesque narrative with elements of minstrelsy, *Fairview's* counter-discursive metatheater points at the continuation of racist discourses in earlier and more recent entertainment genres.

*Fairview's* intermedial references to sitcom and minstrelsy also draw attention to the influence of the media these genres operate in and, similarly to *Venus*, the play raises awareness about the constructedness of the colonial discourses they create. Jimbo's long tirade at the end of act two precisely asserts the influence of the white gaze on race representations in mass medial contexts and further affirms the power of media in creating racial stereotypes:

JIMBO. [...] every other fucking person, or race, or whatever the fuck,  
  
every other thing, they're all rooting against me,  
  
all of them are rooting against me,  
  
and I fucking Know [*sic*] that shit,

I know that

and I love it

I fucking love it

because you know what?

All those motherfuckers are watching my fucking movie.

And rooting for whatever the fuck they want

in my fucking movie.

Like, you want to make me the villain?

That's fine because you're in my fucking movie

motherfucker. (*Fairview* 72)

In his vicious monologue, Jimbo compares himself to the villain in a movie that is structured by the white gaze and does not allow the incorporation of other perspectives. He indicates that he, as a white man, is aware of the privileged position he has in society, and of the harmful influence his position has on the lives of others who are less privileged. Hence his self-claimed status as the 'villain' in the movie which he, as a white man, directs and controls. Jimbo's speech acquires a collective dimension as he uses the deictic expressions 'I' and 'you' in a way that is not directed at an individual but rather addresses the collective experience of white dominance and Black subjugation. Jimbo's speech also acknowledges the fact that the white gaze structures and determines aspects of Black experience because, as he sees it, even Black resistance requires a foil and would be "fucking lost" without it (*Fairview* 73). Jimbo's monologue can be read counter-

discursively because *Fairview*, like *Venus*, explicitly thematizes the influence popular genres have on framing Black bodies.

In act three, Jimbo, Suze, Mack, and Bets, who we have – until then – only heard, join the onstage action and take on the roles of the Black characters about whom the Frasier family has been talking earlier. Moreover, their apparent roleplay goes unnoticed by the actual Frasier family. Jimbo’s, Suze’s, Mack’s, and Bets’s performances are overacted embodiments of their previous stereotypical descriptions of the Black family members; Jimbo’s lawyer Tyrone is a rapper ‘straight outta Compton’ (*Fairview* 84), Mack’s Erika is a man in drag with ‘attitude’ (*Fairview* 86), and Suze’s sassy, jazzy Grandma (*Fairview* 90) obliterates Bets’s traditional ‘Mammy’ impersonation (*Fairview* 93). Hence, in act three, the white characters’ mimicry renders the stereotypical views of Blackness that they previously voiced hypervisible (Frisina 202), intricately linking their comedic overperforming to their earlier racist jokes and cultural appropriation.

Drury’s playtext thus questions mimicking metatheater as an effective device for subverting colonial discourses on the Black body. The play’s critical thrust is also highlighted by daughter Keisha’s intervention in the dramatic action at the end of act three. Keisha, the only member of the Frasier family reacting against the invasion of her dramatic space, feels “just a little out of it” when white Grandmother Suze joins the table (*Fairview* 81) and is visibly shocked when the latter – in a metatheatrical violation of dramatic conventions – can hear the private thoughts she utters in an aside (*Fairview* 82), prompting Keisha to explicitly address the impact that Suze’s white gaze (and, as it is implied, that of the audience) has on her:

KEISHA. I don’t need to sit down.

I need to ask you to leave.

So that I can have some space to think.

I can't think

In the face of you telling me who you think I am

With your loud self and your loud eyes

and your loud guilt–

I can't hear myself think.

[...]

I want to know what that space is.

What that space would be like.

For me.

Without.

Without you–

What should I call you. (*Fairview* 100)

Eventually, Keisha “*steps through the fourth wall*” (*Fairview* 102) and hesitantly invites self-identified white audience members to climb on stage and trade places with her family so that a space can be created where the actions of Black people are not determined by the white gaze (ibid.). The act of physically switching place can be read allegorically as a re-visioning of historically determined ethics of spectating. Nevertheless, the playtext does not suggest that simply reversing the roles of the spectator and the spectated would change stereotypical ways of perceiving

Blackness altogether, since Keisha's final monologue explicitly acknowledges that the white gaze is not easily erased and that she still feels she has to direct her words at "them", i.e., white people, again and again, having no verbal space left "to talk to You", i.e., Black people (*Fairview* 103). Similar to Jimbo's outburst, Keisha tends to move her speech beyond her own (Black) point of view by addressing a collective that includes her, as the playtext's capitalization of "You" and her later reference to "us" (104) indicates.

In the end, Keisha does not provide an authoritative definition of 'the' Black experience but concludes with a self-reflexive comment on the play's title while the stage has become crowded with white audience members: "[...] they found all of it, their view over all of it, the sum of all of it, to be fair" (*Fairview* 106). Keisha's words can be read as exemplifying what Kyle C. Frisina has called *Fairview's* exertion of a "right to opacity" (212). That is, an instruction for (white) spectators not to attempt to imagine any absolute truths of the Black experience (ibid.). Shane Breaux similarly argues that *Fairview's* final theatrical image shows the white spectators that the lights that are now blaring on them do not assist Black people in realizing their actual selves, but only help (white) people see representations of Blackness (85). Building on Frisina's and Breaux's analyses, Keisha's highly cryptic final words can be read as a reference to *Fairview's* failure as a play to resist colonial framings of Black people by using postcolonial metatheatrical devices. Especially the white actors' use of mimicry to perform stereotyped versions of the Black Frasier and Keisha's subsequent interruption of the action attests to this observation. The effectiveness of allegorically switching views or counter-discursively juxtaposing a racist comedic genre with sitcom is also questioned as it remains unclear how exactly these postcolonial strategies might accurately portray the Frasier. What, in the end, is a 'fair view' on Blackness and is there actually an appropriate means of representing Black experiences without first countering white, colonial

frameworks? While Parks's *Venus* uses postcolonial metatheater as a means to resist the colonial gaze, Drury's *Fairview* even goes a step further and questions the ineffectiveness of postcolonial devices to rewrite and replay white framings of the Black body in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to examine how the usage of metatheatrical devices by contemporary experimental African American playwrights has changed the representation of Black bodies on stage by conducting a playtext analysis of Suzan-Lori Parks's 1996 *Venus* and Jackie Sibblies Drury's 2018 *Fairview*. The analysis both combined and applied two methodological approaches. Firstly, Tompkins' theories about metatheater in postcolonial drama (1995) were used to determine in how far counter-discursive, allegorical, and mimicking types of metatheater undermine the power of the white gaze on the framing of the Black body in both plays. Secondly, some of the plays' metatheatrical devices, e.g., the play within the play, were studied from an intermedial viewpoint to scrutinize the evocation of popular (media) genres such as freak show, sitcom, melodrama, and minstrelsy in the two plays.

The analysis confirmed the initial hypothesis that both plays employ postcolonial metatheatrical strategies, albeit with a different dramaturgical effect regarding their ability to adequately resist the white, colonial gaze. Both *Venus* and *Fairview* confirm Tompkins' thesis that since the 1990s counter-discursive strategies increasingly draw on popular texts rather than canonical ones to rewrite colonial discourse. As the plays also appropriate popular performance genres, it may be more accurate to expand the label 'counter-discourse' from written texts to other non-written artefacts and even different (media) genres. This observation is supported by both plays' intermedial references to the framing structures of popular media in an attempt to

allegorically subvert dominant colonial historiography and discourse by means of the spectatorial dimension of theater. Whereas postcolonial metatheatrical strategies in *Venus* mainly resist the white gaze by implicating the audience in the re-enactment of Baartman's historical display, *Fairview* more explicitly questions how far the empowering effect of postcolonial self-reflexive strategies actually reaches. Not only does the title of Drury's playtext refer to this critique, but especially Keisha's intervention to stop the mimicking performances and her plea to switch 'view' indicate the limitations of rewriting colonial history from the colonizer/colonized or, in the American context, the master/slave binary. Since *Fairview* premiered after the foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement and the cross-national and cross-racial resonance it had in supporting Black lives, Drury's interrogation of the postcolonial binary suggests a link between contemporary African American metatheater and American societal developments. Since both *Venus* and *Fairview* are not isolated cases of metatheatrical writing in their playwrights' oeuvres,<sup>10</sup> future research could scrutinize how the findings of this article are representative for Parks's and Drury's oeuvres and, additionally, how they relate to metatheatrical experiments by other up-and-coming African American playwrights such as Jeremy O. Harris or Aleshea Harris to determine if, and in what way, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Black plays are updating earlier forms of representing Blackness onstage.

---

<sup>10</sup> Parks's *The America Play* (1994) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) foreground roleplay and spectacle by both featuring whiteface Abraham Lincoln impersonators, while Drury's *We Are Proud to Present* (2012) links German colonialism to the American context by staging a rehearsal of a play that depicts the historical Herero and Nama genocide.

## Works Cited

- “Are names of groups like African American and Native American ever hyphenated in MLA style?” *MLA Style Center*, 5 June 2018, [style.mla.org/hyphens-names-of-ethnic-groups/](http://style.mla.org/hyphens-names-of-ethnic-groups/). Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 2007.
- Billington, Michael. “Fairview review – a daring challenge to the white gaze.” Review of *Fairview*, directed by Nadia Latif. *The Guardian*, 5 Dec. 2019, [www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/05/fairview-review-jackie-sibblies-drury-young-vicp](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/05/fairview-review-jackie-sibblies-drury-young-vicp). Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.
- Brantley, Ben. “Of an Erotic Freak Show and the Lesson Therein.” Review of *Venus*, directed by Richard Foreman. *New York Times*, 3 May 1996, [www.nytimes.com/1996/05/03/theater/theater-review-of-an-erotic-freak-show-and-the-lesson-therein.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/03/theater/theater-review-of-an-erotic-freak-show-and-the-lesson-therein.html). Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.
- . “Theater as Sabotage in the Dazzling ‘Fairview.’” Review of *Fairview*, directed by Sarah Benson. *New York Times*. 17 June 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/theater/review-theater-as-sabotage-in-the-dazzling-fairview.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/theater/review-theater-as-sabotage-in-the-dazzling-fairview.html). Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.
- Breaux, Shane. “Seeking a Fairer View: Smashing Theatrical Mirrors in Contemporary Black Drama.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Arts*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2020, pp. 75-87.
- Chemers, Michael M. “Freak show.” *Britannica*, [www.britannica.com/art/freak-show](http://www.britannica.com/art/freak-show). Accessed 7 Oct. 2021.
- Coleman, Nancy. “Why We’re Capitalizing Black.” *New York Times*, 5 July 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html). Accessed 8 Dec. 2021.
- Drury, Jackie Sibblies. *Fairview*. Theatre Communications Group, 2019.
- Drury, Jackie Sibblies, and Nadia Latif. “Fairview: the Pulitzer winner whose creator hopes it has a short shelf life.” Interview by Bridget Minamore. *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 2019, [www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/04/fairview-jackie-sibblies-drury-nadia-latif](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/04/fairview-jackie-sibblies-drury-nadia-latif). Accessed 16 Sept. 2021.
- Foster, Verna A. “Meta-Melodrama: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins Appropriates Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2016, pp. 285-305.
- Frisina, Kyle C. “Contemporary African-American Drama at Visuality’s Limits.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2020, pp. 197-220.

- Gilbert, Helen, and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. Routledge, 1996.
- Kornweibel, Karen Ruth. "A Complex Resurrection: Race, Spectacle, and Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2009, pp. 64-81.
- Lott, Eric. "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy." *Representations*, vol. 39, 1992, pp. 23-50.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Venus*. Theatre Communications Group, 1997.
- Poole, Ralph J., and Ilka Saal. "Passionate Politics: An Introduction." *Passionate Politics: The Cultural Work of American Melodrama from the Early Republic to the Present*, edited by Ralph J. Poole and Ilka Saal, Cambridge Scholars, 2008, pp. 1-26.
- Rajewsky, Irina O. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, vol. 6, 2005, pp. 43-64.
- Saal, Ilka. "The Politics of Mimicry: The Minor Theater of Suzan-Lori Parks." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 70, no. 2, 2005, pp. 57-71.
- Strother, Z. S. "Display of the Body Hottentot." *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, edited by Bernth Lindfors, Indiana UP, 1999, pp. 1-61.
- Thompson, Katrina Dyonne. *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*. U of Illinois P, 2014.
- Tompkins, Joanne. "'Spectacular Resistance': Metatheatre in Post-Colonial Drama." *Modern Drama*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1995, pp. 42-51.
- Young, Harvey. "Touching History: Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley and the Black Body." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2003, pp. 134-153.
- Young, Jean. "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *African American Review*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, pp. 699-708.