

“IT’S A COMMON STORY”: STAGING ANIMATEDNESS IN PLAYS BY AMIRI BARAKA AND JACKIE SIBBLIES DRURY

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Abstract: This article explores three plays, Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* (1964) and *The Slave* (1964), and Jackie Sibblies Drury, through the lens of animatedness, the process of controlling and manipulating an identity via its representation, introduced by Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings* (2005). While the term itself arises from contemporary affect theory, the processes that comprise it have played a crucial role in the assembly of African American theatre and the conceptualization of African American plays, from the narrativization of blackness, to minstrelsy, to plays that approach the American mainstream. What is more, even though playwrights and scholars have been aware of the processes of manipulative representation, these have been rarely addressed in performance. The three plays discussed here represent a break from this tendency. The primary concern of the article is therefore to consider the workings of animatedness, to retrospectively trace its relationship with the history of African American theatre, and explore how the respective playwrights – separated by decades but connected by this topic – reveal this otherwise unseen metatheatrical process, “reanimate” it, and make it an active part of the assembly as a measure of counteraction, since as Ngai argues, animatedness is sustained by passivity “and the allegorical significance it transmits to the ugly feelings that both originate from and reflect back upon it.”

Keywords: African American theatre, animatedness, affect theory, narrativization, blackness.

In her discussion of performative assembly, Judith Butler describes its basic element, “the people,” not as a specific population, but rather a group “constituted by the lines of demarcation that we implicitly and explicitly establish.”¹ As such

¹ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) 3.

"there is no possibility of 'the people' without a discursive border drawn somewhere, either traced along the existing line of nation-states, racial or linguistic communities, or political affiliations."² In the assembly of theatre, these implicit demarcations are not just part of the constitution of the audience, but are also replicated and amplified by stage realities, shared constructs and expectations on the background of which a stage representation of "people" has to operate. In situations when a part of the assembly assumes higher privilege or has historically held power over the stage representation of other members of the assembly, the representation itself becomes subject to what Sianne Ngai calls "animatedness," a process by which the depiction of an identity is animated and controlled. Since before the Harlem Renaissance, African American theatre has wrestled with the complex politics of representation and agency. However, it was only in the 1960s that African American playwrights began to overtly deconstruct what Sianne Ngai calls "racialized animatedness,"³ and even then, it was a rare sight, which few have continued since.

Using Ngai's critical vocabulary, this article examines three plays: Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964) and *The Slave* (1964), and *Fairview* (2018) by Jackie Sibblies Drury. While separated by more than half a century, they are connected by their attempts at the re-animation of animatedness. They are also emblematic of a general shift in the discourse of African American theatre over the last fifty years: from revolutionary condemnation of assimilation politics that bury racialized narratives, to postmodern, metatheatrical, and self-reflexive plays like *Fairview*. To examine this connection, the article first introduces animatedness itself, followed by an exploration of the ways in which blackness has been controlled on stage, and how this control has affected black plays. Finally, the article examines the conceptual alignments of the three abovementioned works, specifically the ways in which they relate the control over the black body to whiteness, while also acknowledging the differences between the playwrights, mainly in their approach to the audience and its role in the continued existence of animatedness.

Animatedness and Authenticity

The term animatedness was coined by Sianne Ngai in her work *Ugly Feelings* (2005); it is an affective process which entails the control over representations of

² Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* 5.

³ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) 12. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

blackness by the majority. Specifically, Ngai relates animatedness to the “definitions of ‘animate’ and ‘animated’” ranging from “biological existence (‘endowed with life or the qualities of life: ALIVE’), to socially positive emotional qualities (‘lively,’ ‘full of vigor and spirit,’ ‘zest’), and finally to the historically specific mode of screen representation.” (94-95) She illustrates the endowment of life via representation using the image of stop motion films, where a lump of clay moves as if by itself, while being controlled and shaped by an unseen force: a hand that exists solely between the frames. Nevertheless, the unaware spectator walks away with the illusion of a freely moving autonomous entity. Ngai argues that the “seemingly neutral state of ‘being moved’ becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject, abetting his or her construction as unusually receptive to external control.” (91) To be “‘animated’ in American culture is to be racialized in some way” (95), Ngai concludes. Crucially, animation through racialization also implies total control over every physical part of the animated subject, their reduction to small moveable points, and a de facto synecdochizing of the body. When the complexity of existence is reduced and tied to specific symbols and features, they can be easily seized and controlled, like pieces of clay or the individual limbs of a marionette.

The emotionally animated aspect that feeds into the control is primarily associated with “the disturbingly enduring representation of the African American as an excessively ‘lively’ subject” (11). These can be seen in the typical “Uncle Tom” and other stock characters, like the sambo, or as Spike Lee dubs them, “the magical, mystical Negro.”⁴ These representations of blackness present the black individual as “a pliant body unusually susceptible to external control” (11). And theatre has played a direct role in the creation of these characters and their representations. On the one hand, as Ngai writes, animation arises “the moment the body is made into the object of a gaze; being animated thus entails ‘becoming a spectacle whose ‘aesthetic’ power increases with one’s increasing awkwardness and helplessness.” (99). On the other, the depiction of blackness in theatre has been thoroughly mutilated by the ultimate controlling act: minstrelsy.

Prior to early twentieth century, minstrelsy was the overwhelmingly dominating theatrical depiction of blackness and in parodying the black dialect and mannerisms of African Americans, minstrels added the animated, overly emotional hyperbolic emphasis, caricatured gestures, language, and characters, presenting them to the wide public as *the* depiction of blackness. Hence, not only

⁴ Susan Gonzalez, “Director Spike Lee Slams ‘Same Old’ Black Stereotypes in Today’s Films,” *Yale Bulletin & Calendar*, 2 March 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090121190429/http://www.yale.edu/opa/arc-ybc/v29.n21/story3.html>.

did minstrels control every facet of the black identity, but they also *became* the image of blackness and shaped it in the eyes of the spectator. Certainly, minstrel acts have consciously worked with existing narratives about the inferiority of blackness. But, as Michelle M. Wright writes in "What is Black Identity?," these narratives have in and of themselves created a state where "the signifier of physical blackness achieves greater dimensions than its signified, allowing the body that is categorized as black to erupt into a chain of signifiers that conflates human bodies with mythological topographies."⁵ The massively popular minstrel acts perpetuated this conflation and ensured that this representation of blackness would be carved into popular culture. Consequently, any black playwright who chose to enter the theatrical space in the early twentieth century had to cope with the distorted representation of blackness and found themselves in the uneasy position of weighing the approaches to tackling it: whether to bury "dead" images of racialization (such as those arising from minstrelsy), or to reanimate them in the service of creating new meanings. As Ngai mentions, "racial stereotypes and clichés, cultural images that are perversely both dead and alive, can be critically countered not just by making the images more 'dead' (say, by attempting to stop their circulation), but also, though in a more equivocal fashion, by reanimating them [...] to generate unanticipated social meanings and effects." (124-25) However, given the specific circumstances in the early days of African American theatre, the former approach – burial of images – prevailed.

During the Harlem Renaissance and in the years that followed, there was pressure on playwrights to minimize racialized narratives, since it was understood they would be responsible for re-creating the image of blackness in the eyes of the white audience. As James Hatch and Ted Shine remind us, "African American artists are in a rather precarious position since what they produce is often interpreted as representative of the entire race rather than as an individual's personal expression."⁶ Furthermore, authors are often expected to overcome a perceived alienating barrier between the black character and the white audience member. As Leslie Sanders writes in *The Development of Black Theatre in America: From Shadows to Selves*:

In a predominantly white society, the cultural ground is white, for it consists of thoughts, historic and artistic creations of white people. In the theatre then, the stage reality, the conscious and unconscious assumptions

⁵ Michelle M. Wright, "What is Black Identity?," *Cahiers Charles V* 40 (June 2006): 137.

⁶ James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans, Vol II. The Recent Period* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 66.

mutually accepted by the theatre and its audience, is white [...] Black artists thus employ an essentially alien – even alienating – medium.⁷

Hence, with minstrelsy still being in recent memory, black playwrights often made the conscious decision to present a version of blackness with which the white audience members could identify and which would avoid any connotations with the minstrel representations and narratives. The goal of this approach was “a kind of intellectual ‘passing’, as though the absence of the racial perspective allows a writer to become part of the mainstream.”⁸ However, this passing through burial of alienating images was also precarious, since it risked continuing, even furthering the process of animatedness.

To understand how, we need to explore one final aspect of the process: its unconscious internalization by the subject itself; a point when animatedness turns into malignant self-discipline and no longer requires the unseen force to control the subject. The subject itself follows the boundaries in order to be accepted. To exemplify this, Ngai uses a poem cycle by John Yau called “Genghis Khan: Private Eye,” where the speaker finds themselves with a lump of clay in their throat, speaking words and making promises that are not their own, but come out of this lump. “A foul lump started making promises in my voice,”⁹ the speaker says. The lump is, according to Ngai, the “genealogy of an American racial stereotype” (104). In the poem, “the story of the lump who turns Genghis Chan into a pledging individual might be read as an allegory of how the Asian-American becomes forced into the position of model minority – that is, the person ‘made’ uniform, accountable, and therefore safely ‘disattenable,’ at the cost of having his or her speech acts controlled by another.” (104) Not only does social discourse seize control of representation, but it also forces the individual to be compliant with representations that are not their own.

This is the animatedness that African American theatre has felt acutely throughout much of the twentieth century. The desire to pass into the mainstream, to bury old images, created what could be called the “assimilationist” style of writing. As black theatre slowly found its footing on stage and produced its first major successes, the mainstream-oriented play persisted and dominated. Certainly, there were those who felt that this style sacrificed blackness on the altar

⁷ Leslie Sanders, *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 2.

⁸ Sanders, *The Development of Black Theater in America* 26.

⁹ John Yau, “Genghis Chan: Private Eye,” *Radiant Silhouette: New and Selected Work, 1974-1988* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow, 1989), 189-95.

of whiteness and subjected it to further control by the gaze of the white audience, particularly those that subscribed to the theories of Alain Locke.¹⁰ Yet, despite these dissenting schools of black playwrights, none of them have attempted to stage animatedness and reveal it – to reanimate it, as Ngai would say – since they were mostly concerned with re-representing blackness through narratives that would be truly authentic rather than authentic by the standards of the majority. However, with the rising political activism of the 1960s, animatedness finally moved from burial to reanimation and stepped onto the stage for the first time.

Baraka: Animating Clay

When the Black Arts Movement gradually arose in the mid-1960s, one of its founders and most prominent figures, Amiri Baraka, was strongly opposed to the assimilationist style. He expressed his disgust in "Philistinism of the Negro Writer":

In most cases the Negro writers who usually wanted to pursue what they classify as 'high art' were necessarily middle-class Negroes, and the art that these middle-class Negroes made tended to be an art that was, at best, an imitation of what can only be described as white middle-class literature.¹¹

And while much of the output of Black Arts was simply a redoubled version of the effort seen in the early dissenting schools, Baraka himself was motivated by the realization of how the black identity was controlled. It was a personal revelation for him, having seen it at Howard University:

Howard University shocked me into realizing how desperately sick the Negro could be, how he could be led into self-destruction, and how he would not realize that it was the society that had forced him into a great

¹⁰ Locke's arguments for avoiding the mainstream emerge from his famous collections, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) and particularly *Plays of Negro Life: A Sourcebook of Native American Drama* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), where he argues for the abandonment of "the blight of propaganda and the taint of sentimentality" (xvi), which he perceived as problematic in the mainstream-oriented plays. He saw the future of black drama in realistic depictions of the black experience where "the puppets of protest and propaganda" (xvi) are replaced with "flesh and blood characters and situations" (xvi). Locke's dissenting opinions are also covered by his contemporary, Montgomery Gregory, in "Chronology of Negro Theatre," which is itself part of *Plays of Negro Life*.

¹¹ Herbert Hill, ed., *Anger, and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 54.

sickness. [...] These are all examples of how American society convinces the Negro that he is inferior, and then he starts conducting his life that way.¹²

He also added: "The Howard thing let me understand the Negro sickness. They teach you to pretend to be white."¹³

This sickness set Baraka on a path. Due to it, he saw blackness and whiteness entrenched in opposition, and assimilation represented a form of desertion. Baraka's work is therefore underlined by a tone so emblematic of his Revolutionary Theatre concept, which "must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must Accuse and Attack because it is the theatre of Victims."¹⁴ This approach has also garnered criticism over the years for strict socio-political binarism¹⁵ and for promoting whiteness and blackness as idealized, exclusionary, and forever warring categories. However, as Nita N. Kumar has argued in "The Logic of Retribution: Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*," Baraka was a proponent of *the* ideal identity as a purely theoretical state, with reality being in a state of flux, and thus changeable: "the categories remain tenuously defined and shifting. Quite often the terms beg the question. 'The Black Man must aspire to Blackness,' says Baraka [...] If blackness is both the natural and the ideal state, then the term *black* evidently is not definitive, and needs to be defined."¹⁶ Hence, while Baraka saw the categories of blackness and whiteness as opposing, he also saw them as malleable and influencing each other.

It is precisely this combination of personal experience and views on identity that made Baraka unique. He was not looking to sidestep the issue of one identity controlling the other, it was his goal to make it visible. His plays pit the fluctuating blackness and whiteness against one another as Victim and Perpetrator, and their friction ultimately peels away the surface representation and digs into the sickness, which is animatedness. As Annette J. Saddik puts it, "[Baraka's] best known plays, *The Slave* and *Dutchman*, both force the audience to confront its own prejudices through violent dramatic presentations that challenge society's

¹² Theodore R. Hudson, *From Leroi Jones to Amiri Baraka* (New York: Duke University Press, 1973) 10.

¹³ Hudson, *From Leroi Jones to Amiri Baraka* 9.

¹⁴ Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *Liberator* (July 1965): 22, National Humanities Centre, Toolbox Library, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text12/barakatheatre.pdf>.

¹⁵ Nita N. Kumar, "The Logic of Retribution: Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*," *African American Review* 37, no. 2/3 (2003): 271.

¹⁶ Kumar, "The Logic of Retribution: Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*" 271.

assumptions about race."¹⁷ They do so by presenting characters moving in a space permeated by white dominance, but who have managed to carve a path for themselves by flowing with its tide, therefore subjecting themselves to control – an unfortunate position that Baraka borrowed from his personal life, as evidenced by *The Slave*.

The shorter part of Baraka's famous diptych is often lost in the shadow of *Dutchman*, but in terms of animatedness, it is no less significant. *The Slave* positions the protagonist, conspicuously called Walker Vessels, as a clear stand-in for the author. He is a college scholar disillusioned by the contempt of the white academic world and is also a prime example of subjecting himself to a position of complacency to achieve the intellectualism he craves. When the play begins, violent riots rage in the streets, and Walker is forced to face his split allegiances. Finally looking at himself not through the eyes of the majority, but through eyes of his own, he has chosen to become a leader in the riots and incite them: "I, Walker Vessels, single-handedly, and with no other adviser except my own ego, promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other."¹⁸

Now he has come to reckon with his past: his white ex-wife Grace and her new husband, Easley, a white professor who Walker used to admire, now the surrogate father to his children and thus literally in control of Walker's future. The goal for Walker is clear: to take vengeance on those that claimed to love and respect him, but have never done so:

WALKER I thought maybe I might be able to sneak in just as you and my ex-wife were making love, or just as you were lining the girls up against the wall to beat them or make them repeat after you, "Your daddy is a racist murderer." And then I thought I could murder both of you on the spot and be completely justified.

(69)

And indeed, Walker does end up killing Easley, but not before he formulates the malignant control Easley held over him as a professor and a role model: "But remember when I used to play a second-rate Othello? [...] I was Othello ... Grace was Desdemona ... And you were Iago. Or at least between classes you were Iago.

¹⁷ Annette J. Saddik, *Contemporary American Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 74.

¹⁸ LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman; and, The Slave* (New York: Morrow, 1964) 66. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

Hey, who were you during classes? I forgot to find that out. Ha, the key to my downfall.” (57) Just as Iago is feeding manipulation to Othello, imposing the image of the brute on him, so too is Easley pushing Walker into the image of blackness that whiteness holds as true. As Walker states his unfortunate position, Grace says: “You’re split so many ways ... your feelings are cut up into skinny horrible strips ... I don’t even think you know who you are any more. No, I don’t think you ever knew ... You are out of your right mind.” (82) To which Walker responds: “The way things are, being out of your mind is the only way to live.” (82) Walker’s mind; the “right mind” was never really his own. Having studied and made a career for himself in the white environment, he has accessed education, higher social status and all the benefits entailed in his position. However, the same education which Walker had dedicated his life to required complacency and did not reward him with the desired free agency. The opposite, in fact: it carved a path for him that led to violence.

By bringing up the idea of a “split mind,” Baraka invokes the theories of W.E.B. DuBois and double-consciousness, which itself shares aspects of animatedness. DuBois’s idea of “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity,”¹⁹ almost predicts Ngai’s theories since it too entails a form of self-discipline through the values set by the majority. Nevertheless, the personal dimension and realism of *The Slave* does not allow Baraka to unravel animatedness in full.

However, what was in the background of *The Slave* rises to the surface in *Dutchman*. Like its counterpart, *Dutchman* presents the audience with a hard-working black man surrounded by whiteness which never stopped seeing him as an amalgamation of stock images and stereotypes. The defining difference of this play is its allegorical tone. The surreal world, with its train endlessly and aimlessly barrelling forward, offers up a plethora of symbols that feed into a gloomed vision of racial relations in America. By stepping away from realism, Baraka reaches deeper into the unconscious and presents a more complex attempt at a depiction of animatedness.

Once again, opposition is at the core of *Dutchman*, as Clay sits opposite a white woman called Lula. Where Clay is quiet, closed off, invisibly going about his business, Lula is carefree, upfront, and flirtatious. She can do that which Clay cannot: whatever she wants. If Clay is the assimilated blackness, Lula is a brash, self-assured, and manipulative whiteness. From the very first moment, she bids Clay to do as she pleases. Like the clay lump in animation, she tries to section off parts, make them uniform, and ultimately take them over:

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of the Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994) 2.

LULA You look like you been trying to grow a beard. That's exactly what you look like. You look like you live in New Jersey with your parents and are trying to grow a beard.[...]

CLAY Really, I look like that? [...]

LULA But it's true, most of it, right? Jersey? Your bumpy neck?

CLAY How'd you know all that? Huh? Really, I mean about Jersey... and even the beard. I met you before?

(8-9)

Lula can make these correct predictions because of what Clay has been doing all his life: being invisible. The desire to move up the social ladder has pushed him into compliance with pre-existing ideas and representations, which now allow Lula to control him. She tries to finalize her submission of Clay when she guesses his name: "I bet your name is ... something like ... uh, Gerald or Walter. Huh? ... Lloyd, Norman? One of those hopeless coloured names creeping out of New Jersey." (15) Lula fails in her last guess, but she reveals how she is able to do what she does. When Clay asks if she knew all the facts about him, she says: "Not all of it. I lie a lot. It helps me control the world." (15) Lies, images and control. A cycle that has shaped Clay and ultimately silences him when he lashes out against Lula. As he hits her and begins to speak for himself, Lula turns around and murders him. If he cannot be controlled, he is erased. And once again, like with *The Slave*, the result of this process is death.

Indeed, the threat of violence is prominent in both plays. It is a warning that damns the sickness and the majority that expects it, but it is also emblematic of a problem in Baraka's work. While he does unravel aspects of animatedness, his approach is rather limited. First, there is the length of the plays: the fast and explosive short format was meant to rile up the spectators, but it does not give its themes much room. In combination with Baraka's oppositional view of identities, it means that the plays do not explore deeper into the unconscious the role of both identities in question, or the intricacy of representation. Crucially, Baraka does not acknowledge that even the play itself is potentially part of the animatedness process, due to the gaze of the audience that observes it. Animatedness in *Dutchman* and *The Slave* remains confined to the stage reality and does not consider the lines of demarcation in the audience. It took over half a century for this boundary to be crossed.

Drury: Double-Crossing the Audience

Decades after the eventual withdrawal of the Black Arts Movement, but in a similarly tense socio-political atmosphere of the Trump presidency, Jackie Sibblies Drury presented audiences with *Fairview*, a play that shares crucial elements with Baraka's work but also embodies their evolution in a more sophisticated understanding of racial discourse and representational politics. Where *Dutchman* and *The Slave* are defined by Baraka's revolutionary vigour – sharp, piercing, aggressive, but consequently violent, unambiguous, and narrow – *Fairview* is layered and varied, taking in a plethora of images and narratives that all feed into the process of animatedness.

When *Fairview* first opened at the Soho Repertory Theatre in 2018, audiences quickly identified the strategies of the play, their responses latched onto Drury's overt and audacious treatment of race, and touted *Fairview* as "[a] play about race, though not only about race, but it also includes a series of gestures and invitations that divide the audience,"²⁰ a work that leaves viewers "contemplating metatheatrics and responsibility, spectatorship and representation."²¹ Since then, *Fairview* has garnered much critical praise and public attention, ultimately winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2019, being described by the committee as "a hard-hitting drama that examines race in a highly conceptual, layered structure, ultimately bringing audiences into the actors' community to face deep-seated prejudices."²² Indeed, the same frustration with prejudices that emanates from *Dutchman* and *The Slave* permeates Drury's text. It even incorporates many of the same ideas about control and the inevitable lashing out against its grasp. However, the seat of power in *Fairview* is moved from the stage to the seats in the auditorium, as Drury acknowledges the role of the assembly of theatre itself and positions the play as a mirror to the audience.

The first act of *Fairview* introduces a middle-class African American family, the Frasier, preparing a dinner in honour of their grandma's birthday. And the dinner must be perfect, at least as perfect as the lives that the Frasier family seems to live. Indeed, the most significant aspect of the first act is how perfected, clean,

²⁰ Alexis Soloski, "In This Play About Race, 'People need to be uncomfortable,'" *NYTimes.com*, 6 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/06/theater/fairview-play-race.html>.

²¹ Sara Holdren, "Reviewing *Fairview*, a Play That Almost Demands That I Not Do So," *vulture.com*, 17 June 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/reviewing-fairview-a-play-that-almost-demands-that-i-dont.html>.

²² "Fairview, by Jackie Sibblies Drury," *pulitzer.org*, The Pulitzer Prizes, April 2019, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/jackie-sibblies-drury>.

and gentrified it is. Reviewers and critics have pointed to a striking similarity between the setup of *Fairview* and that of classic TV sitcoms, such as *Family Matters* or *The Jeffersons* – a stylization that the 2018 Berkeley Rep. Theatre production amplified with its set design and marketing, using televisual distortion in its trailers. These sitcoms are emblematic of what the first act of *Fairview* emulates: a middle-class black family goes about their everyday business, while dealing with minor inconveniences, all played for laughs and the occasional big, emotional gesture; a pure sitcom world devoid of larger, more pressing questions of American life. By creating escapism, cheap entertainment, and a sugar-coated vision of how the world is, sitcoms ultimately become uniform in their characters and content. Through evoking this aesthetic, Drury acknowledges that the family lives in a virtual world and is therefore also virtual. The Frasier exist strictly as part of a mould, a vision that makes them recognizable, comforting, and easy to read for the audience.

The sitcom parallel also brings in another layer of sub-surface control. *The Jeffersons*, for example, while being a story of a black family, was created by an all-white team of writers and developers.²³ Not only are its viewers given what they want to see, but those who give them these black characters are white. The product that the play mimics is at once being controlled by the unseen hands between the frames and the gaze of the audience. Yet, for the duration of the act, the Frasier reality stays intact, it revels in its televisual sheen. The only exception to the rule is the daughter, Keisha, who seems to be aware of something that is preventing her from being herself: "Something is keeping me from what I could be. And that something. It thinks it has made me who I am. It's ... it's just so confusing."²⁴ That "something" is the centrepiece of the rest of the play.

In a twist, *Fairview* features another audience apart from its physical one. Act 2 introduces four disembodied voices that exist in an aether between the stage and the auditorium. As far as stage action is concerned, Act 2 is merely a muted replay of Act 1, which the voices occasionally observe, comment on, mirror, but mostly ignore, being caught up in their own conversation. This involves the contemplation of a central question: "if you could choose to be any race you want, any race at all [...] what race would you be?" (31) The discussion is a whirlwind of narratives and stereotypes that the voices base their choice on. When one voice chooses to be Asian, it is because Asians are "a traditional culture" with "a lot of

²³ The show was created by Michael Ross, Don Nicholl and Bernie West, and developed by Norman Lear.

²⁴ Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Fairview* (London: Oberon Books, 2019) 26. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

expectations” (34). Another voice, called Suze, states she would choose to be black, but not just that: she would be a black person with knowledge of whiteness, which she would use to help others: “Of course I’d try to help people! With life skills. You know fiscal responsibility, and family planning, or like retirement planning [...] things we take for granted, how to go on a job interview, how to get a mortgage.” (53-54)

While the voices remain unseen, it gradually becomes apparent that they are all white; a fact that is confirmed in Act 3 when they enter the stage. Similarly, their conversation slowly makes it clear that to the voices, whiteness itself is not considered a race, or a different identity. Instead, race is understood as “non-whiteness,” which gives the voices power over others. Not just to “choose” who they want to be, but to set the boundaries what “others” mean. This notion is supported by other snippets of dialogue which suggest that racial identities are “made” in America and that they are fixed, tied to the presuppositions about them. This may be exemplified by the moment when the conversation shifts to one voice choosing to be Latinx:

MACK They are in Our country too.

SUZE Of course.

MACK And that’s what’s amazing – it’s like because they’re here, it’s like their identity is being made here. Like, most people are just what they are, you’re like, oh, that person is black or that person is Asian, but with Latinx people it’s like, they don’t think, they just are what they are [...] It’s just politically good, you know?

(44)

The final line of this excerpt reveals another facet of the conversation: the voices are talking with the air of casual liberalism. On the surface, they acknowledge the questions and mistreatment of race but in the same breath they further the typologies they claim to deny, such as when one of the voices refuses to choose a race at first: “Because this question is everything that is wrong with America [...] I have nothing to say. Yes, I have absolutely nothing to say. [...] Unless I can change my race to be something that is interesting.” (45-46)

To underscore the tenor of Act 2, the black characters are silenced, not part of the conversation at all. There is, however, a form of interaction between the voices and the family. At specific moments, the dialogue of the voices synchronizes, as if by accident, with the action on stage, giving the impression that the voices speak for the family. Thus, not only does the family exist in a virtual world created for the entertainment of the voices, not only is the story of the family ignored: the four

white "ghosts" possess the voices of the family and supplement their lines. By moving away from the sitcom to the surreal, Act 2 marks a literal turning point for the play. If Act 1 is a camera view of benign virtual reality, Act 2 slowly turns that camera around, revealing the machinery and people that contribute to its existence. We are slowly made aware of a discourse that reinforces the presuppositions and stereotypes that co-opt a misjudged idea of a racial identity. The privileged voices that understand race through its uniformity easily deconstruct and claim ownership over it. And in the final act, it becomes clear that even the ongoing performance is not immune to this deconstruction.

When Grandma Frasier finally appears on stage, she is in fact Suze, one of the voices from Act 2. She has embodied and taken over the past of the family, without anyone noticing any deviation, with the only exception of Keisha, the young daughter. Soon, other guests arrive, Uncle Tyrone, Keisha's friend Erika and another overexaggerated version of Grandma. All these characters are in fact the voices from earlier. They are dressed in "urban clothing," and as they enter, they rap, dance, and imitate the African American vernacular. Once the voices establish themselves as black characters, they also begin rewriting other aspects of the play to their image. Fake Erika presents Keisha with a pregnancy test and the test comes out positive. While that is a physical impossibility for Keisha, the voices have imposed the narrative of a pregnant black teenager on her. Later, fake Tyrone places a mountain of bills on the table rendering the family penniless, seemingly due to the father's gambling debts or drug addiction. As more and more of these changes pile up, finally, one of the voices reveals where the power of these changes comes from: "It is a common story," she says (101).

From Suze replacing Grandma with her own constructed version of blackness, to the reconfiguration of biological and social realities, the existence of the Frasier family is destroyed because the narratives that the white characters view as "authentically black" are materialized as they please. The supposed black experience is so intertwined with white narratives that when Keisha attempts to tell her own story in the climax, she realizes her initial attempts are nought but fragments of rote stories: "Once upon a time, there was a bright little girl, who knew if she worked twice as hard – No. ... Once there was a little boy born with the deck stacked..." (112) She experiences the same effect as John Yau's Genghis Khan: she speaks words that are not her own. Here, in a moment of desperation, Keisha, like Walker and Clay, lashes out and breaks free of animatedness. However, where Baraka connects lashing out with violence, Drury opts to break the performance, rather than break someone's back. She has Keisha walk out of the fourth wall and ask the audience – or rather those in the audience who consider themselves white – to come on stage and to experience what Keisha and her family

have always been: marked, exposed by the lights that don't help them see anything, but that make a version of them hyper-visible to the audience.

As we can see, *Fairview* circulates a similar set of images and ideas that Baraka's works did. The idea of a split identity, one limited by the discourse that surrounds it, is present in both Walker and Keisha. Another point of intersection is the depiction of white characters as self-assured, brash, and manipulative, using their own ideas about blackness to alter the black characters. Finally, there is the closing act where a black character breaks away in a moment of defiance. Yet, unlike Baraka, Drury is aware of the metatheatrical dimension of animatedness and does not keep her characters confined to the stage reality. She creates a link between the observer and the animating force, and finally faces the observer with their own role in animatedness. Moreover, *Fairview* does away with the violent retaliation seen in the endings of both *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, and instead opens the stage, both to audience members and to debate. And in the drastically different resolutions of the plays, one can observe a shift in their relationship to animatedness.

The binary definition of race, the entrenchment of us/them that erupts into violence in Baraka's work, is replaced by an openness and fluidity of identity. By denying strict entrenchment, *Fairview* is clearly continuing in the vein of post-black aesthetics and ideas, while at the same time acknowledging the potential pitfalls of mere surface level acceptance of these ideas, since, as the disembodied voices show, superficial discussion of racial politics does not dissolve ethnic labelling: it merely continues its use in a faux enlightened discourse. Furthermore, the discussion of the voices shows that the animation of identities is not strictly exclusive to blackness, a point that Ngai hints at through Yau's poem. Finally, one could argue that the condemnation of assimilation in *Dutchman* and *The Slave* is in fact another form of "burial" of racialization, precisely the kind that Black Arts sought to avoid. The desire to become part of the mainstream, to achieve economic stability and climb the social ladder, has been the reality of everyday experience of many African Americans. By not engaging with this perceived "gentrification" of the black experience, or treating it in a strictly negative, one-sided, and condemning manner, Black Arts discounted more complex interactions with the tendency it wanted to criticise. By taking assimilation and its gentrified aesthetics into the play, Drury invites the unanticipated interactions that are so crucial for re-animating animatedness. And as outlined above, the most unanticipated interaction is that with the audience.

Reassembling

The voices and the audience members in *Fairview* both play an integral role. Initially, they appear passive, unable to do anything to the process of the play

itself, but passivity is the state on which animatedness thrives, and Drury shows that the narratives audience members absorb, pass on, or create, take on their own being and transform the performance. They also expose part of a discourse that exists on the periphery of the play and far beyond in the history of the assembly of African American theatre. Yet, the question remains of what is achieved through this exposure of an invisible discourse. What changes when Baraka accuses whites of destroying blackness and blackness of being compliant, or when Drury shows just how overexposed the black body has become in its representation; and crucially, how does it involve the assembly, the audience, the people? Judith Butler provides a response:

The point of a democratic politics is not simply to extend recognition equally to all of the people, but, rather, to grasp that only by changing the relation between the recognizable and unrecognizable can (a) equality be understood and pursued and (b) 'the people' become open to a further elaboration [...] In effect, the insight into persistent exclusion forces us back into the process of naming and renaming, of renewing what we mean by the people.²⁵

Much of African American theatre has been concerned precisely with making the invisible visible, and changing the unrecognizable into recognizable, whether by focusing on whitewashed history, underrepresented narratives, or forgotten injustices. The unravelling of animatedness is another gesture in the same direction, one that does not mend demarcations in the assembly, but opens them to broader debate by placing them in the spotlight.

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²⁵ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* 5-6.

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