

Black, In a Way

OCTAVIA WASHINGTON

Carleton College

I DON'T THINK ANY THEATER STUDY ABROAD is meant to begin with Jackie Sibbles-Drury's disquieting and electric *Fairview*, but alas, in January 2020, I joined the class (as one of the two Black students) to watch Nadia Latif's production. Act 1 chronicles a middle-class Black family at dinner: Beverly is overworked, Keisha is late, and the elusive Mama is missing at her own birthday party. It would be simple, if Act 1 did not end with the interruption of this model when Beverly faints, and Act 2 picked back up with white characters – Jimbo, Suzie, Mack, Bets – doing a racist podcast as voiceover, while the Black actors repeat the lines and gestures of Act 1 in soundless familiarity. In Act 3, Keisha becomes aware of the purgatory her family is trapped in, and has a confrontation with the white characters that results in her breaking the fourth wall. The experience of watching Drury's play at the Young Vic¹ in London with a majority white audience was an uncomfortable and unfamiliar one. It's an awfully disturbing play that does not stop to take into account its audience's fear; not when Keisha seems to become aware of the voices, not when Jimbo gets close to saying to the n word; not even when, in Act 3, Keisha asks the white audience members to come on stage. To Drury, stopping would defeat the point, since everyone in the audience is meant to be disturbed, disquieted, and discomfited by the play.

This is why I maintain that *Fairview* is a strange place to start for a study abroad program for theater in London of mostly white students because it exists as such a genre-breaker in the category of race-baiting plays. Many playwrights in the past claimed that there is some way for reconciliation between white and Black people in order to unpack trauma, rather than the strong-footed discomfort that *Fairview* prefers. In those plays, they push for singularity in our responses to racial trauma, instead of the multiplicity of character that makes up Blackness. Drury argues that discomfort is the primary means through which we should discuss race relations in the US and UK, using theatrical devices such as characterization, repetition and dual perspectives to make her case. The purpose of this paper is to create a theoretical framework that names and defines the literary practices used in Drury's *Fairview* script. In looking at the production, I evaluate the practical manifestations of these theories. By examining Drury's published script and the Young Vic production, I agree with Drury's claim that discomfort comes first in the discussion of race. I further argue that in this approach, *Fairview* bases itself in the lineage of Black Theatre as a means of challenging white supremacy, or at least building a canon that does not subscribe to normative, white theatrical conventions.

Drury's repetition of stage actions and a motif of dual perspectives establishes for her audience that the characters are acting in an imitation of each other, and in a performance of Blackness for audience-goers. In *Fairview*'s script and production, the stage actions of Act 1 are copied in Act 2. Drury opens her script with "lights up on a negro" twice.² The stage directions defamiliarize us with Beverly by positioning her Blackness first. Drury's directions are also pin-pointing the artifice of theater – Beverly starts the act by looking in the "pretend mirror hung on the fourth wall."³ By drawing on the elements of theater that are naturally false, she positions Beverly as someone who exists with equal falsehood; someone who is Black by way of playing pretend. Attuned to her

¹ *Fairview*, script by Jackie Sibbles Drury, directed by Nadia Latif, Young Vic Theatre, London, 7 Jan 2020, Performance.

² Jackie Sibbles Drury, *Fairview* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2019), pp. 31.

³ Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.8.

Blackness and its artifice, Beverly asks (and mouths), “what’re you looking at?”⁴ She does this first to her husband, Dayton, then to us, the audience. She does this because she’s being surveyed by both and encountering multiple perspectives on herself – her husband’s and the audience’s. The two of them act as one camera on Beverly; as the question makes Dayton laugh, subsequently so does the audience. But the use of humor is a trap, as Beverly’s pantomimes in the mirror quickly become uncomfortable in Act 2. Her question (“what’re you looking at?”) is repeated for destabilizing effect; who are we, as audience members, looking at? The audience has to ask this because Act 2 introduces a disconnect between sound design and stage direction – Beverly cannot be heard and instead the audience must watch the characters do a silent, exaggerated performance of themselves. Jasmine “looks at herself in the ‘mirror’” too before she does a neck roll that is much sharper than at the beginning.⁵ It makes us wonder: did we ever have any idea who Beverly or any member of her family was while they were being surveyed? To Drury, the answer is no. Someone who is being surveyed cannot provide a true self, which is the exact complication that Black people find themselves in, as people who are constantly watched through systems of surveillance in a police state. The medium of theatre indicts the audience by making them feel like participants in voyeurism and members of the exact system of surveillance that keeps these Black characters at a distance.

This venture towards race voyeurism tends to upset white audience members. Jimbo seems to understand that race is a construct, yet he asks: “what race would you be?” over Beverly and Dayton’s pantomimed conversation.⁶ And though the podcasters draw on a series of racist answers (even though Jimbo interestingly uses the more politically-minded “Latinx”), he isn’t quite asking what race, so much as which of these Black family members could these white podcasters embody. This question is for the podcasters, but also for the uncomfortable (and majority white) audience. This attempt at race-play discomfords the audience because it is taboo, especially when Jimbo tells Suzie, “if I like kidnapped you, and locked you in a room, and like dyed your skin?”⁷ To him, these categories would make Suzie Black enough to belong in the family, but what exactly makes someone Black? Just skin alone? Drury invokes these questions in the audience, as the family represents caricatures of Blackness, with no distinctions; no real voices and definitely no agency to remove themselves from the play. The duality of *Fairview* is so pervasive that it’s obvious - for one, it’s a show within a show; the play *Fairview* that we the audience experience, in contrast to the podcast over Act 2. Secondly, we see the characters act in imitation: of a Black sitcom at the beginning and of each other in Act 2. Perhaps the only time they are not acting in imitation is when they break the fourth wall in Act 3 but even that’s debatable; after all, it’s in the script.

The sound and set design of the Young Vic production manifests this motif of duality and continuously builds discomfort. Drury calls her show “the surveillance being embodied,” born out of her experience with police surveillance in North Africa.⁸ That is certainly the case in the sound design of Act 1, where the use of Black sitcom theme songs in the background both trivialize (by making humorous) and familiarize us with the family. For one, the songs make the audience feel like they are in familiar terrain. I saw quite a few audience members before the show dancing along to the *Proud Family* theme, a Disney show rife with colorist stereotypes about dark-skinned Black people, with a family (the Prouds) that are imitated all the time through Halloween costumes. The Prouds are also similar to Drury’s family, in that both live in very firmly middle-class homes.

⁴Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.8.

⁵Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.40.

⁶Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.32.

⁷Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.50.

⁸Michael Martin, “The Pulitzer-Winning Play ‘Fairview’ Is About Being Watched While Black,” NPR, 2019 4 July, <https://www.wfae.org/latest-national-and-international-headlines/2019-07-14/the-pulitzer-winning-play-fairview-is-about-being-watched-while-black#stream/0>.

The beautiful set, designed by Mimi Lien, further separates us from the family, through their expensive pillow sets, multiple floors, and shelf of collected art. Drury's notes in the script call it "a nice living/dining room in a nice house in a nice neighborhood." This marker in socio-economic class is important; it provides a specific depiction of Blackness as most normal and expected. The family we're introduced to has everything to make themselves respectable (by the requisites of white achievement), but even they have no escape from white surveillance and inquiry. Ultimately, that lovely house is destroyed in a food fight scene in Act 3, showing us that these material markers of status are temporal. They can't protect us from being seen, or from having someone simplify us to a "negro" in our stage directions. Meanwhile,⁹ the sound design of Act 2 attempts to destabilize and create discomfort, both in the mismatching of the scene at play and in the racist content of what is being said. Jimbo's assertion that he'd "say [the n word] if [he] were a Black person, I can say it now, if I want to" sullies the mood¹⁰— he makes his fellow podcasters nervous, he disrespects the bodies of the Black family who move through the "nice house" with the slur, and he makes the audience squirm with the fear that he really will say it, after all.

The illusion of the fourth wall in the play is a representation of dual perspectives, which director Nadia Latif uses in her production to question the barrier between the audience and actor, realizing August Boal's concept of the spect-actor. Keisha says, "see, there's Terri, she's our stage manager"¹¹ when she appeals white audience members to come up. She calls attention to the function of theatre as a way to spark change, and forces audience members to join the production. Boal's concept of the spect-actor relies on the audience becoming no longer "passive victims" of theatrical images, but engaged actors who use theatre as the immediate revolutionary practice for communities, to be performed anywhere.¹² In this production, the spect-actor is manifested when actors break the fourth wall and the audience are no longer allowed to passively survey, but be active. Keisha tells us, "Come up here folks who identify as white, you know who you are."¹³ She doesn't stop until a startled and uncomfortable audience begins to respond to her and move; not because she's made a happy space for them, but because she has told them their seats are no longer theirs. This is in line with *Fairview* and Boal's resistance to the bourgeois view of theater as entertainment, and what better way to access that than to ask its white audience members (the middle-class bourgeois who can afford the theater) to stand?

With the fourth wall break, each production of *Fairview* tries to physically create a barrier between its white audience and the BIPOC watching, pushing for something that seems, on the surface, separationist in practice. The production makes the argument that separation is not equal to inequality in the case of BIPOC people, but rather that we cannot always build radicalism out of existing systems. This is reminiscent of Amiri Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre where he claims that, "Americans will hate the Revolutionary Theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real."¹⁴ His assessment describes some of *Fairview*'s *New York Times* reviewers, who called the play explosively political and race-baiting, questioning, "Would 'Fairview' even work if 90 percent of the audience were of color?"¹⁵ Like Baraka, *Fairview* is advocating for the destruction of theatre practices that oppress or rely on conventions of "the popular white man's theatre."¹⁶ By

⁹Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp. 31.

¹⁰Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp. 35.

¹¹Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.103.

¹²Augusto Boal, "Poetics of the Oppressed," *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Theatre Communications Group, 1993), pp. 155.

¹³Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.38.

¹⁴Amiri Baraka and Leroi Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *The Making of African American Identity: Vol. III, 1917-1968* (2007): National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, July 1966, 1302.

¹⁵Jesse Green and Salamishah Tiller, "Fairview: Watching a Play in Black and White," *The New York Times*, Aug 7 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/theater/fairview-ending-debate.html>.

¹⁶Baraka and Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 1302.

Drury's own admittance in a Vogue article,¹⁷ *Fairview* would not work with a majority audience of color, because the practices the play uses come from a lineage of theater that is meant to provoke or startle the oppressor, not those who are experiencing oppression. In that sense, *Fairview* is a product of radical imagination where "imagination (Image) is all possibility... any use (Idea) is possible."¹⁸ To Baraka, imagination is an act of protest, where the most vulnerable imagine worlds that don't subjugate them. Drury applies a reversal of power structures - switching the subjugation - that don't necessarily exist but can be made reality.

Through language, Drury employs the essence of the Black Power movement of the 60s, where the act of transgressive representation in theater is a form of self-love and empowerment, with the goal of rejecting white normative aesthetics. Baraka puts it simply: "If the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves."¹⁹ Drury is resistant to normative structures, as she values representations of Blackness that do not take into account white gatekeeping of language (even if that representation becomes mitigated through the white gaze). Both Drury's stage directions and dialogue use AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and slang, in a way that would be exploitative from white writers, yet remains realistic from Black ones. Jasmine's first line to Dayton is "Haaaaaay-aaaaaaaay! How you doin' baby?"²⁰ The casual vernacular, as is the case with the sitcom music, shows that Black people are meant to see themselves in the language of the characters. Under the principles of Revolutionary Theater, proper representation has the power to empower those watching; not simply to provide them the tools for individual care, but the means to navigate harm as a collective. One critique of AAVE from white liberals (the ones who are likely to see her play) asserts that unapologetic Blackness will alienate white viewers; as Baraka puts it, "the liberal white man's objection to the theatre of the revolution... will be on aesthetic grounds."²¹ Drury knowingly seeks to discomfort and revolutionize through language. With it, she emphasizes that this is not a colorblind representation, where one must use white dialect to indicate humanity on the part of the Black characters.

These representations of Blackness in entertainment create an aesthetic space for Black people where they can address racialized violence and trauma without the white gaze. One of Jasmine's conflicts with Beverly derives from the fact that she sees her sister as uppity; trying to, in some sense, achieve classist aims. Jasmine mocks her for it, with the line, "I am not trying to disrespect that because you trippin' over some budget Brie and some grapes."²² Jasmine does not go without critique in the play, as we see her tendency towards fatphobia. Yet the humor and in-jokes to Blackness that dominate Jasmine's speech keep her as one of the few characters who is unconscious of the white characters or white audience because she is firmly herself. Unlike Keisha who is conscious of the audience, and Beverly who examines herself in the pretend mirror, Jasmine's internal sense of self is not flux - she remains unconfused in her Blackness. Jasmine's confidence gives weight to Baraka's "theatre of Victims,"²³ where performance gives tools for liberation that can then become reality.

The nature of discomfort has the potential, as in August Wilson's seminal speech on Black theatre, to reshape audience consciousness outside of Eurocentric aesthetics. Wilson's speech is in direct correlation to *Fairview*'s insistence on distinguishing itself from a white, American theater history by creating the racialized play that leaves its audience with the demand to stand up. In "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson conceives of two purposes for Black art: "to entertain

¹⁷Green and Tiller, "Fairview: Watching a Play in Black and White," *The New York Times*, Aug 7 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/theater/fairview-ending-debate.html>.

¹⁸Baraka and Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 1301.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.10.

²¹Baraka and Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 1302.

²²Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.12.

²³Baraka and Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 1301.

white society” and “feed the spirit and celebrate the life of Black America by designing its strategies for survival prosperity.”²⁴ Wilson’s speech is meant to disrupt the audience at the TCG National Conference, just as *Fairview* tries to frighten its white audience out of complacency. *Fairview* falls into the latter category as defined by Wilson through its use of discomfort, which is induced in many ways throughout the show: through disconnect between sound design and stage direction, the fear of white characters using racial slurs, and the end of Act 3 in the uncomfortable reversal where we watch white people be put under surveillance. Wilson proposes, too, that it is not useful for Black people to remain in white theatre spaces. He critiques colorblind casting as “a gesture of benevolence... if we cannot develop our talents, then everyone suffers: our writers; our theatre; our audience.”²⁵ In his methodology, Black Theatre presents its own useful, but separate, function to society and accepting gestures of white generosity in theater (through practices like colorblind casting) does nothing but hinder the works of Black playwrights. In addition, Wilson dismisses colorblind casting by adding, “we are not patrons of the linguistic environment that would have us as ‘unqualified,’ and ‘violators of public regulations.’”²⁶ His disregard for white practices aligns with Baraka’s and Drury’s use of AAVE as a method of targeting white audiences. Drury and Wilson’s methods establish that they value Black aesthetics and playwrights, without adherence to white theater. Without Wilson’s advocacy for Black Theatre, a play like *Fairview* could not exist.

In this motif of duality, *Fairview* sets itself in conversation with Frantz Fanon’s famous book *Black Skin, White Masks* where he argues that race in America is a constant performance represented through masks. However, Drury’s argument bases itself in Black femininity as exemplified by her characters (mainly Keisha), instead of Fanon’s male-centered gaze of what it means to be Black. The introduction of Fanon’s book establishes that Black people (men, in Fanon’s work) are looking for “liberation of the man of color from himself.”²⁷ Fanon’s argument about liberation is reflected in Keisha’s experience, as she’s trying to liberate herself from color and the restrictions that come with it. Suzie has assumed Keisha needs her help because she’s relying on assumed roles of Blackness and whiteness – her as being a white savior, Keisha as someone who is in need of saving. Keisha disrupts this delusion with the line: “I can’t think in the face of you telling me who you think I am.”²⁸ The line is representative of a separation from the white gaze; Keisha finds Suzie’s white guilt exhausting but, overall, she finds fault with being defined in the gaze of her guilt. Suzie’s assumptions trap Keisha into who Suzie wants her to be; Suzie’s assumptions are also meant to reflect white audience assumptions about how they can help her too. This moment acts as the catalyst for the play to erupt its structure, and reverse the surveillance lens – in a sense, the reversal of masks that Fanon identifies. While Fanon’s book is notably male-centered, it does illuminate many of themes of Drury’s work and the goal of *Fairview* to look at Blackness as distinct from Black people; not particularly innate but taught.

In particular, Drury’s inspecting the surveillance of the bodies who experience the most critique in her play, which are its Black women. Mack, a white character, conflates being a Black woman to three elements: “Hair! Body! Voice!”²⁹ Suzie, too, tries to relate with her story about her Black nanny, but it reads as one long micro-aggression.³⁰ They treat their comments as a compliment but they are really just minimization, and an attempt to portray Black femininity as performance for the sake of whiteness. But we understand from the care given to Beverly, Jasmine, and Keisha

²⁴August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” *American Theatre*, Sept 1966, pp. 154, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” *American Theatre*, Sept 1966, pp. 158, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.

²⁷Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press: London, 1952), pp. 2.

²⁸Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.100.

²⁹Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.35.

³⁰Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp. 29.

by Drury that their treatment is meant to be strange, especially because Act 1 is concerned with the Black women of this world and what they feel. The only person who seems to “liberate” herself is Keisha, the teenage Black girl with the ability to see double. Her asides find the Black women around her “so beautiful.”³¹ They give her the power to see and speak to the audience, so in a sense, there is no de-familiarization with Keisha.

The state of the Black women in *Fairview* enacts Patrica Hill Collin’s concept of “controlling images,” a central tenet of the Black feminist intellectual tradition. Controlling images refers to Black women constantly being assaulted with negative images of themselves through the media that justify their mistreatment in the U.S. or add to it. Not only do these images negatively hinder Black women but an image “becomes the point from which other groups define their normality.”³² This is visible in a moment where the white characters attempt to gaslight Keisha into taking a pregnancy test, even though it’s an impossible reality. Jimbo instigates with, “Who’s baby is it?”³³ Despite Keisha’s rebuffs, they convince the other characters of her potential pregnancy, relying on the stereotype that Black women are more likely to be teen mothers and dropouts, using that stereotype to “define their normality” and superiority. This is emblematic of what happens to Black women in theater, in which the white gaze reduces Black women to stereotypes derived from minstrelsy and slavery. Black theater, and Drury’s play, attempt to combat this with diverse storytelling, as the resistance to controlling images, and the boxes that Black women get placed into, allows for representations that are unfixed. Black women playwrights, in particular, have a lineage of correcting white paradigms, which was most famously realized in Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*. Shange’s entire structure, employing a choreopoem, rather than forward dialogue, is resistant to reducing Black experience to a single voice. In an interview from 1990, she reflected her frustration with a lack of nuance in the portrays of Black women, arguing that, “anyone who’s beset with sexism and racism and poverty cannot live a simple life... you’ve mastered a very complex system of bureaucracy, street business, spiritual activity, and sex stuff.”³⁴ Her reflection refers to Black women’s ability to navigate interconnecting systems of oppression; a “matrix of domination,” where instances of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and other oppressions overlap.³⁵ Shange’s characters – the lady in brown, the lady in blue, the lady in yellow – posit Black womanhood as diverse, complex and beautiful; they are not within a singular representation. Like Drury, Shange employs many voices with the goal of depicting multiplicity of experience. Correcting these controlling images is central to the mission of these Black women characters and authors; overcoming them in their recreation on stage and de-powering them.

The characterization of Keisha is an actualization of Paul Carter Harrison’s concept of “the African imaginary” as a way to combat whiteness as a norm in fields, including theatre. Harrison makes the case for Black Theatre as a distinct art form from that of white American theatre that mythologizes and is driven by the common Black experience; the “story about us, by us, for us, only us,” as Keisha calls it in her final monologue.³⁶ Drury’s case for an “African imaginary” in the final monologue tempts her audience into imagining theatre as a medium to access that story of us. She gives weight to Black Theatre as belonging to its own lineage and having legitimate practices. But Keisha’s assessment of it is messy; she doesn’t quite figure out what she means or illuminate the single story of us. Keisha’s fumbling lines up with Black theatre, as a mode that takes form

³¹Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.30.

³²Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 70.

³³Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp.16.

³⁴Neal A. Lester, “At the Heart of Shange’s Feminism: An Interview,” *Black American Literature Forum*: Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1990): African American Review (St. Louis University), 726.

³⁵Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 18.

³⁶Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp. 105.

right in that moment and is constantly adapting. There is not one story because Black theatre is not homogenous. The contemporary iteration of Black theatre is more than just “resistance to oppression” that relies on single-stories to speak on Blackness.³⁷ The “African imaginary” pushes theatre to take on a more radical shape in its efforts to create safe space for BIPOC only. Keisha’s experience is a beacon of hope for this radical space; she emphasizes that the “African imaginary” can be immediate as she moves through the aisles, and creates a vision of radical space in the separation.

The current zeitgeist of Black creativity is tipped in *Fairview*’s favor, as contemporary playwrights examine Blackness via historical revision and time. Two recent plays echo Drury’s means of inducing audience discomfort and questioning Blackness: *A Strange Loop* (debuted in 2019) by Michael R. Jackson and *The Gift* (debuted in 2020) by Janice Okuh. *A Strange Loop* is a musical following Usher, a Black queer writer who also happens to be an usher, as he tries to write a show.³⁸ Through the play-within-a-play structure, he turns the surveillance lenses to his own life, analyzing what it means to be Black and queer, both for the consumption of the audience, and for himself. Jackson does similar work to Drury, especially in the song “Inner White Girl,” which questions the ways in which Jackson’s hobbies and enjoyment are perceived differently as a result of what he looks like.³⁹ Both authors are using the Black body, and their subsequent relationship to the (white) audience to ask: what does it mean to be Black? Theater in both cases acts as the axis to examine this relationship through a very immediate, live forum. *The Gift*, which I saw in February 2020 at Theatre Royal Stratford East,⁴⁰ is a historical revision of the story of Sarah, an African girl who was adopted by Queen Victoria. *The Gift* is a work that distinguishes and prides itself on following in the lineage of Black feminism, asking what it means to be a Black woman both in the Victorian age, and in the contemporary. Okuh does the work of connecting both historical racism to present microaggressions, arguing that both are prevalent forms of violence that erode the health of Black people. *Fairview* not only exists in the aesthetic lineage of Wilson, Baraka, and Fanon but is simultaneously in conversation with other contemporary work by Black writers. The three plays together, as well as other Black writers contributing to the culture through television series like *Lovecraft Country*, emphasize the importance of revision. When we do not revise historical exclusions, we contribute to the white supremacist message that Black people did not exist before colonization.

Fairview, a fairly recent play, is forceful; it does not ask for anything less than its demands to be met. But it does not resonate with all the BIPOC people who see it. That’s fair enough; not everyone has the stomach to sit through offensive speech. The epigraph of *Fairview* is this quote from *Black Skin, White Masks*: “‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply ‘Look, a Negro!’” Drury calls this “the play, in a way.”⁴¹ This is the recurring motif in *Fairview* of the Black actors playing as caricatures of themselves on multiple levels - caricatures of their characters, of Black people, of actors. And the end of the play, for its Black audience members, is that: ‘Look, a Negro!’ Watching *Fairview* as a Black person is the feeling of being watched yourself, of having someone constantly stare at you, and put you on display. Not every Black person wants to subject themselves to that. I, for one, am not in this camp but maybe for a different reason. Prior to this, I had never seen an American playwright so boldly address the pitfalls of white American theatre and how it must progress. For that reason, *Fairview* will always stick with me, and is necessary, even precursory, to conversations on how theater must change after COVID-19. In July 2020, a coalition of BIPOC theater-makers

³⁷Paul Carter Harrison, “(Re) Branding Black Theatre,” *Black Renaissance*, vol. 13 (2013): pp. 73, no. .

³⁸Michael R. Jackson, *A Strange Loop* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2020).

³⁹*A Strange Loop: Original Cast Recording*, “Inner White Girl,” Yellow Sound Label, 2019, Spotify.

⁴⁰*The Gift*, script by Janice Okuh, directed by Dawn Walton, Theatre Royal Stratford East, London, 13 Feb 2020, Performance.

⁴¹Drury, *Fairview* (2019), pp. V.

gathered to create The Theater Artists of Color Demands for Change. Their twenty-nine page document tells us that our current model for theatre is unsustainable, unbearable, even, for Black playwrights, Black directors, Black actors, and Black audience goers. Both Theater Artists of Color and *Fairview* are saying, “We see you, White American Theater.”⁴² At the end of the play, Keisha sees her audience, and she does not like the sight of them. Just as we’re forced to see her and we find ourselves incredibly devoid. Keisha’s final lines try to illuminate the story of us, relying on the age old cliché of bootstraps: “many many many many times there was a person who worked hard, a person who tried to do their best, and tried to do well by their family, and tried to be good, and tried to do better.”⁴³ The stripped story of “A Person Trying” is how *Fairview* leaves us, and how Keisha walks out of the stage doors. I prefer this quiet ending, over a grandiose act. Revolution is just the commitment to being “A Person Trying;” to seeing things that are wrong and understanding, processing, wishing for them to be corrected. And then, finally, acting.

⁴²Michael Paulson, “Theater Artists of Color Enumerate Demands for Change,” *The New York Times*, Jul 10 2020, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2422140073/fulltext/858C82D1887D47EEPQ/1?accountid=9892>.

⁴³Drury Jackie Sibbles, *Fairview* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2019), pp.105.

Bibliography

- A Strange Loop: Original Cast Recording*. Performances by Larry Owens, L Morgan Lee, and James Jackson Jr. Yellow Sound Label, 2019.
- Baraka, Amiri and Jones, Leroi. "The Revolutionary Theatre." *The Making of African American Identity*: Vol. III, 1917-1968 (2007): 4-6. National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox. July 1966.
- Boal, Augusto. "Poetics of the Oppressed." In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 120-155. Theatre Communications Group, 1993.
- Drury, Jackie Sibbles. *Fairview*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2019.
- Drury, Jackie Sibbles. *Fairview*. Directed by Nadia Latif. 7 Jan 2020; London: Young Vic Theatre. Performance.
- Fanon, Frantz. "Introduction." *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. Pluto Press: London, 1952.
- Green, Jesse and Tillet, Salamishah. "Fairview: Watching a Play in Black and White." *The New York Times* (New York), Aug 7 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/theater/fairview-ending-debate.html>.
- Harrison, Paul Carter. "(Re) Branding Black Theatre." *Black Renaissance*, vol. 13, no. (2013): 70-79,182.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second ed. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Jackson, Michael R. *A Strange Loop*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2020.
- Lester, Neal A. "At the Heart of Shange's Feminism: An Interview." *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1990): pp. 717-730.
- Martin, Michael. "The Pulitzer-Winning Play 'Fairview' Is About Being Watched While Black." *NPR*, 2019 4 July. <https://www.wfae.org/latest-national-and-international-headlines/2019-07-14/the-pulitzer-winning-play-fairview-is-about-being-watched-while-black#stream/0>.
- Okuh, Janice. *The Gift*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2020.
- Okuh, Janice. *The Gift*. Directed by Dawn Walton, 13 Feb 2020, Theatre Royal Stratford East, London. Performance.
- Paulson, Michael. "Theater Artists of Color Enumerate Demands for Change." *The New York Times*, Jul 10 2020. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2422140073/fulltext/858C82D1887D47EEPQ/1?accountid=9892>.
- Wilson, August. "The Ground on Which I Stand." *American Theatre*. Sept 1966.
<https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.