

Frank Obenland\*

# Dissensual Performances of Race and Community in Claudia Rankine's *The White Card* and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2024-2006>

**Abstract:** *The White Card* (2018) and *Fairview* (2018), two recent plays by contemporary Black female playwrights Claudia Rankine and Jackie Sibblies Drury, raise questions about how overcoming socially constructed racial categories presupposes the idea of a (theatrical) community as the conceptual framework that informs theater's political efficacy. As such, *The White Card* and *Fairview* register the inherent fissures and cleavages that result from various processes of racialization structuring the theatrical performance itself. This article suggests that the plays by Rankine and Drury create a form of theatrical dissensus that fundamentally disrupts how issues of race and racism are rendered tangible in theatrical performances.

**Keywords:** spectatorship, metatheater, Black performance, race and racism, Jacques Rancière, distribution of the sensible, audience participation, Claudia Rankine, *The White Card*, Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Fairview*

## Introduction

At the end of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's 2011 play *Neighbors*, the actors playing Melody and Jim Crow Jr. leave the auditorium and meet outside the stage door. Blurring the distinction between actor and character, the two share an intimate moment in which Melody asks Jim Crow Jr. about his feelings about being part of a theatrical performance featuring some of the most denigrating racial stereotypes. Here, the play moves beyond its satiric, tragicomic, shocking, and spectacular critique of performative traditions, such as blackface minstrelsy or race melodramas, and extends the play's action intentionally into the liminal space between the stage and the auditorium when Melody asks Jim: "How do you feel?" (319). Melody's question, spoken off-stage, signals an underlying skepticism that theatrical performances can serve as an adequate site for introducing audiences to the experiential

---

\*Corresponding author: Frank Obenland, Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, E-Mail: frank.obenland@uni-mainz.de

reality of race.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the ending of *Neighbors* illustrates possible limitations for interventionist Black performances. In *Neighbors*, the account of the emotional toll of enacting a racialized identity on stage is cordoned off and placed in the protected intimacy of a conversation outside the theatrical performance. It is left to chance whether the audience, upon leaving the playhouse, beholds the exchange: “*Maybe people catch this, maybe they don’t*” is the terse comment in the playscript’s secondary text (319).

The play thus seems to push against Jacques Rancière’s conceptualization of theatrical performance as an “emancipated community” that brings actors together with spectators who actively participate in the theatrical performance as “narrators and translators” of individual experiences (*Emancipated Spectator* 22). By focusing on the importance of individual experience and meaning making, the play neither seeks to create a “resistant community” (hooks, “Performance Practice”), nor does this open ending invite a reparative re-connection with historical Black cultural and performative traditions, as does, for example, August Wilson’s magisterial project of “(w)righting history” in his play cycle on the African American experience in the twentieth century (Elam, *Past as Present* 3). Instead, it suggestively allows for the possibility of a future conversation on the experiential and affective reality of race inside and outside of American theater as well as in the liminal spaces in between.

Recent plays by contemporary Black female playwrights Claudia Rankine and Jackie Sibblies Drury continue where *Neighbors* ends. As I want to propose in the following, Rankine’s *The White Card* (2018) and Drury’s *Fairview* (2018) re-introduce the theatrical conversation about staging race into the theatrical community of the audience itself. As such, these plays seek to intervene in “the discovery, construction, maintenance, and critique of forms of sociality” in theater (Reinelt 283). The plays expose underlying assumptions about racial differences within the “implied community” that comes into existence “for the time of the performance – even if riven with antagonisms and contradictions that make *community* a weak signifier” (286). Despite the limitations of the idea of a theatrical community, the two plays are

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my appreciation to the editors and anonymous readers of this special issue for their insight, encouragement, and valuable feedback.

The following discussion is informed by recent conceptualizations of Blackness and race as an ideological and theatrical “device” (Elam, “Device of Race” 4–5), a sociological process of racialization (Omi and Winant), or, following the works of Judith Butler, Richard Schechner, and Daphne Brooks, as a form of “twice-behaved behavior” (Schechner 29). More recently, Harvey Young has described racial identity as resulting from an ideological hailing of Black bodies, the internalization and socialization of racial categories, and what he describes as “racial habitus,” that is, “the development of a set of behaviors inspired by the experience of having been interpellated and socialized” (10). In a similar vein, Sara Ahmed has suggested to consider “whiteness” as a “phenomenological issue [. . .] as a way of exploring how whiteness is ‘real,’ material and lived” (150).

predicated on the notion of theater as, in Janelle Reinelt's words, "a place of democratic struggle where antagonisms are aired and considered, and where the voluntary citizenry, the audience, deliberates on matters of state in an aesthetic mode" (289). While "the activity of performing and spectating is itself an aspect of community formation," Reinelt argues that theater becomes a site for contesting the very principles according to which communities are formed (290).

In this sense, I will use the term *theatrical community* to denote a constellation of performers and spectators that explicitly or implicitly reflects on its own function as a surrogate for a community for which questions of inclusion and exclusion are fundamentally at stake. As such, *The White Card* and *Fairview* elicit cognitive and affective responses from the audience in order to critique theater's participation in what Michael Omi and Howard Winant have described as "racial formation," that is, as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed" (109). Sharing Jacobs-Jenkins's insistence on the importance of confronting and dismantling denigrating images of Blackness, *The White Card* and *Fairview* more specifically offer performative critiques of socially constructed racial categories. They raise questions about often implicit norms that regulate how individuals – and their experiences – are rendered visible and how individuals are included in collective forms of aesthetic experience.

As I will argue, these plays stage a fundamental form of "dissensus," arising from "a conflict between two regimes of sense, two sensory worlds" (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 58). Similar to other contemporary playwrights, such as Tarell Alvin McCraney, Lynn Nottage, Dominique Morisseau, Aleshea Harris, and others, these plays respond to previous forms of representing Blackness that have shaped the "affective economies" of aversion and identification with racialized bodies (Ahmed 44–46). In raising questions about cultural and political citizenship, the works of Rankine and Drury also speak to a contemporary moment shaped by what Saidiya Hartman has called the "afterlife of slavery," that is, the impact of past forms of oppression on contemporary social relations, such as different forms of institutional racism and police brutality.<sup>2</sup> Targeting existing structures of power and oppression, they address the dilemma that any call for moving beyond socially constructed racial categories and markers of difference presupposes the idea of a "community" as the conceptual framework that informs theater's political efficacy.

The recognition of the theatrical community as a vehicle for a political theatrical practice, however, needs to account for the fissures and cleavages inherent in various processes of racialization. Taking her cue from the philosophical works of

---

<sup>2</sup> Cultural critics who have also contributed to this current assessment are Ta-Nehisi Coates, Jared Sexton, Fred Moten, and Frank B. Wilderson III.

Rancière, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has argued that staged performances not only create theatrical communities but also have the potential to expose the inherent fragility of these very communities themselves. Dillon notes that theatrical performance “brings a people – and the contest over the limits of that people – into view” to the effect that “the relation between embodied (ontic) persons and represented (mimetic) subjects is definitionally in play” (10–11). In this sense, theatrical performance has the ability to address and critique structural inequalities and power hierarchies based on racialized identities. In a similar manner, Rancière suggests, theater is structured by an underlying “distribution of the sensible” that regulates not only the visibility of subjects but also who is recognized as a speaking subject (*Politics of Aesthetics* 12–13). To achieve its egalitarian political potential and to include marginalized or suppressed voices, theatrical performances need to engage in “the transformation of the sensory fabric” that informs the shared aesthetic activity of the theatrical community (*Emancipated Spectator* 56).

Despite their difficulties and limitations, I argue that Rancière’s complex ideas of spectatorship, aesthetic experience, and the communal experience of theatrical performances offer a useful approach to a discussion of Rankine’s and Drury’s plays. These plays are skeptical about theater’s efficacy of articulating and conveying a specific political message. Instead, they offer a democratic proto-politics in focusing on moments in which the predominant logic of how race and racism are viewed and discussed becomes disrupted by performative means. These plays do not primarily heed the lessons of artists and theorists who have pointed to the oral and literary repertoire of Black performance traditions as sites of resistance.<sup>3</sup> Thus, their focus is not so much on developing alternatives to traditional or avant-gardist theatrical forms, but on realizing the disruptive potential inherent in specific theatrical scenarios and constellations. They produce “political dissensus,” which Rancière defines not as a clash of opposing interests, opinions, or points of view, but more fundamentally as “a dispute over the situation itself, a dispute over what is visible as an element of a situation, over which visible elements belong to what is common, over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it” (“Introducing Disagreement” 4).

In these plays, then, racialized Black bodies are rendered visible in order to draw attention to the lack of a consensus on “race” or, more precisely, to a lingering disagreement on how the experiential reality of race structures the aesthetic experience of the theatrical performance itself. This dissensus is not so much enacted in the action on stage but in the destabilization of the traditional separation between

---

<sup>3</sup> For critical work in this field, see the excellent studies *Black Performance Theory* and *Black Movements* by Soyica Diggs Colbert.

audience and performance spaces. In this manner, the plays remind spectators that they are, at least potentially, part of an egalitarian, communal aesthetic experience. This does not mean that they create immersive forms of theater reminiscent of early avant-gardist performances, where the audience is given a major part in the performance itself. Considering Dillon's and Rancière's conceptualization of theater and community, I want to suggest that the plays by Rankine and Drury create a form of theatrical dissensus that fundamentally disrupts how issues of race and racism structure the aesthetic experience of theatrical performances.

## **“Imagined Conversations [. . .] among Strangers”: *The White Card***

Rankine's one-act play offers an interesting case for a drama that seeks to intervene in conventional conceptualizations of an implied theatrical community as predominantly white. As such, the spatial arrangement of the performance space is used to demonstrate how the sensory experience of the play is structured by the experiential reality of race. During the play's run at the American Repertory Theater in Boston in February and March of 2018, audience members attending a performance of *The White Card* found themselves positioned across from each other, allowing them not only to observe the action on stage but also to view each other. The traverse design thus created a theatrical community that comprised performers as well as viewers as part of a collective aesthetic experience (*“White Card Toolkit”* 10). This is corroborated by the stage directions in the printed version, which explicitly stipulate: *“If possible, the audience surrounds the dinner party to enable audience members to also be looking at each other”* (15). The separation between stage and audience was further minimized by the white décor of the theatrical space and by keeping the auditorium lit throughout the whole performance. With its focus on a limited set of characters and its concentration on the domestic spaces of the play's two scenes – one set in the home of the affluent white Spencer family, the other in the studio of Charlotte Cummings, a Black female artist –, the play seeks to establish a form of “imagined intimacy” traditionally found in the domestic settings of realistic family plays (Chaudhuri 9). At the same time, though, the use of the traverse design flouts the strict separation of audience and performance spaces and turns the dramatic action on stage into a metonymic extension of the audience.

Underlining its intimate and communal character, the performance of *The White Card* challenges spectators to negotiate their own material presence as a collectivity. Bridging the boundary between performance space and audience space, however, does not mean that *The White Card* envisions a unified community of

spectators and performers. As Dani Snyder-Young has pointed out, the play “was explicitly designed as an intervention in white supremacy targeting the older, affluent white people dominating audiences and subscriber bases at large institution theaters” (5). In this sense, the program made available to spectators identifies “the fault line between black and white lives” as the thematic focus of the play (Rankine and Carl 12). In the same vein, the audience is reminded: “As we sit in the theater in such close proximity to one another, as we embrace the discomfort of the words and histories we fear speak, we hope the play sparks the kind of risky, vulnerable, and nuanced conversation that the urgency of our situation demands” (13). This underlines the configuration of the theatrical space as a site for discussing the contours of the theatrical community reflecting the fault lines in society as such.

In addition, the setup of the performance space signals its political function of questioning what could be understood as, following Rancière, the “distribution of the sensible” of conventional stage performances. For Rancière, the sensory experience of stage performances depends on a “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (*Politics of Aesthetics* 7). The spatial arrangement of the stage thus highlights the relationship between the audience’s sensory experience and a dissensus inherent in the sensory and spatial organization of the play itself. This dissensus does not take the form of an explicitly articulated discursive disagreement. Instead, the sensory experience of the live performance is predicated on a naturalized form of whiteness that informs the organization of theatrical space. As the stage directions indicate, this whiteness also encompasses the diegetic space of the apartment in which the play is set, where it contrasts with works of art that “are projected on canvasses around the white room” and that consist of “contemporary work by artists representing the victimization of African Americans and Rauschenberg’s White Painting” (15).

These artistic references expose a fissure or rupture in the communal experience of the play as well as in the performance’s “sensory fabric” of “being together” according to the dominant “distribution of the sensible” (*Emancipated Spectator* 56). What is at stake, then, is how the experiential reality of race is not universal or equally shared and how whiteness – as a socially constructed marker of difference between individuals and groups – disrupts the possibility of a unified experience shared by all members of the “implied community.” It is to highlight the political implications of this dissensus that Rankine introduces *The White Card* as “an imagined conversation regarding race and racism among strangers” (ix).<sup>4</sup> She hopes to

---

4 The political underpinnings of the play are more explicitly articulated in the preface to the printed version of *The White Card*. There, Rankine describes a confrontational encounter with a white male

render tangible an element that has eluded her and the spectator: “Maybe the expectation is for the performance of something I as a black woman cannot see even as I object to its presence. Perhaps the only way to explore this known and yet invisible dynamic is to get in a room and act it out” (ix). With regard to *The White Card*, this unacknowledged “dissensus” is about how whiteness engenders actual and symbolic violence that affects white and Black subjects differently.

During its run at the American Repertory Theater, the one-act play featured two scenes portraying a conversation between a Black female artist and an affluent couple offering her their patronage. To this, a second part was added (not included in the printed script), in which the audience participated in group discussions about their experience of the performance. Designed as “pedagogical intervention,” these conversations asked white attendees to reflect on their whiteness and to recognize “that a diverse, inclusive, and equitable society requires building reciprocal relationships with people of color” (Snyder-Young 13). This second part, then, aimed at translating the aesthetic experience of the performance into a post-performance conversation about race. According to Rankine, the premise for both parts consists of a shared desire for recognition: “What brings everyone to the room is the desire to be seen and known, but what keeps them there is the complexity of our human desire to be understood” (ix). Here, the theatrical community is conceived as a “community of strangers,” sharing a capacity “to translate” and to recognize their “shared power of the equality of intelligence” in the act of seeing and knowing (*Emancipated Spectator* 17). The desire to be recognized and understood – which for Rankine includes “everyone” – also gestures at a political and democratic potential in the sense that, according to Reinelt, “the performance event itself constitutes a form of radical democratic activity as people choose to participate in an event that recognizes the marginality of some members of the society and strengthens that group by taking place” (291).

The two scenes are structured around an exchange between Charlotte Cummings, a Black female artist in her forties, and Charles and Virginia Spencer, an affluent white couple whose wealth derives from the husband’s involvement in America’s prison-industrial complex. In the first scene, Charlotte arrives for a dinner party at the Spencers’ apartment. The Spencers are introduced as well-meaning liberals and collectors of African American visual art interested in acquiring Charlotte’s photographic work, which “stages the aftermath” of the 2015 church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, in an effort to “provoke connection and recognition

---

audience member at one of her poetry readings. In the course of the conversation, Rankine finds her views depreciated and dismissed, violating not only her status as a citizen and poet, but also her position as a subject entitled to speak about race and racism in general (ix).

by reenacting moments of violence that are lost to history entirely” (35). In the hope of ingratiating himself with the Black artist, Charles acknowledges structural racism as a fundamental social issue – without, however, acknowledging the Spencers’ own role or involvement in it. After sharing his impressive collection of contemporary artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Longo, Glenn Ligon, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Charles introduces Charlotte to his newest acquisition, *An Anatomy of a Death*, which the playscript variously describes as a “sculpture [. . .] meant to be shown on the floor” as well as a “photograph of a diagram” and a pictorial representation of “Michael Brown’s autopsy report” (55–56).<sup>5</sup> The object used in the performance at the American Repertory Theater resembled “a large, flat, rectangular object on the floor,” showing “black lines on a white field [that] indicate the outline of a body” and “black marks [that] indicate the six bullet holes in Brown’s body” (Snyder-Young 10). For Charles, the artwork’s representational function serves as a conduit for the Black experience in the United States. He summarizes his naive understanding of the artwork by asking: “How can we get any closer to Brown’s reality than this?” (60). In the ensuing debate over the piece of art, however, the sociospatial reality of the white family home fails to provide a template for an inclusive or postracial community. The Spencer residence is neither a “home” for Brown nor for Charlotte.<sup>6</sup>

More importantly, it is Charlotte who challenges Charles’s reading of the artwork as a realistic depiction of Black suffering and death. She reminds him that it primarily references the institutional context in which the autopsy report was produced and not the killing itself. As a participant in the “prison-industrial complex” and the “connection of incarceration and capitalist enterprise” (Shelby 122), Charles locates the death of Brown outside the provenance of his own work as an investor in the prison-industrial complex as well as outside his son Alex’s involvement in the Black Lives Matter Movement. As Charlotte demonstrates, Charles’s understanding of the photograph is informed by a “racial imagination” (78) that prevents him from grasping the social and experiential reality of Black suffering and death. Charles effectively reads the photograph indexically as “a portal to the inhumanity” of Brown’s death (57). However, Charlotte criticizes Charles’s interest in the autopsy report as highly problematic because its focus on death erases not only the actual body but also the individuality and lived reality of Brown as well as the constant threat of being killed. For Charlotte, Charles’s acquisition of the photograph is an

---

5 Eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was fatally shot and killed by a white police officer on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, an incident that sparked the protest movement there.

6 As Alisa Solomon has pointed out, the play’s discussion of an appropriate visual representation of Black death echoes the controversies surrounding Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till, and Kenneth Goldsmith reading Brown’s autopsy report as poetry to a mostly white audience.

expression of “American sentimentality,” an interest in regulating and negotiating the affective response of white people (57).

While Charles and Virginia acknowledge the problem of “structural racism,” in particular with regard to the Ferguson police department, they remain detached from Charlotte’s and Brown’s lived experiences (57). Thus, Black art is reduced to a commodity that serves to comfort and reassure Charles and Virginia in their political views. As a result, the conversation between Charlotte and Charles breaks down because the Spencers remain unable to acknowledge how their own whiteness is implicated in the structural violence inflicted on Black bodies. At the climactic end of the first scene, Charlotte lies down precisely within the outlines of the artwork, thus filling in for the missing “real” body. Thus defying the autopsy report’s representational function, her body demarcates a rupture in the white sensory arrangement or “distribution of the sensible” that has structured the Spencers’ limited aestheticized experience of Brown’s death.

The second part of the play depicts the repercussions of Charlotte’s visit to the Spencers, when Charlotte meets Charles in her artist’s studio a year later. During their encounter, Charlotte consistently works towards making Charles aware of his inability to critically reflect on his own whiteness (79). As a consequence of their first encounter, Charlotte has been questioning her own artistic practice as a form of “handing over black death spectacle” (80) to collectors like Charles, by whom she feels objectified and commodified. She is afraid of being complicit with the “racial imagination” she shares with Charles (84; 78). However, she finds his interest in Black death deeply disconcerting: “Maybe you think those artists are making those paintings for you, Charles, because the black body is in a state that you are comfortable with” (81). Charlotte realizes that “Art is not going to change laws, but it might make apparent something we didn’t see about how we all grew up” (77). This is her rationale for a series of photographs of Charles’s white skin, titled *Exhibit C*, which is the centerpiece of her newest exhibition. All the while, Charles keeps defending his practice of collecting art as a form of patronage for Black artists and as a way of bringing Black death back from the “silences” of American history (82). He is furious about being turned into an object and wants to be seen and recognized in his individuality, unimplicated by history: “Tell me that you see me” (85). To Charles’s objections, Charlotte in turn articulates her own Afro-pessimist conviction that Western definitions of whiteness are predicated on the exclusion of Blackness from the category of the human: “Racism exists outside of reason. Blacks have never been human” (87). Charlotte admonishes Charles to embrace the “hopelessness” of this outlook, which eventually leads Charles to acknowledge this position when he declares: “You are right to keep me a part of it. My whiteness” (88).

Here, Charles’s moment of self-recognition coincides with Charlotte’s recognition as a speaking subject. This becomes possible because of her engaging in a new,

more confrontational artistic practice of refocusing her art away from “Black death spectacle” on the issue of Charles’s privileged whiteness. His new sense of hopelessness leads him to understand Charlotte’s point of view, a change which is not forced upon him but is rather a result of a new “distribution of the sensible” that subjects him to the Black artist’s gaze. He now realizes the normative power of his white skin: “All my skin is holding me together. Good lord, all this skin shields me. It protects me from . . . from being you. It’s like the badge of the police” (88). However, the play does not end with Charles’s monologue. It moves towards a “dissensual moment,” in Rancière’s sense, when Charles declares: “Charlotte, you can shoot me now” (88). However, Charlotte does not simply proceed to “shooting” Charles, but she makes him part of a new and intimate constellation:

*Charlotte ties her smock around her waist and, taking off her shoes, steps on a crate, binding her hands with a scarf. She stares at Charles’s back. Charles turns around. His horror and confusion are apparent. There is the click and flash of a camera. (89)*

Whereas Charles is losing the protection of his white skin at the very moment of being captured in a photograph, Charlotte assumes a pose reminiscent of a Black woman standing on an auction block that underlines the vulnerability of her Black body. However, this dissensual scenario challenges the underlying power dynamic of the white gaze by framing Charles within Charlotte’s “shot.” In terms of bell hooks’s notion of an “oppositional gaze,” Charlotte not only reclaims “the possibility of agency” but also enacts her desire to “change reality” (“Oppositional Gaze” 308). The impersonal click and flash of the camera punctuates the conventional “distribution of the sensible” in that it draws attention to the aesthetic activity of looking at the scenario itself.

This moment of dissensus involves the spectators seeing each other seated across and around the stage. The final scene’s push for a new “distribution of the sensible” is thus placed at the center of the actual theatrical community. Rankine seems to allude to the emancipatory potential of theatrical performances outlined by Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator*, where he argues that an emancipatory process of learning and questioning can only be successful “if we refuse, firstly radical distance, secondly the distribution of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between territories” (17). “Emancipation,” Rancière argues, “begins [. . .] when we understand that self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection” (13). In light of Rancière’s argument about the emancipatory potential of theatrical performances, the play’s tableau-like ending calls on spectators to reflect on their roles as onlookers, who structurally participate in the institutional “white gaze” of theater audiences.

At the American Repertory Theater production, spectators were invited to join a post-performance discussion, which was conducted in small groups and facilitated

by a diverse team of hosts (Snyder-Young 3–22). In an illuminating study of spectators' comments in these groups, Snyder-Young and her assistants observed a series of interesting reactions to the play, whose target audience consists of “the older, affluent white people dominating audiences and subscriber bases at large institution theaters” (5). While many of those attending openly expressed their sympathies for Charlotte's radical questioning of white privilege, a “vocal minority” sought to dominate discussions and refused to acknowledge the extent to which their own whiteness is implicated in the conversation the play intends to generate (8).<sup>7</sup> Even though the final tableau does not wholly preclude the possibility of consumerist, voyeuristic, or resistant attitudes among spectators, the play's conclusion nevertheless invites spectators to participate in a shared and collective activity, to understand the intention of Charlotte's aesthetic practice, and to transform the underlying logic of allocating roles and positions according to racialized categories. The play's dissensual quality makes it conceivable to “reframe the relations between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ to adapt to it” (*Emancipated Spectator* 72).

## Hypervisible Whiteness and Aesthetic Community: *Fairview*

In her critically acclaimed, Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Fairview: A Play*, Drury offers one of the most complex interventions in the conventional ways of staging race in recent years. Echoing the style of television's family sitcoms, the play uses metatheatrical devices to illustrate the performative construction of race. It introduces the audience to the members of the Frasier family, preparing a birthday dinner honoring the family's matriarchal grandmother. The first act begins with Beverly, assisted by her husband Dayton, frantically preparing the perfect dinner party. They are joined by their daughter Keisha and, later on, Beverly's sister Jasmine, while Beverly's brother Tyrone calls in to tell his exasperated sister that he will not arrive in time for the celebrations. All the while, the grandmother remains unseen, staying in her bedroom. Beverly eventually has to realize that her desperate attempts to prepare the perfect party are doomed. When she learns that the birthday

---

<sup>7</sup> For Snyder-Young, this is exemplified by one white female spectator in her thirties who refused to join the conversation, blaming the theater for not having created a more racially inclusive and diverse audience (7–8). While this comment certainly speaks to an ongoing problem of most mainstream American theaters, this episode also illustrates the complexities of asking spectators “to decenter” their “white experience” at the very moment that they become aware of its efficacy (14).

cake is irredeemably ruined, she collapses to the floor, much to her family's shock and astonishment.

An explanation for the significance of Beverly's collapse can be gleaned from several moments in the first act, in which the actors draw attention to the play's metatheatrical style. For example, Beverly is irritated by a brief disturbance in the music playing on her radio. After a short moment of puzzlement, she stares out at the audience as if looking at "*a pretend mirror hung on the fourth wall*" (8). This imaginary mirror prompts her to check her looks and to apply lipstick. She then resumes her dancing to the music on the radio. As Shane Breaux has pointed out, the female characters in the play "use the mirror to make sure they are pleased with their own reflections and how they appear to their family, and eventually, to *white audiences*" (79). The repeated gaze into the one-way mirror thus punctuates the performance, adding a metatheatrical or self-reflexive element that underlines the performance's mediality and its parodic and satirical character.

The repeated looks into the "mirror" of the fourth wall draw attention to how the characters and their bodies become racialized as part of the theatrical performance itself. This is illustrated, for example, by Beverly's sensual and seductive dancing in front of her husband, which offers more than just innocent innuendo in that it also invokes exotic and sexualized fantasies about Black womanhood. With her collapse, Beverly succumbs to more than the pressure of being the perfect homemaker, daughter, and mother; she also succumbs to the pressure of representing a Black body in a white environment. Moreover, the device of the mirror turns the white gaze into a form of surveillance that impacts the behaviors and the emotions of those being looked at. As Drury points out in an interview: "by watching someone with suspicion you change them" (Appel).

Throughout the first scene, Beverly strives to maintain a positive self-image and to achieve recognition and respectability in the face of potentially negative and harmful judgmental views of her Blackness. This, for one, is reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois's conceptualization of Black selfhood as "double consciousness" as a result of "looking at oneself through the eyes of others" and experiencing the "contempt and pity" of an unsympathetic society (11). Her exaggerated mannerisms and blunders during her frantic preparations, moreover, echo Frantz Fanon's description of how Black self-consciousness arises when the lived experience of Blackness becomes subjected to racialization: "I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the others fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye" (109). Similar to Fanon, then, *Fairview* continues to explore the possibilities of imagining the Frasier family as a model for Black social life under the very condition of the white gaze.

Beginning with act two, the play develops a postdramatic structure of various performances layered on top of each other in order to demonstrate how represen-

tations of Blackness in mainstream culture are always already framed by a white gaze. Spectators watch a mute repetition of the first act. The dialogue is now replaced by a conversation between voices that are recognizable as those of white individuals. Speaking from off-stage, Suze, Mack, Bets, and Jimbo engage in a discussion that is wholly at odds with the play's action, such as when they speculate about possible benefits of assuming different ethnic and racial identities. The white gaze of these characters is exemplified not only by a seemingly unfettered liberty to comment on and judge the Black characters but also by highly stereotypical views of Blackness. Here, the contrast of onstage action and vocal commentary resembles Hans-Thies Lehmann's notion of *parataxis* – a property of postdramatic theater that describes the combination of contrasting or dissimilar images, concepts, or fragments on the stage (86; 88). In the paratactical juxtaposition of Black and white characters in a simultaneous, yet spatially separated, performance, the white voices speak from an intermediary or liminal space aligned with the audience's white gaze, now clearly dominating the members of the Black family.

In the last act, *Fairview* pushes the theatrical performance to its logical and conceptual limits when it begins to challenge how the white gaze eclipses the Frasier's lived experience of Blackness by changing the power dynamics between those who are seeing and those who do not see. So far, the Frasier, unable to look through the mirror of the fourth wall, have been unaware of the white characters and their comments. Now, the previously invisible white characters assume the role of those Black family members who have been absent so far: Beverly's brother Tyrone, Keisha's friend Erika, and the matriarchal grandmother. In addition, the white characters also start to portray the other family members in terms of demeaning racial stereotypes. In contrast to the second act, these stereotypical images now begin to directly affect the Black characters on stage. Keisha, for example, seeking her mother's approval for a gap year before going to college, is turned into a pregnant teenager, while her father is portrayed as a gambler and drug addict (88–89; 91–93; 94–95). As Kyle C. Frisina points out: “the white characters' actions are so outrageous, their pleasure in inhabiting what they believe to be Black life so apparent, that the white gaze is fully converted from an invisible to a hypervisible force on the stage” (202). These metatheatrical moments prepare the audience for the play's climax, when Keisha, a youthful and optimistic young Black woman, representing the buoyancy of a younger generation, breaks the illusion of the fourth wall and asks spectators identifying as white to come on stage. As a consequence, the stage fills with white individuals looking back at an auditorium now predominantly occupied by non-white spectators.

Before this *coup de théâtre*, the efficacy of the white gaze has been introduced with the help of the device of the mirror, the paratactical juxtaposition of Black characters with white voices, as well as the white actors' demeaning impersonation

and characterization of the Frasier family. Thus, the white gaze has become the dominant factor in the “distribution of the sensible” informing the theatrical performance. As a form of surveillance, the white gaze has affected how characters feel and behave, as, for example, when Beverly corrects her own appearance in the mirror in act one. Keisha has also articulated a feeling of being constrained by structural forces beyond her control: “something is keeping me from what I could be” (27). In a key moment, Suze, a seemingly well-meaning white woman who has been impersonating the family’s grandmother according to her notion of sentimental white saviorism, declares to Keisha: “I’m so proud of you and I am so happy for both of us, for all I’ve done to make you who you are” (99). At this point, Keisha is able to fully recognize and name this “something” as “your loud self and your loud eyes and your loud guilt” (100). She now begins to distance and emancipate herself from it: “I can’t hear myself think. I can’t hear anything but you staring at me” (100). Keisha’s catachrestic expression, combining seeing and hearing, articulates the constraining effect of the white gaze on her own sense of self: “I can’t think in the face of you telling me who you think I am” (100).<sup>8</sup>

As a regulatory concept, the white gaze is shown to impact not only Keisha’s individual experience, but in the sense of the Rancièrian “distribution of the sensible” also the forms of community and collectivity implied in the theatrical performance itself. More importantly, Keisha’s appeal to spectators identifying as white to ascend to the stage demarcates a disruptive moment of dissensus with regard to the power dynamic between spectators and performers. According to the stage directions, the actor playing Keisha “*steps through the fourth wall. It’s as simple as that*” (102) and places herself between the other performers and the audience. She takes control over the theatrical performance and over who is rendered visible on the stage. She thus effectively displaces and expels the impact the white performers have previously exerted over the play. The white audience members are now placed on stage where their whiteness is put up for scrutiny while those remaining in the audience are rendered visible as a new collective entity.

The device of the mirror also changes its meaning when Keisha observes that those on the stage are now unable to see beyond and through the mirror of the fourth wall: “Should I tell them that the lights are there to help people see them, not to help them see anything?” (104). Affectionately referring to the remaining audience as “all my colorful people” (104), the intimacy created by Keisha’s address is the result, in Drury’s words, “of some audience members mak[ing] themselves un-

---

<sup>8</sup> With Suze playing the role of Keisha’s grandmother, the play here additionally suggests that the white gaze has also infiltrated the Frasier family as a model of Black sociality that is predicated on the presence of the white gaze in the first place.

comfortable” in an effort “to make people of color feel more comfortable” (Appel). When Keisha asks the rhetorical question “Do I have to tell them that I want them to make space for us?” (104), she not only refers to the reorganization of the theater space but also articulates a social and political disagreement riveting the theatrical community. This disruption is somewhat mitigated by Keisha reminding everyone about the voluntary and temporary character of this moment (102). More specifically, though, her reminder “That there are things in motion already” and “That no one can own a seat forever” (102–103) addresses not only how the roles and the positioning of spectators and actors align with their racialized subjectivities, but also with them being part of, in Reinelt’s sense, an “implied community” that reflects the racial dynamics in society at large.

The play’s intended movement away from anti-Blackness is not realized in the “silliness” of a grotesque food fight featuring the white characters as “aggressors” and turning into a form of “violence that feels more consequential” (98). Instead, Keisha’s intervention pushes for spectators to experience this reversal of Blackness from an object into a subject on account of the reorganization of the theatrical space and its concomitant exchange of positions.<sup>9</sup> In the course of her concluding monologue, Keisha immerses herself in the community of “all [her] colorful people” by telling them “a story about us, by us, for us, and only us” (105). Rendered as a parable in a language reminiscent of biblical prophecy, Keisha’s story focuses on “A Person Trying,” who – like Beverly in act one – “tried to work hard, tried to do their best, tried to do well by their family, tried to be good, and tried to be better” (105). Keisha’s story about the experience of living within and pushing back against the white gaze also gives rise to a new form of Black sociality. This prospective community is explicitly grounded in communal acts of seeing, understanding, and appreciating each other: “They took it all in,” Keisha declares, “and in their estimation they found all of it, their view over all of it, the sum of all of it, to be fair” (106). Here, her view of Black sociality is reminiscent of Rancière’s conceptualization of an aesthetic community that is based on sensory and aesthetic experience itself.

Similar to Rancière, Keisha’s vision of a shared aesthetic activity results in a vision of mutual appreciation and justice. While addressing “my colorful people” (104), she ends on the word “fair,” which not only connotes ideas of justice, beauty,

---

<sup>9</sup> Reactions to Keisha’s request by actual audiences were mixed, and on several occasions individual audience members resisted the call to come on the stage. In *Just Us*, Rankine also describes a white female friend’s “embodied refusal” to come to the stage (197), for which the friend offers the explanation that she considered the play’s turnabout as too ostensibly intended as a pedagogical lesson about whiteness and as too invested in making white audience members feel uncomfortable (210). Similarly, Faedra Chatard Carpenter has described the reversal at the end of the play as a somewhat reductive theatrical gesture primarily targeted at white theater patrons (369).

freshness, and purity, but – in a difficult twist – also allows for the possibility that this form of Black sociality is conceptualized in relation to whiteness.<sup>10</sup> This can be understood as an indication that Keisha’s vision does not abolish racialized identities or systems of racial classification; in fact, it could even be argued that it reinscribes whiteness as an inescapable condition for envisioning forms of community. But here I would offer a more hopeful reading of the play as a dissensual performance, in which racial categories are not ultimately overcome, but rather set aside in a turn-about that Drury has described as “a hopeful gesture” and “something that the white audience member can do [as] an active, positive, uncomfortable but possible thing” (Appel). As a form of dissensus, this possibility of a change in the dominant “distribution of the sensible” is predicated on the theatrical performance itself and, possibly, on recognizing the egalitarian potential of sensation (*Emancipated Spectator* 17).

## Conclusion

In their respective works, Rankine and Drury offer complex interventions into the ways in which theatrical performances are traditionally used in order to create an “implied community” of spectators. Working within and against the constraints of a conventional “distribution of the sensible” in theatrical performances, these playwrights address questions of social and racial equity and justice by gesturing at a more fundamental reorganization of the theatrical experience itself. They seek to destabilize the fundamental distinction between “acting” and “viewing” as constitutive theatrical practices by appealing to spectators to reflect on their own participation in the performance and, more generally, in the production of racial categories in both society and the theater. *The White Card* and *Fairview* invite an understanding of theatrical performance as a shared, collective, aesthetic activity and focus their critique on ways that acculturated assumptions about race always already mediate and structure theatrical experience as well as the forms of sociality this experience implies.

Following Rancière, these plays can be understood as dissensual performances in that they introduce Black subjects that intervene in how theater regulates social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion based on racial categories. In *The White Card*, this dissensus is enacted in a final visual scenario designed by a Black female artist and embedded in the collective experience of theatrical performances. The

---

<sup>10</sup> In an interview, Drury has pointed out: “This play couldn’t happen for an audience that was entirely people of color. It needs to have white people to function. So even this play, that is trying to decenter whiteness, actually centers whiteness in and of itself” (Appel).

design of the stage as well as the location of the actors make the audience a constitutive part of the performance. In a similar manner, *Fairview* also demonstrates the underlying dissensus in the structure of the theatrical performance itself in that its young female protagonist exposes how the audience's white gaze regulates and structures conceptualizations of Black sociality. Taken together, *The White Card* and *Fairview* mark an important starting point for rethinking Western mainstream theater's role in the struggle for racial equity and justice by enabling a shared aesthetic experience, where we can see and hear each other on more equitable terms.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8.2 (2007): 149–168. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>>.
- Appel, Liz. "Theater Is Coded as a White Space: Jackie Sibblies Drury Is Changing That." *Vogue*, 5 June 2019. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://www.vogue.com/article/jackie-sibblie-drury-fairview-pulitzer-interview>>.
- Breaux, Shane. "Seeking a Fairer View: Smashing Theatrical Mirrors in Contemporary Black Drama." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 42.2 (2020): 75–87. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <[https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj\\_a\\_00526](https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj_a_00526)>.
- Carpenter, Faedra Chatard. "Fairview by Jackie Sibblies Drury." *Theatre Journal* 72.3 (2020): 367–369. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2020.0076>>.
- Chaudhuri, Una. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995. Print.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. New York: One World, 2017. Print.
- Colbert, Soyica Diggs. *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2017. Print.
- Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849*. Durham: Duke UP, 2014. Print.
- Drury, Jackie Sibblies. *Fairview: A Play*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2019. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Norton Critical Edition*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: Norton, 1999. Print.
- Elam, Harry J. Jr. "The Device of Race: An Introduction." *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. 3–16. Print.
- . *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967. Print.
- Frisina, Kyle C. "Contemporary African-American Drama at Visuality's Limits." *Modern Drama* 63.2 (2020): 197–220. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.3138/md.63.2.1080>>.
- hooks, bell. "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition." *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*. Ed. Catherine Ugwu. London: Bay, 1995. 210–221. Print.
- . "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Feminist Film Theory*. Ed. Sue Thornham. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999. 307–320. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474473224-033>>.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.

- Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003. Print.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2015. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203076804>>.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Introducing Disagreement." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9.3 (2004): 3–9. Print.
- . *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2009. Print.
- . *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350284913>>.
- Rankine, Claudia. *The White Card: A Play in One Act*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019. Print.
- . *Just Us: An American Conversation*. London: Penguin, 2020. Print.
- . "The White Card Toolkit." *Arts Emerson*, Web. 19 Jan. 2023. <<https://s3.amazonaws.com/american-rep-assets/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/17110521/The-White-Card-Toolkit.pdf>>.
- , and P. Carl. "A Note from Playwright Claudia Rankine and Dramaturg P. Carl." *The White Card*, American Repertory Theater, 22 Feb. 2018. 12–13. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <[https://issuu.com/americanrep/docs/the\\_white\\_card\\_program\\_final](https://issuu.com/americanrep/docs/the_white_card_program_final)>.
- Reinelt, Janelle. "Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy." *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*. Eds. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998. 283–300. Print.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Sexton, Jared. "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016). Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02>>.
- Shelby, Tommie. *The Idea of Prison Abolition*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2022. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691229775>>.
- Snyder-Young, Dani. *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2020. Print.
- Solomon, Alisa. "Stacked Deck: With *The White Card* Claudia Rankine Turns to the Stage." *The Nation*, 10 Apr. 2019. Web. 10 Jan. 2024. <<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/claudia-rankine-white-card-new-play-poetry-review>>.
- Wilderson, Frank B. III. *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Young, Harvey. *Theatre & Race*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.

## Bionote

### Frank Obenland

is a Senior Lecturer for American Literature and Cultural History at the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at the University of Mainz. His current research and teaching focuses on historical and contemporary African American theater and drama. In his research, he examines how theater and drama serve as platforms for contesting the social construction of racial identities. His publications include essays on William Wells Brown, Langston Hughes, C.L.R. James, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.