



## WATCHING THE WATCHERS: RACE, PRIVILEGE, AND RESISTANCE IN JACKIE SIBBLIES DRURY'S FAIRVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* stands as a rigorous metatheatrical intervention that critically examines race, privilege, and the politics of spectatorship in contemporary America. This paper analyses how the play systematically dismantles conventional theatrical realism to reveal the subtle yet entrenched operations of white supremacy within everyday social relations and cultural representation. By staging an ostensibly familiar Black family drama that is progressively destabilized by the invasive voices and surveillant gazes of white observers, Drury exposes the asymmetrical power relations between those rendered visible and those who exercise the unmarked authority to observe without accountability. The audience is thereby repositioned from passive consumers of spectacle to ethically implicated participants, compelled to interrogate their own location within racialized regimes of looking, interpretation, and consumption. The study contends that *Fairview* mobilizes surveillance, interruption, and role reversal as aesthetic strategies of resistance, reclaiming narrative agency from dominant perspectives. Finally, through its radical reconfiguration of spectatorship, the play unsettles liberal paradigms of empathy and reimagines theatre as a site of critical self-reflexivity, moral responsibility, and political confrontation.

**Keywords:** *Race, Privilege, Spectatorship, Resistance, Metatheatre, Surveillance*



## INTRODUCTION

Jackie Sibblies Drury is a prolific contemporary American playwright known for her formally innovative and politically incisive theatre. Her work consistently interrogates issues of race, power, representation, and spectatorship, challenging audiences to reflect on their own social and ethical positions. Her plays often employ experimental structures, non-linear narratives, and metatheatrical techniques to disrupt theatrical realism and expose the ideological frameworks that shape everyday experiences.

For her *Fairview* (2018), she got both international recognition as well as won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama because of her bold exploration of white privileged and racialized spectatorship. Her other notable works are *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation...* (2012), *Really* (2016), and *Marys Seacole* (2019). Not only do these plays examine historical memory, but also interrogate collective guilt and the limits of empathy. Having fostered experimental performance, she becomes a co-founder of The Appointment. Through her intellectually rigorous and aesthetically challenging dramaturgy, Drury has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary American drama, redefining drama as a space for critical inquiry, ethical confrontation, and social transformation.

## DISCUSSION

She beautifully employed the metatheatre device to interrogate race, privilege, and the dynamics of spectatorship within contemporary American society. First, it is necessary to understand the concept of metatheatre. The term metatheatre was coined by

Lionel Abel in his work *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963), in which he describes plays that are self-conscious about their own theatrical nature. The primary features of the metatheatre's play are as follows. First, metatheatre openly displays its theatricality, making the audience aware that they are watching a performance rather than concealing itself behind realistic action. It is done by commenting its own performance. Second, breaking the fourth wall when characters speak directly to the audience, or using devices like a "drama about drama, play-within-a-play and role reversal" (Martin Gray: 172, 173). Third, at the end of the play, an actor speaks half in person, half in character. By doing so, metatheatre prevents passive viewing and encourages the audience to think critically about what they are watching. It is often used to question ideas about reality, power, and representation, and is especially effective in political and experimental drama, such as Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*.

The play is written in three acts. When the curtain opens, it was simple and family drama of an upper middle class black family of Frasier's, who are preparing for a birthday celebration of grandmother. But it soon becomes a provocative, genre-defying exploration of race, privilege, and the dynamics of watching. The first line of the act one "Lights up on a negro: Beverly is peeling carrots" (Drury: 7). It powerfully addresses the intertwined histories of labour and the enslavement of Black people in America. Meanwhile, Dayton, her husband, enters with a bunch of silverware. Beverly becomes overstressed because of wrong silverware and extensive work for birthday celebrations. She said to herself, "I am so behind" (Drury: 8) for preparing the



carrots, roast, cake, chilled wine, and silverware. Since Beverly plans the seating arrangements as her mother sits "at the head of the table" (Drury: 9). But he disagrees the idea of Mama sitting at the head of table and he is displeased to learn that Beverly's sister, Jasmine, is joining them. Beverly replies, "She is family. And family is everything" (10). But Beverly's chaotic sister Jasmine turns up, amping up Beverly's stress levels and resulting in her fainting at the end of Act One.

This burden of labour is not Beverly's alone; her daughter, Keisha, is drawn into the same exhausting cycle when Beverly insists that what Keisha "needs to do," rather than enjoying the party, "is to go on in that kitchen and check on her grandmother's birthday cake, and help her mother out today" (Drury: 28). Having transformed the beautiful and joyous evening into a tyrannous responsibility for constant attention to food preparation. This not only exposes racial discrimination but also serves as a grim reminder of the historically entrenched enslavement of Black people.

"Act two watches act one" (Drury: 2), which means Act one's scenes are enacted in the same manner, however, the dramatic action is now persistently overlaid with the commentary of four ostensibly white audience members, whose superimposed conversation intrudes upon the performance, fractures its coherence, and foregrounds the act of spectatorship itself. Watching the play, they are debating on race, occasionally commenting what they observe but are engaged in their own conversation. Meanwhile, Jimbo asks Suze, "If you could choose to be a different race, what race

would you be?" (Drury: 32). At first, she refused to choose any race by saying "because race isn't something you can change" (Drury: 32). Jimbo challenges Suze by recalling her claim that race is a social construct, arguing that something cannot be both constructed and real at the same time. Suze counters this by insisting that the constructed nature of race does not negate its lived reality or social consequences. The exchange culminates in Suze's pointed question, asking Jimbo what race he would choose if given the option, thereby exposing the tension between abstract theory and the material, lived experience of race.

Jimbo answered her that he would like to become an Asian, because Asians are very traditional and strict with their children. Jumbo claims that as an Asian, he will rebel to show that Asians can become whatever they want. He will take his parents to therapy and have a happy family. Suze opposes to his stereotyping, and Jimbo calls her a "good little liberal" (38). They are soon joined by Mack, who responds without hesitation that he would choose to be Latinx, expressing a desire to inhabit the stereotypes commonly associated with Latinx identity. Bets, by contrast, positions herself as an outsider to the American context and criticizes what she sees as the Americans' monotonous preoccupation with race, stating that she would choose to be a Slav. She further argues that discussions of race are rendered tedious precisely because they are constrained by predictable rituals of apology and self-justification. This dismissive stance eventually irritates Suze, who, shedding her earlier theoretical distance, finally enters the game and



declares that she would choose to be African American.

SUZE: And it's like, I would choose to be African-American, actually. Because I was raised by. My family, we had ... but she was more than that, she was this lovely ... Her name ... (quavering) Her name was Mabel. (Drury: 28)

The four white characters function as representative figures of the dominant ways in which white individuals reproduce everyday racism. Suze embodies the liberal white saviour, whose ostensibly progressive discourse conceals an impulse toward moral superiority and control. Mack, a gay man, claims the existence of an "inner Black woman," appropriating Black identity as a performative accessory rather than engaging with its material realities. Jimbo reduces Black male subjectivity to rap music, flattening a diverse and historically grounded experience into a single cultural expression. Bets, positioned as a European observer, critiques Americans for their preoccupation with race while remaining wilfully blind to the pervasive and systemic racism embedded within her own society.

"The process of classifying individuals according to racial identity is highly complex, shaped by the interaction of social hierarchies, power relations, and historical contexts. Racial identity is not merely a biological or cultural distinction; rather, it is a historically constructed phenomenon formed through social processes and institutional forces" (Jenkins, 1994, p. 208). Across the ages, both physically and economically powerful people have established and imposed racial categories in order to

control weaker people. For example, according to Anusmriti, Indian people follow the four-fold system or *varna system* Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The first group controls remaining three group members. When the European nations established colonies and imposed the rigid racial classification in order to legalise economic exploitation and impose social stratification. Similarly, in the USA, Jim Crow laws institutionalized racial identity as a mechanism for maintaining white supremacy, demonstrating how theories of racial supremacy have been embedded within legal and social structures.

Jimbo's statement acknowledges a traditional and confused interpretation of Black identity. He says that being a "rich Black person" (Drury: 57) is not a powerful man. He believes that Black identity is fixed with class and performance rather than its complex social and historical reality. We admit that, to some extent, money can solve social status issues, but not completely eradicate them, because racial identity continues to shape lived experiences rather than economic status. This perspective reflects a privileged blindness to systemic racism, as it ignores that even wealthy black individuals continue to suffer from racial prejudice and discrimination. Finally, Jimbo's comments expose how racial identity is often misunderstood and trivialized by those who view it through stereotypes rather than lived experience.

The statement shows how wealth, social status, and racial identity together shape a person's life in society. While money can solve some practical problems, it cannot remove the reality of being part of a racial minority. Even wealthy Black individuals



may still face suspicion, profiling, and discrimination because of their race. This connection between race and class is deeply linked to systemic racism and a long history of discrimination against Black communities. Growing up Black in America often means living with the lasting effects of past and present oppression. Wealth alone cannot erase these social and historical experiences. It is therefore incorrect to believe that financial success can remove the impact of race. Even with economic security, racial identity continues to influence how people are treated and the experiences they have, showing that identity is shaped by more than money—it is formed by race, culture, and history.

Bets's speech powerfully expresses how Black women are constantly silenced and controlled by social expectations. The repeated commands to "shhh" and to not be "too proud" or "too sexy" reveal how society polices Black women's bodies, voices, and emotions. By listing labels such as "too loud," "too aggressive," and "too sassy," Bets exposes the stereotypes used to dismiss and undermine Black women whenever they assert themselves. These judgments are rooted in fear—fear of her emotional depth, intelligence, and confidence. Bets's declaration, "I am too much," (Drury: 90) transforms what society treats as a flaw into a statement of strength and self-acceptance. Rather than apologizing for her presence, she reclaims it, challenging a world that seeks to diminish Black women for simply being fully themselves.

## CONCLUSION

*Fairview* stands as a powerful example of how metatheatres can be used to critically examine race,

privilege, and spectatorship in contemporary American society. By foregrounding its own theatricality, the play refuses passive consumption and instead compels the audience to confront their position as watchers, participants, and beneficiaries of racialized systems. Through its three-act structure, Drury gradually destabilizes realism, moving from a seemingly ordinary Black family drama to a sharp exposure of how white spectators frame, stereotype, and appropriate Black lives. The intrusive commentary of the white characters in Act Two lays bare everyday forms of liberal racism, while Act Three intensifies this discomfort by directly addressing the audience's complicity. The play also reveals how race operates beyond class, showing that wealth cannot erase the lived realities of Blackness shaped by history, labour, and systemic oppression. Bets's final assertion—"I am too much"—encapsulates the play's resistance to silencing and reduction, transforming marginalization into defiance and self-affirmation. Ultimately, *Fairview* uses metatheatres not as a stylistic experiment alone but as a political strategy, forcing audiences to reflect critically on power, representation, and their own role within structures of racial inequality.

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