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# Historical Authenticity: Performing Victorian Blackness in *Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabarti and *An Octoroon* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I draw on approaches from neo-Victorian studies, theatre history as well as race and performance studies to argue that authenticity is a historically contingent concept and ideologically motivated category of value. In nineteenth-century theatre, the idea of authenticity was used to exclude and stereotype black people. My analysis of the neo-Victorian dramas *Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabarti and *An Octoroon* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and their first productions in London and New York focuses on the trope of authenticity to trace how these two plays historicise and make visible the cultural production of racialised discourses in the theatre. In both productions, theatricality is employed to question authenticity claims in relation to race. *Red Velvet* rehabilitates authenticity for its project of recapturing a lost black theatre history. *An Octoroon*, by contrast, seems to reject the trope of authenticity for a more performative understanding of race, thereby resignifying racist theatrical devices. By historicising authenticity *Red Velvet* and *An Octoroon* are therefore able to expose historical and current racism within the theatre industry and serve as anti-racist interventions.

Authenticity is a highly politically charged and historically mobile concept, especially in relation to race. This paper explores how *Red Velvet* (2012, dir. Indhu Rubasingham) and *An Octoroon* (2014, dir. Sarah Benson) historicise authenticity. The productions reveal how the trope of authenticity was used in nineteenth-century theatre to exclude and stereotype black people and how this legacy endures within the theatre in Britain and America. *Red Velvet* rehabilitates the concept of authenticity, identifying it with the character of Ira Aldridge, who, the play suggests, was prevented by racism from achieving his true po-

tential as an actor. One of playwright Lolita Chakrabarti's stated aims for *Red Velvet* is to recapture lost black history and to use the theatre to establish a theatrical lineage for BME actors on the UK stage (*Red Velvet*, Preface). In contrast, the playful irreverence of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' adaptation of Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* seems to undercut fixed notions of race by asserting the performativity of race; authenticity then seems at best an irrelevant, at worst a potentially oppressive category. Both strategies are antiracist interventions.

The main sense of authenticity I want to explore is of accuracy of representation. This is not merely aesthetic but also political, particularly when the objects of aesthetic representation are un- or underrepresented politically. As E. Patrick Johnson argues, 'Because the concept of blackness has no essence, "black authenticity" is overdetermined—contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of its production … Authenticity, then, is yet another trope manipulated for cultural capital' (3). Harvey Young's concept of 'phenomenal blackness' is also relevant here. Young defines this as 'the ways in which an *idea* of the black body has been and continues to be projected across actual physical bodies' (4, original emphasis), often violently. The popularity of the nineteenth-century theatre, in Britain and America, made it a highly influential medium in the cultural production of this fictional, stereotyped 'black body', as Michael Pickering and Hazel Waters have explored. Both *Red Velvet* and *An Octoroon* show how the racist production of 'authentic blackness', the warrior Moor in the former and the blackface minstrel in the latter, is remote from actual black people, leaves very little room for other, dissenting representations and can even justify racist violence.

*Red Velvet* and *An Octoroon's* revisionary engagement with theatre history places them in a burgeoning genre of

neo-Victorian texts, which Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn define as '*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*' (4, original emphasis). Whilst Benjamin Poore, in his survey of plays representing the Victorians since 1968 in Britain, is right to point out Heilmann and Llewellyn's neglect of drama in favour of literature and film and the potential of excluding texts based on aesthetic judgement, his self-described 'quantitative' approach goes too far in the opposite direction and underestimates the importance of theatrical form in creating meaning (7). It is *Red Velvet* and *An Octoroon*'s metatheatrical engagement with history that makes them so effective. Indeed, because it is an embodied medium, theatre can go further than other kinds of neo-Victorian texts in re-animating and reflecting upon the past. Joseph Roach's concept of 'kinaesthetic imagination', a form of cultural memory found in 'gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories' is relevant here (26). In both *Red Velvet* and *An Octoroon*, the bodies of the actors are crucial in enacting and revising racialised theatre history, particularly in the recreation of historic acting styles, white face, racial drag and minstrelsy. Roach's approach also broadens the discussion beyond the theatre to other performances of race, as although he points out that kinaesthetic imagination 'exists to a high degree of concentration in performers', he argues that 'it also operates in the performance of everyday life' (26). This allows for the consideration of the relationship between productions of race within the theatre and how they are performed in the world outside.

*Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabarti is a semi-fictionalised account of the life of Ira Aldridge, the first black actor to perform

at a legitimate theatre (one of two licensed by the Lord Chamberlain to perform spoken drama) in Britain in the nineteenth century. *Red Velvet* premiered at the Tricycle Theatre in London in October 2012 and was directed by the theatre's new Artistic Director, Indhu Rubasingham. It was revived at the Tricycle in January 2014, before transferring to St Ann's Warehouse in New York. I saw the production in its revival at the Garrick Theatre in London in January 2016.

The main action of *Red Velvet* is set up as a flashback: Aldridge's encounter with a journalist at the start of the play in 1867 provokes him to remember the events of 1833, when he was engaged to play the lead in *Othello* at Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. In Chakrabarti's version of history, due to a virulently negative, racist reaction in the press, the manager of the Theatre Royal, Pierre Laporte, decides to let the house go dark after only two nights rather than allowing Aldridge to continue in the role.

*An Octoroon* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins is a highly metatheatrical adaptation of Dion Boucicault's 1859 play, *The Octoroon*, a Victorian sensation drama set on a southern plantation that centres on the plight of Zoe, who is one eighth black (an 'octoroon'). *An Octoroon* premiered at the Soho Rep in New York in April 2014 and was directed by Sarah Benson. Benson's production was revived at Theatre for a New Audience in New York in February 2015, where I saw it. As with Boucicault's original play, *An Octoroon* has also been produced across the Atlantic, in Ned Bennett's recent production at the Orange Tree Theatre in London, which opened in May 2017.[1] Branden Jacobs-Jenkins adaptation is surprisingly faithful to Boucicault's play. However, it is ironised by a frame narrative, in which a black actor playing the character 'BJJ' and a white actor playing the character 'Play-

[1] As I saw the Orange Tree Production late in the editing process of this article, I will focus on Benson's production and only make brief references to Bennett's.

wright' squabble and explain the mechanics of melodrama, and by the use of racial drag: actors black up, red up and white up onstage.

## Representation and Realism in *Red Velvet*

The first sense of 'authenticity' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition is 'accurate reflection of real life, verisimilitude' (1). *Red Velvet* explores how questions of aesthetics have been used as a veil for racism. One of the most outrageous moments of staged racism in Rubasingham's production is the speech the character Charles Kean (who is characterised as Aldridge's fiercest opponent) gives to the theatre manager, Pierre Laporte:

> Pierre … acting is an art. Transformation is an art. My father, a small … physically … challenged ageing man, to see him become a warrior Moor … is an art, isn't it? … People come to the theatre to get away from reality. And … what I mean to say is … it's a sad fact … and I'm sorry to say it … but it's true I'm afraid that … his … well … he will prevent them from escaping reality … (43, original ellipses)

Kean attempts to disguise his racism as a concern for theatrical mode, helped by the rhetorical device of aposiopesis: 'I'm afraid that...his...well...he'. Kean cannot even bring himself to verbally acknowledge Aldridge's blackness, as if by pretending not to see race he is not being racist. The gaps in Kean's speech illustrate the historically determined construction of authenticity.

Kean professes that the purpose of theatre is escapism; the true skill of acting is in the transformation. This logic, which strikes a twenty-first century audience member accustomed to a naturalistic concern for reflecting reality as perverse, informed many of the racist reviews of Aldridge's 1833 performance, a

selection of which are read aloud by the cast in *Red Velvet*. One of the most shocking is an excerpt from a review *The Spectator*: 'An African is no more qualified to personate Othello—than a huge fat man would be competent to represent Falstaff' (72). Beyond the excerpt quoted in *Red Velvet*, the review continues, 'the property-man can furnish as good a suit of "the shadowed livery of the burnished sun" for stage purposes, as Dame Nature herself,— perhaps, in his own opinion, a better' ('The African Actor' 328). The keyword in the review is 'verisimilitude', a synonym for authenticity, signifying the appropriateness to and believability of an actor in a part.[2] The reviewer for *The Spectator* asserts that the body of the actor does not produce 'verisimilitude' in the role; indeed, in the case of the raced, 'African' body, it militates against 'verisimilitude'. However, whilst seeming to deny the body in favour of the incorporeal 'temperament', the reviewer tacitly replaces the obscenely corporeal 'African' body with 'a flat nose and thick lips' with an unmarked white body, which can be blacked up—this is the value judgement communicated in the word, 'better' (328).

A twenty-first century audience, used to seeing black actors in the role of Othello, may struggle to comprehend how a white actor blacked up could ever have been considered 'better'. Yet this is to underestimate the shock of Aldridge's appearance in the role of Othello to a Victorian audience, which *Red Velvet* attempts to contextualise. Theatre historian Hazel Waters emphasises that Edmund Kean, Aldridge's predecessor in the role at the Theatre Royal, had represented Othello as 'tawny' rather than black (70). Othello, a noble, tragic hero, did not fit with conventional theatrical representations of black people as servants and buffoons, such as Mungo in *The Padlock*, a role Aldridge himself

[2] For a brilliant exploration of Victorian perceptions of authenticity and acting, see Voskuil.

often played (Duncan 246). In nineteenth-century Britain, theatrical and scientific discourses of race, along with colonialism, fed into each other to promote a discursive hierarchy of European races over non-European ones, as Jane Goodall shows. Even before anthropological and ethnographical accounts used physical features as a circular 'proof' of racial inferiority in the second half of the nineteenth-century, Goodall notes that a number of non-Europeans were displayed in ethnological freak shows, such as Saartje Bartmaan (165). Goodall argues, in reference to such shows, 'Performance skills in themselves were crucially situated on the savage/ civilised borderline, so that a too-skilled presentation of savagery might paradoxically fail in its objectives, while too natural a display would frustrate the expectations of an audience who wanted to see a certain kind of mental image realised in performance' (89). By this logic, Aldridge's performance was criticised as it was at once under-identified and over-identified with the part: because he is black, he cannot act 'the warrior Moor'; because he is black, audience members cannot suspend their disbelief. As Othello, Aldridge's raced body exceeded accepted nineteenth-century forms of black representation. In *Red Velvet*, Aldridge comments ruefully to Laporte, 'So when Kean plays the Moor, we're amazed at how skilfully he descends into this base African tragedy but with me it seems I'm revealin' my true nature' (85).

The phrase 'true nature' is important, as it suggests another definition of authenticity: 'A mode of existence arising from self-awareness, critical reflection on one's goals and values, and responsibility for one's actions; the condition of being true to oneself' (OED, 3d). The OED's first citation of the use of the term 'authenticity' in this sense is from 1948, suggesting that the idea is anachronistic for the nineteenth-century character

Aldridge to express. Sophie Duncan has written incisively about Chakrabarti's use of the ahistorical in order to 'associate ... nineteenth-century blackness not merely with the 'exotic' but also emphatically with the modern, progressive and intersectional' (Duncan, 231). To this list can be added 'authentic'. Rubasingham's production deliberately employs anachronism (or historical in-authenticity) as part of its critique of racialised, historical notions of 'verisimilitude'. Nonetheless, the script, direction and, crucially, the acting style that Adrian Lester employs in the production imbue the role of Ira Aldridge with authenticity to a twenty-first century audience, setting up a rival definition of authenticity as being true to oneself.

In Chakrabarti's telling of Aldridge's story, it was Ira Aldridge's innovative acting style, almost as much as his race, which disturbed and angered the nineteenth century theatrical status quo (although supposedly aesthetic concern can act as a smokescreen for racism). When Ira Aldridge arrives at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, he asks the company to perform Desdemona's arrival in Cyprus. Rubasingham and the cast of the play-within-a-play create a pastiche of early nineteenth century acting, which proved one of the funniest moments of *Red Velvet* in production. Their acting, as the stage directions state, is 'full of gesture, pose and scale' (34); the character Ellen Tree as Desdemona does not look at Aldridge as Othello even as he greets her. George Taylor states that 'the stock style [of the early nineteenth-century theatre, as opposed to longer runs] emphasised individual expression rather than social interplay, and the outward expression of feeling, through gesture and vocal technique' (22). In contrast, the character Ira Aldridge objects, in the character Ellen Tree's words, to the "teapot' school of acting' and answers Tree in the affirmative when she asks, 'So I may

play what I feel?' (37). Aldridge's suggestions imply that he is in favour of a more naturalistic playing style.

However, casting Aldridge as a champion of naturalism in 1833 is anachronistic. Although Errol Hill argues that Aldridge did help modernise acting, he dates this to Aldridge's sympathetic performance of Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* in 1857 (19). Furthermore, as Taylor's account suggests, early nineteenth-century acting set great store by representing feeling, albeit in a stylised way. Perhaps then, the emphasis of Tree's question is on the 'I', acting as an expression of the self and, therefore, a kind of authenticity. Here, the senses of authenticity as being true to oneself and as accuracy of representation blur. In another layer of Rubasingham's production, when the Covent Garden cast are not 'acting', the twenty-first-century actors embody them in a naturalistic performance style. Naturalism seems therefore to be designated the authentic playing style, set against the comic artificiality of early-nineteenth century acting conventions (from a twenty-first century audience's perspective, at least). Identifying Aldridge with a more naturalistic style, then, increases the sense of Aldridge's authenticity.[3]

Yet it is not only Lester as Aldridge as Othello's acting style that is made a signifier of authenticity, but also his race. To a twenty-first century audience of *Red Velvet*, Lester is a legitimate Othello because of his stature as an actor, his association with the role, and because he is black. As Sophie Duncan notes, Adrian Lester was heavily associated with the role of Othello (241), especially for those audience members of the revivals, including myself, who had seen him take the title role in Nicholas Hytner's 2013 production at the National Theatre. In the same

[3] It is important to note that Adrian Lester nuanced his performance of Ira Aldridge's performance of Othello. He still employed larger gestures and passions than would be customary in a contemporary performance of the role.

way that Rubasingham's production sets Lester as Aldridge as Othello's more naturalistic acting against the artificiality of early nineteenth-century gestural acting, it sets the audience's sense of Aldridge's legitimacy as a black Othello against Aldridge's Victorian detractors' sense of his lack of 'verisimilitude'.

There is a danger that such a positioning of the twenty-first-century audience members' progressive understanding of race against the risible alienness of the Victorians could allow them to dismiss racism as Victorian and thereby be insulated from confronting the continuing legacy of racism within the theatre industry. Nonetheless, the final image of Rubasingham's production acts as a gestus, showing the violent marking of race on the body in performances in and beyond the theatre. Lester as Aldridge has been preparing to go onstage as *King Lear*, gradually putting on his costume and applying makeup. At the last moment, Lester turns to face the audience. He is in white face. He quotes from King Lear, 'they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie' (92). The lights go down. In the violent marking of race upon his body, Adrian Lester is re-enacting how Aldridge played 'white' Shakespearean parts. In Chakrabarti's tragic version of Aldridge's story, whiting up could seem the ultimate betrayal of authenticity; Aldridge was prevented from living his authentic self, a black actor, due to racism. However, such a focus on Aldridge as an individual and a victim risks oversimplifying how he negotiated blackness within the limitations of nineteenth-century racial discourses, as well as obscuring wider, structural racism. Ultimately, *Red Velvet*'s anti-racist critique is limited by the production's continued reliance on authenticity as a category of value.

## Blackface Minstrelsy and Racial Drag in *An Octoroon*

Ira Aldridge's acting career intersects with the stage history of blackface minstrelsy. The minstrel show was a form of popular entertainment originating in the United States, but also popular in Britain, in which generally white, male performers blacked up with burnt cork and performed comic dances, skits and songs. It developed from individual performers, such as T.D. Rice in the 1830s, to full-blown variety shows in the 1840s and '50s. In staging demeaning stereotypes of African Americans for laughs, blackface minstrelsy played a large role in what Hazel Waters calls 'the consolidation of the black grotesque' (114). Stage representations of black people in the nineteenth century also drew on minstrelsy, including the multiple dramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and their characterisations of Topsy as insensate heathen and Uncle Tom as the happy slave, which were hugely popular in Britain and America in 1852-'53 (Pickering 23). A number of theatre historians note that blackface minstrelsy was received as an authentic representation of blackness because of its grotesquerie (see Waters 95-109; Goodall 123). Indeed, Eric Lott suggests that 'the belief in the authenticity of blackface' was so great that white theatregoers mistook white minstrel performers in blackface for black people (20).

In an interview, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins said that his play *Neighbors* (2010) is an investigation of 'a 300-year history of black people in the theater' (quoted in Healey). *Neighbors* juxtaposes a naturalistic drama about two families with interludes drawing on blackface minstrelsy; in its premiere at the Park Theater in New York in February 2010, which was directed by Nigel Smith, the Crow family were played by black actors in black face. In the final scene, the Crow family (each member of which is named after a stock character in minstrel shows) are prepar-

ing to go 'onstage' to perform their minstrel show. The son, Jim Crow, who is a reluctant performer in the family show business, worries, 'What if they don't like me?' His mother, Mammy, replies, 'They luvs evathang we does', before she and Jim's siblings, Sambo and Topsy, launch into a list of racialised stereotypes that span from minstrelsy to twenty-first century American culture:

| | |
|---|---|
| Topsy | They luvs when we dance. |
| Sambo | When we shucks. |
| Mammy | When we jives. |
| | ... |
| Topsy | When we ax like we on crack lak dis. |
| Sambo | (*doing a stomp routine*) When we stomps our feet lak dis. |
| Topsy | When we drop it lak it's hot lak dis. |
| | ... |
| Mammy | They luvs when we be lak dat. |

(Scene 18)

By paralleling minstrelsy with twenty-first century forms of cultural production, including Snoop Dogg and Hollywood films, Jacobs-Jenkins suggests the continuing danger that racialised representations can obscure complex realities. The recasting of grotesque, racist stereotypes as 'authentic' blackness is achieved through the complicity of the audience and the performers. The performers represent to the audience what they want to see ('They luvs when we be lak dat'), which results in a self-reinforcing loop of racist cultural appropriation and caricature.

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins strives in his plays for a relationship with the audience that breaks that loop, encouraging scepticism of representations presumed to be authentic. In the final moments of *Neighbors*, the house lights come up on the Crows and the audience and the stage directions instruct, 'We watch them. They watch us. We watch each other' (Scene 18). This dynamic of confrontational, mutual watchfulness is carried through into *An Octoroon*, which makes use of metatheatre and racial drag in part in order to contest the value of concepts of authenticity—racial and theatrical.[4]

It is worth noting that Boucicault's treatment of race in his production of *The Octoroon* in New York in 1859 was more nuanced than might be expected. Boucicault's white wife, Agnes Robertson, played Zoe—a casting choice that undermined the bodily legibility of race and suggesting that the 'taint' of being an octoroon was a social construct rather than something innate. Nonetheless, Boucicault himself wore redface to play Wahnotee.[5] Additionally, the play's depiction of the plantation slaves, which he claimed were based on his travels in the South and would have been played by white actors blacking up, owes something to blackface minstrelsy conventions. Jacobs-Jenkins re-appropriates and resignifies Boucicault's minstrelsy into racial drag to suggest the performative nature of race: actors black up, white up and red up on stage to play characters of a different ethnicity from their own. The twenty-first-century American theatre audience's squeamishness about blackface is crucial in the effectiveness of this device.

[4] Whilst Benson's production was staged end-on, Ned Bennett's was staged in the round at *The Orange Tree*. This made me hyper-conscious of my fellow audience members, who were, on the preview night I saw it, mostly white and older, and their reactions. For an excellent critique of Bennett's production's relationship with the audience and race, see Wagaine.

[5] For a discussion of redface in America, see Deloria.

The extent of the racial drag is conveyed by the list of Dramatis Personae at the front of the playtext, which is astoundingly specific in the 'ethnicities listed in order of preference', at once reifying race and suggesting it is performative. BJJ, 'played by an actual playwright, African-American actor, or black actor', whites up to play George and M'Closky. As in Boucicault's original, the 'white actor, or actor who can pass as white' playing the Playwright, reds up to play Wahnotee. The 'Indigenous American actor/ actress, a South Asian actor/ actress, or one who can pass as Native American' who plays the Assistant blacks up to play the slaves Pete and Paul. The slippage created by the word 'pass' points to the paradox of staging race; whilst audience members may read race onto the actors' bodies onstage, the visual signifiers may not correspond with how the actors themselves identify. Johnson argues that, in 'the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people', 'blackness supersedes or explodes performance in that the modes of representation endemic to performance— the visual and spectacular—are no longer viable registers of racial identification' (8). In *An Octoroon*, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Sarah Benson spectacularise race (in the sense of making it a spectacle) to make the cultural production of race visible.

The racial drag ironises the racist content of Boucicault's *The Octoroon*. For example, when George (in whiteface) asks Pete (in blackface) whether the slaves were all born on this estate, the slave replies:

> Dem darkies? Born here? What? On Terrebonne! Don't believe it, Mas'r George — dem black tings never was born at all; dey growed up one mornin' frum da roots of a sassafras tree in the / swamp (52).

This is almost word for word what he says in Boucicault's play;

the minstrelised dialect and folk wisdom are hallmarks of minstrel representation. Yet, in the Theatre for a New Audience Production, Austin Smith presented Pete's minstrelised characterisation as just an act, put on around white people to appeal to their beliefs about black people's 'folksy ways' (52).

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins further interrogates the problems of representation by having the house slaves Dido and Minnie (played by black actors) speak in twenty-first-century, urban slang. The comedy lies in the anachronism and the wilful inappropriateness, such as Minnie's reassurance to Dido, 'You can't be bringing your work home with you' (137). A note in the playscript before Act 1 reads 'I'm just going to say this right now so we can get it over with: I don't know what a real slave sounded like. And neither do you' (43). Branden Jacobs-Jenkins forestalls criticism of the authenticity of his work as a representation of the conditions of slavery. Indeed, by setting the contemporary slang of Minnie and Dido alongside Boucicault's minstrelised slave dialect, revealing both to be historically contingent forms of representation and refusing to privilege one over the other, he questions the truth claims of representations supposed authentic and, in so doing, also delegitimises notions of 'authentic blackness'. However, it is worth noting that Jacobs-Jenkins' representations of black female characters have been criticised as playing into racist stereotypes (see Wagaine). There is a danger that, in celebrating the theatrical as inauthentic, Jacobs-Jenkins mitigates the potential of theatrical representation to create sympathy for black characters. As the satirical characters do not permit much room for sympathy, Zoe's problematic character arc, as written by Boucicault (representative line—'I'd rather be black than ungrateful', 77), ends up bearing emotional weight. This is the opposite problem from *Red Velvet*, which makes Al-

dridge a sympathetic character by setting his authenticity against the nineteenth-century theatre.

Nonetheless, through a complex critique of racialised representation and the distribution of affect, Jacobs-Jenkins and Benson show what is at stake in challenging racist representations that claim to be authentic. At the centre of *An Octoroon*, where, as BJJ informs us, the 'Sensation Scene' would be in a Victorian melodrama (114), a lynching photograph is projected onto the back wall of the theatre for a number of minutes. In Sarah Benson's production, the photograph was of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana in 1930, which was the inspiration for the song 'Strange Fruit' by Billy Holiday. In front of Shipp and Smith's hanging bodies, a crowd of white people face the camera, smiling; one man points sternly at the bodies. In my memory of the Theatre for a New Audience performance, the image remained for an uncomfortably long time; I wanted to look away but felt I had to look.[6] Benson's choice of image - one of the most famous visual representations of lynching—means that many in the audience would have seen it before. The photograph's significations and significance exceed the play, which simultaneously punctuates the comedy of *An Octoroon* with the realities of racist violence and shows that this has been under the surface of *An Octoroon* all along. Young argues 'the lynching event was one of the most spectacular performance events of the past two centuries' (188). Staged black bodies have been objectified and subjected to violence for the entertainment of white people, on a continuum from the discursive violence of the staged slave auction in Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, the comic

[6] Bennett's treatment of this scene did not encourage similar reflection, at least in the first preview. An old school projector was brought out, but, as it was staged in the round, the photograph (of a single, hanging black body and a white man looking on) could only be shown to half the audience at a time, resulting in awkward stage business that provoked laughs.

violence in minstrel shows (within the theatre), and the physical violence of lynching (beyond the theatre). By staging the photograph as the ultimate spectacle in the melodrama of race, Benson and Jacobs-Jenkins suggest that the cultural production of race is implicated in violence, making it a duty of artists to challenge racist representation.

As *Red Velvet* and *An Octoroon* show, the theatre is uniquely placed to make visible the slippage between artistic representations and embodied experiences of race. Although authenticity is not in itself negative, I have demonstrated how authenticity as a category of aesthetic value has been co-opted to exclude non-white people from the theatre, to grotesquely misrepresent black people, as in minstrelsy, as well as to justify racist violence. Although Chakrabarti and Jacobs-Jenkins' approaches to authenticity are very different, both are concerned with the political responsibility of representation in the theatre. While theatrical devices are not in themselves racist, they carry their histories with them, including their use in racialised representation. This does not discount them as valuable tools. However, their racialised legacies must be acknowledged by theatre makers, so they can be reappropriated to counter those histories and restore lost stories. In *Red Velvet*, Ira Aldridge remarks that there is 'something about velvet—a deep promise of what's to come, the sweat of others embedded in the pile. A crushed map of who was here folded in' (12). This is an apt metaphor for *Red Velvet*'s and *An Octoroon*'s aesthetic and ethical engagement with theatre history.

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