

Article

# Making Whiteness Visible and Felt in *Fairview*

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**Abstract:** In this article I analyse how Jackie Sibblies Drury's play *Fairview* makes white audience members feel white. As a play that exposes whiteness and calls white people to account for their racism, *Fairview* speaks to contemporary global antiracist activism efforts. Therefore, I begin by situating *Fairview* in the transatlantic cultural and political context of Black Lives Matter. I then discuss the theatrical devices Drury employs in *Fairview* in order to make whiteness felt before going on to analyse a range of white audience responses to the production at London's Young Vic Theatre in 2019/2020. I reflect on these responses in relation to how white people react to accusations of white privilege and power in the public sphere and identify shared strategies for sustaining whiteness. In conclusion, I consider *Fairview* as a model of affective antiracist activism.

**Keywords:** black theatre; whiteness; black lives matter; anti-racism

## 1. Introduction

Jackie Sibblies Drury's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Fairview* is a confrontational deconstruction of the white gaze.<sup>1</sup> In the play, Drury does not just represent whiteness as a problem. She also employs theatrical techniques that implicate white audience members as *the* problem and involve them in a tentative rehearsal for an antiracist solution: at the end of the play white spectators are provided with an opportunity to demonstrate their support for values of racial equity and equality by giving up their seats for the cast and going up onto the stage. The moment of audience participation has been a recurring talking point<sup>2</sup>. Because Drury invites the audience into the world of the play and that world is very specifically American, this produced an interesting tension when *Fairview* was performed at London's Young Vic Theatre, directed by Nadia Latif. The reviewers, almost all of them white and mostly male, speculated that *Fairview* would unsettle white audience members. Dominic Cavendish writing in *The Daily Telegraph* concluded: 'If you're white you're likely to feel guilty, but you may wind up furious' (Cavendish 2019a). In contrast, Tim Bano for *The Stage* felt *Fairview* would stir negative emotions but in a positive way: 'It's a play that will likely make white audience members feel ashamed of being an audience member, while at the same time—and who knows how Sibblies Drury and Latif pulled this off—glad to be there to be able to witness it' (Bano 2019). Michael Billington writing in *The Guardian* acknowledged that *Fairview* would 'induce unease in white, middle-class liberals' but questioned whether it would be enough to have a transformative impact: 'This is definitely a play to see, if you can, and to argue about afterwards [ . . . ] Whether it will shock you into a new awareness—at a time when there is, especially in theatre, a hunger for inclusiveness—is something only you can decide' (Billington 2019). In this article, I analyse the theatrical techniques used by Drury in *Fairview* to make white audience members feel white. I also assess the play's impact on white spectators by examining a range of responses to the London production, including my own. In doing so, I draw on recent critical whiteness scholarship that is concerned with understanding how, in an age where whiteness is increasingly exposed, it is being 'defined, deployed, performed, policed and reinvented' (Twine and Gallagher 2008, p. 7). I find that watching *Fairview* made many white spectators feel uncomfortable. For some, this was a productive experience that



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encouraged critical self-reflection. For others, the experience produced responses that can be understood as attempts to re-assert white power in both explicit and more subtle ways.

This discussion draws on both the play text of *Fairview* and its performance at London's Young Vic Theatre. I also analyse a number of reviews in the media by professional theatre critics and reactions from 'lay' audience members as recorded on social media (Twitter) and in an online forum for theatre enthusiasts<sup>3</sup>. I incorporate some personal responses to the play, which I watched in January 2020, throughout this analysis. These moments acknowledge the impact of my position as a white male on my understanding and experience of the play. This does not represent a fully developed methodology but rather my growing interest in how "race" is constructed in the theatre through the embodied experience of the audience<sup>4</sup>. An inherent problem with any critique of whiteness is that focusing on whiteness risks centring it further. Despite Drury's best intentions to represent black peoples' negative experiences of the white gaze, she acknowledges she was unable to avoid this issue in *Fairview*:

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 de-centre whiteness, actually centres whiteness in and of itself. (qtd in Appel 2019)

Similarly, this article, which focuses on white audience members' reactions to the play, also risks centring whiteness. However, on this matter I agree with Sara Ahmed when she states that 'reification is not then something we do to whiteness, but something whiteness does' (Ahmed 2007, p. 150). By making whiteness visible and by making the wrongs of racism felt (Perry and Shotwell 2009, p. 40) its power can be diminished.

## 2. Calling Whiteness Out

Whiteness is a tricky term to define. For Sara Ahmed it is 'an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they "take up" space, and what they "can do"' (Ahmed 2007, p. 149). This spatial and phenomenological explanation is helpful in understanding whiteness as a historically, socially constructed category and how it has functioned and thrived as an invisible or unmarked system of privilege (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Garner 2007). Because in the West whiteness is normalized, white people have tended not to perceive themselves as raced or think about their experiences in relation to race: 'white bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated "towards" it' (Ahmed 2007, p. 156). Whiteness' ability to present as invisible and as the norm, the standard against which "others" who are "not white" are defined and measured, is a key source of its power. In contrast, whiteness is highly visible to black people and people of colour because they are oriented towards it. In the post-imperial, post-civil rights era, the structures that have enabled whiteness' invisibility are increasingly being challenged by black people and other people of colour as they gain access to positions of political power and social prominence (Bucholtz 2019). The Black Lives Matter movement that began in 2013 has intensified this situation in the US and internationally by further exposing how 'Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise' (Garza 2014)<sup>5</sup>. Since Black Lives Matter, whiteness and concepts such as white supremacy, white privilege and institutional racism, that used to be confined to

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to the peer reviewers and to Mary Brewer for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

<sup>2</sup> *Fairview* had its world premiere on 17 June 2018 at New York's Soho Rep., directed by Sarah Benson. It played at the Berkley Repertory Theatre in October of that year and opened at the Theatre for a New Audience on 2 June 2019 with the same cast and creative team as the Soho Rep. production. A new production of *Fairview* directed by Nadia Latif opened in the UK at London's Young Vic Theatre on 28 November 2019 (press night 5 December). It ran until 23 January 2020, after it was extended for six days.

<sup>3</sup> The messages I analysed for this study appear on public and openly accessible platforms. Given the ethical concerns arising from using these data without obtaining user/member consent, I decided not to include any specific details about the forum in this article or to use any direct quotes from these sources.

<sup>4</sup> See also Pearce (2021).

<sup>5</sup> In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi created the now renowned social media hashtag #blacklivesmatter when George Zimmerman, a white neighborhood watch volunteer, was acquitted of the murder of black teenager Trayvon Martin.

the academy, have also been mainstreamed (Sullivan 2019, p. 1). Against the backdrop of the Trump administration in the USA and the aftermath of the referendum to leave the European Union in the UK, Black Lives Matter protests and the circulation of explicit imagery of black suffering and white terror via social media have disrupted hegemonic post-racial narratives that maintain racism is no longer a significant factor shaping peoples' lives and challenged white people to take responsibility for its eradication.

In the UK, Black Lives Matter demonstrations and associated antiracist campaigns have expressed solidarity with the US movement while highlighting home-grown examples of systemic racism. Campaigns have leveraged the reach of social media to draw attention to racial violence in the criminal justice system (#blacklivesmatter UK), white power and privilege in higher education (#whitecurriculum in 2014) and racial inequality in the film and television industries (#BaftaSoWhite in 2017—inspired by the US #OscarsSoWhite in 2015). The Black Lives Matter movement has also galvanized antiracism in the theatre industry. *Fairview* and the research for this article predates the murder of George Floyd in May 2020<sup>6</sup>. However, it is worth noting that, in the UK, the Black Lives Matter protests that followed Floyd's death resulted in a number of theatres publicly declaring their commitment to antiracism. It is still too early to ascertain whether this unprecedented moment will lead to significant and lasting change in an industry that has been accused of institutional racism (Arts Council England 2002) and which as recently as 2016 was described as 'hideously white' (Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation 2016).

Today, whiteness is being increasingly 'called out': its power and privilege is being made visible and individuals and institutions are being called to account for their actions and practices which sustain white hegemony (Shotwell 2011, p. 75). Critical whiteness scholars have responded by turning their attention to understanding how white people are experiencing this 'crisis of whiteness' (Kincheloe 1999). Research has widened our understanding of race, racism and whiteness as discursively produced by examining how white subjectivity is generated and how white privilege is maintained through feelings, emotions and embodiment (Hook 2005). Empirical research in educational settings reveals that engaging white people in topics of racism and whiteness frequently produces 'white discomfort', characterised by feelings of anger, denial or guilt (e.g., Zembylas 2018). These findings echo Robin DiAngelo's notion of 'white fragility' (DiAngelo 2011, 2018) and Derek Hook's concept of 'white anxiety' (Hook 2020), terms used to explain a range of defensive responses and behaviours that are triggered during moments of 'racial stress' (DiAngelo 2018, p. 2). As Ahmed argues, emotions are socially produced and, therefore, white discomfort, fragility and anxiety should not be understood as individual reactions or 'psychological dispositions' but in terms of 'how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and collective' (Ahmed 2004, p. 119). In this light, such reactions might be perceived as strategies deployed by white people to (re)assert white hegemony. They are not, therefore, indicative of whiteness' waning power. Rather, they are modifications of how whiteness operates as a 'technology of affect' (Hook 2005) to secure and maintain its dominance.

If understanding the affective dimensions of whiteness is important for apprehending 'the individual racist's investment in their own racist subjectivity' (Hook 2004, p. 672), it follows that an 'affective political strategy' is needed in order to deracialise subjectivity and alter the racial order (Bonilla-Silva 2019, p. 14). Although white discomfort can prompt disengagement from dialogue about racism, thereby perpetuating whiteness' power, it has also been explored as a pedagogical tool to create a critically reflective space in which to reimagine whiteness (Zembylas 2018). Studies have highlighted that affective knowledge, or 'a felt recognition of the wrongs of racism', can play a pivotal role in moving white people towards an antiracist praxis (Perry and Shotwell 2009, p. 40).

<sup>6</sup> On 25 May 2020 George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was arrested by police officers in Minneapolis for allegedly buying a packet of cigarettes with counterfeit money. Floyd died while being restrained by the police. White police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes while he was still handcuffed, was found guilty of murder by a jury in April 2021.

### 3. Antiracist Theatre and the Question of White Audiences

*Fairview* is one among several explicitly antiracist plays by black British and African American playwrights to be recently produced in the UK. Other examples include works presented as part of the Black Lives, Black Words project/festival of plays (2015, 2016, 2017, Bush Theatre<sup>7</sup>), Josette Bushell-Mingo's *Nina—a story about me and Nina Simone* (2016, Unity Theatre, Liverpool and UK tour), Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon* (2017, Orange Tree Theatre and transfer to the National Theatre in 2018), Arinzé Kene's *Misty* (2018, Bush Theatre and transfer to Trafalgar Studios, West End), debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* (2018, Royal Court) and Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* (2020, Kiln Theatre). These plays all engage with and challenge whiteness in provocative, surprising and often formally innovative ways. In doing so they speak to the spirit of antiracist protest reinvigorated by the Black Lives Matter movement, which challenges white people to acknowledge their race privilege and take responsibility for combatting racism. They also connect to a historical body of plays by black playwrights that invite and exploit white discomfort as part of their antiracist aesthetic<sup>8</sup>. Their staging raises questions about the contemporary treatment of whiteness in these works and their impact on audiences in relation to their antiracist objectives.

The aim of antiracist activism is to achieve transformation. Similarly, antiracist theatre seeks an opportunity for social change by creating the conditions in which spectators might come to an enhanced understanding of how racism functions and of themselves as victims or as perpetrators and beneficiaries of racial oppression. Not all plays by black playwrights are about racism and not all plays about racism are by black writers. Nevertheless, the task of challenging racism on the post-war British stage has overwhelmingly fallen to, and in some cases been foisted on, black playwrights and playwrights of colour. Scholarly analyses of plays by black playwrights have explored how these works challenge white hegemony explicitly and implicitly by centring black peoples' bodies and experiences, and by engaging with black cultural practices and social and political issues of concern to black communities in the UK and internationally (see, for example, Brewer et al. 2015; Goddard 2007, 2015; Griffin 2003; Pearce 2017). However, the topic of whiteness in the British theatre has received little direct attention. Mary Brewer's *Staging Whiteness* (Brewer 2005), which explores whiteness as invisible and dominant or visible and under threat in a range of twentieth century British and American plays by both black and white authors, is a notable exception. Furthermore, while many scholars emphasise the potential of plays that privilege themes of race and racism to 'influence, impact and transform' (Freshwater 2009) their audiences, there is room for further research into the reception of these works, particularly in terms of how they are experienced by audiences.

In the UK, there has been progress with venues programming more plays by black playwrights, particularly in London. The recent staging of the antiracist plays listed above in (mainly) mainstream theatres speaks to a long struggle by black theatre practitioners for inclusion and recognition in British theatre since the post-war (see, for example, Chambers 2011; Goddard 2015; Osborne 2006). However, audiences in the subsidised and the commercial sectors remain stubbornly white and middle class (Arts Council England 2016, 2020). In London, where 40% of the city's residents identify as being black and minority

<sup>7</sup> Black Lives, Black Words in the UK was an international collaboration with the project's American founder, playwright Reginald Edmund. In 2015 and 2016, two staged readings of new short plays responding to Black Lives Matter were produced by Simeilia Hodge-Dallaway (Artistic Directors of the Future). In 2017, Black Lives, Black Words launched the Bush Theatre's re-opening under Madani Younis (the then artistic director). Six plays were performed, four of which were by British writers and two by American writers: *Matter* (Idris Goodwin, US), *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* (Mojisola Adebayo, UK), *The Principles of Cartography* (Winsome Pinnock, UK), *My White Best Friend* (Rachel De-Lahay, UK), *This Bitter Earth* (Harrison David Rivers, US) and *Womb* (Somalia Seaton, UK).

<sup>8</sup> See *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* by Faedra Chatard Carpenter (2014), which draws attention to the long history of African American artists who have engaged performatively with whiteness as a means of exploring questions of identity and resisting whiteness' hegemony (p. 6). *Fairview* connects to and extends this theatrical tradition in new directions. For discussions about the new generation of politically motivated African American playwrights see the following newspaper articles: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-07-01/new-radicalism-of-black-playwriting> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/theater/black-playwrights-theater.html> (accessed on 18 January 2021).

ethnic (BME), white audience members are significantly overrepresented<sup>9</sup>. Having a more racially and ethnically diverse workforce, combined with more diverse programming, is understood as an important route to addressing barriers to participation (Arts Council England 2016, pp. 42–44). In many ways, the Young Vic Theatre meets these progressive criteria. For some time now the theatre has maintained a reputation as a forward-thinking venue that attracts a young, metropolitan audience. This perception was bolstered in 2018 when Kwame Kwei-Armah was appointed as artistic director, becoming the first person of African Caribbean heritage to run a major British theatre. Since his appointment, Kwei-Armah has programmed a number of plays by black dramatists<sup>10</sup>. Yet, when I attended *Fairview*, most of the audience members were white (c. 90%). Accounts in the media and online suggest a similar experience<sup>11</sup>. Clive Davis, the theatre critic for *The Times*, and one of the few critics of colour to review the play, acknowledged *Fairview* would provoke debate; however, he also questioned whether the play was merely preaching to the choir: ‘Well-meaning white audiences may well go home with a faintly masochistic glow in their hearts, but is that really enough?’ (Davis 2019).

The white liberal middle-class spectator poses a unique set of challenges to antiracist efforts. William Sonnega argues that African American theatre and performance is hamstrung in its attempt to improve race relations because reactions underpinned by white guilt ‘maintain the hierarchies of white privilege rather than contest the social and economic inequities on which they are based’ (Sonnega 2001, p. 80). White guilt, Sonnega argues, is a common response to representations of black peoples’ experiences of racism in the theatre. However, it is a self-serving feeling which directs energy inwards, towards the person experiencing the emotion and away from the problem that triggered it in the first place (p. 94). Because liberal ideology promotes the belief among progressives that tolerance is something that is already possessed, as opposed to something that needs to be acquired (p. 82), guilt assuages the liberal conscience because it makes the individual feel tolerant. White liberal spectators, therefore, might not engage with black theatre as a means to understand the “other” but rather to confirm their own liberalism. In the predominantly white and liberal context of the theatre, the challenge for black playwrights is to develop a practice that ‘exposes, rather than recapitulates or reinvents, racism’ (p. 96). However, as Sonnega reminds us, ‘the difficulty in developing such a practice hinges not on a lack of good intentions but on the insidious ways many liberal whites seem overtaken by the guilt of white privilege’ (p. 96).

#### 4. Calling White People to Account in *Fairview*

In *Fairview*, Drury makes white spectators feel uncomfortable by confronting us with our white privilege. However, Drury attempts to manage white guilt by limiting empathy and emphasising accountability. The source of white discomfort is not solely related to the racism we are watching depicted on stage. It is equally located in our awareness of ourselves as white spectators and the relationship this has to perpetuating the kinds of racist representations we see before us.

In Act One, white dis/comfort is achieved through the presentation of what appears to be a play that is not about race. In the Young Vic production, the use of the blue proscenium curtain to conceal the stage before the play started suggested this would be a traditional piece of theatre. When the curtain rose, the audience were introduced to the Frasier,

<sup>9</sup> The use of acronyms BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) and BME (Black and minority ethnic) are currently being challenged in the UK; however, these terms are still widely used by government departments, the media and in academia and were used in the reports that I am citing. The suitability of the term ‘people of colour’ is also being debated. The term is more commonly used in the USA but it is becoming increasingly current in the UK too. Like ‘BAME’ and ‘BME’, a key concern is that terms such as these homogenise people from divergent ethnic and racial backgrounds and collapse their specific experiences of racial injustice. In some circles, ‘global majority’ has emerged as a preferred collective term of empowerment.

<sup>10</sup> Details of the Young Vic’s past productions can be accessed here: <https://www.youngvic.org/whats-on/archive> (accessed on 4 December 2020).

<sup>11</sup> The Young Vic operates subsidized ticket schemes to encourage attendance from local residents and young people in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark, which are some of the most ethnically diverse areas in the country. It is, therefore, possible that white people were not overrepresented in all performances of *Fairview*.

an African American family who were preparing a dinner party for the grandmother's birthday. Squabbles about cheeseboards, silverware and napkin rings promised a satire of black middle-class aspirations. However, the stereotypically drawn characters and slightly heightened acting style jarred with the otherwise realistic performance mode. For example, at one point the whole family broke out into an Electric Slide dance routine and there was a brief aside from teenage daughter Keisha, during which she ominously sensed something holding her back from realising her full potential. Apart from these theatrical moments nothing significant occurred. Tellingly, the act climaxed when the mother, Beverly, fainted upon discovering her cake had burnt in the oven.

At the end of the Act, the curtain came down and soft house lights illuminated the auditorium during a brief set change. This pause offered the audience a moment to reflect. Based on the audience's reactions so far, the house felt split. Some people had laughed quite a lot in parts, while others had remained impervious to the play's gags. For my part, I felt confused and slightly frustrated. I knew *Fairview* had won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, so I was expecting something more thematically provocative and stylistically interesting than a living-room comedy-drama performed in a realist style.

Act Two repeated Act One. However, in Act Two, the onstage action was mimed. Simultaneously, the audience listened to a conversation in voiceover between four young seemingly liberal white people discussing the question: 'if you could choose to be a different race, what race would you be?' (Drury 2019, p. 29). The conversation between Suze, Mack, Bets and Jimbo (who are named in the script, but the audience never learn their names) was not blatantly racist. Because of the nature of the question that framed their discussion they ascribe what they perceive as positive traits to people from non-white racial groups. They use socially appropriate words like Latinx (p. 35) and say knowledgeable things like 'race is a construct' (p. 30). Nevertheless, their reliance on stereotypes and generalisations exposed their racial prejudices:

Jimbo: [ . . . ] Like most black people are really chill.

Mack: And they're really fashionable.

Jimbo: There's this way they dress, there's an attitude (p. 48).

The white characters are not all the same. Suze is the most racially aware. However, as their conversation deepened, even her supportive statements came across as patronising.

The conversation between the white characters framed the action on stage and gave form to how the white gaze objectifies and limits the possibilities of blackness or how, in Frantz Fanon's words, 'not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man' (Fanon [1952] 2008, p. 82). Some of the white characters' comments and commentary on the play (it becomes clearer later that they are watching the onstage action with us) might not have been heard as derogatory by some white people if they had been delivered as isolated remarks or, and this is the most troubling aspect, if they had not been made in the presence of people of colour. However, the combination of the white characters' lack of physical presence, which drew attention to their words, and the duration of their conversation, as it occurred in tandem with the mimed action on stage, amplified the racism of their language to an unbearable level of offensiveness. By exposing 'microaggressions' in this way, this section of the play makes visible the subtle, yet persistent forms of racism that are often invisible to white people. In doing so, it affirms black people's experiences of covert racism that are often denied, yet extremely taxing (Pierce 1970).

Act Two's staging encouraged a more active viewing position by placing spectators as voyeurs of—and eavesdroppers on—how black people are 'overdetermined from without' (Fanon [1952] 2008, p. 87). In Act Two the audience's experience of the action was mediated by the white characters' conversation and commentary. This distance facilitated a more critical engagement with their conversation. Recognising racial bias is central to antiracist activism. Prompting white people to reflect on this issue is one way in which *Fairview* raises ideas for discussion about antiracism. However, in addition to inviting critical reflection

on what was being represented onstage, the staging of Act Two also encouraged white spectators to reflect on our race privilege and to acknowledge our own unconscious bias and complicity in ‘everyday racism’ (Essed 1991).

I found listening to the white characters’ obliviousness to their own racism and privilege excruciating. Yet, I found myself silently participating in it at the same time. It prompted me to think about how I might respond to their questions and comments: What race would I choose to be? Why? Have I thought that? Do I think that? Where have I heard that before? As their conversation progressed so too did my feeling of unease. My discomfort was not only prompted because of what they were saying, but also because it felt recognisable and, more importantly, because it felt as if that was being recognised. I began to experience a feeling of mild paranoia. As the actors repeated the blocking from Act One in silence, it felt as if they were looking directly at me/us white people in the auditorium. This feeling of being “seen” prompted a mixture of not only shame, but also indignation at being made to feel guilty by association.

In Act Two white spectators were positioned as critical observers of the onstage action. At the same time, we were made to feel implicated in the drama. This was not achieved through empathy, but through affinity—we never felt for the white characters, but we were prompted to feel like them. Suze, Mack, Bets or Jimbo’s lack of specificity, and the fact the audience was given virtually no background information about them, prevented them from becoming the sole representatives of racism in the play. This was exacerbated by their disembodiment. Their absence drew attention to the white spectators in the auditorium as the only representatives of whiteness in the room. During Act Two, it felt as if we were—or at least as if we were supposed to be—standing in for these characters and what they represented, which was deeply unsettling.

Because *Fairview* is designed to implicate its white audience and make them feel complicit in the white characters’ racism, its staging in London added a new layer of complexity to the white audience’s experience. Although I felt uncomfortable at times, I also felt slightly removed from identifying with/being identified as the white racists. The characters’ American accents (apart from Bets who is French) and some of their language troubled a more profound identification. In the US production, the opportunity for this was more powerful. African American historian and cultural critic Salamishah Tillet observed of the New York production: ‘a lot of the people around me stopped laughing, got really quiet, and saw themselves in that conversation’ (Green and Tillet 2019). To some extent, white British audience members were absolved from an in-depth personal interrogation as a result of their cultural distance from the material.

In London, the white spectators’ sense of complicity with the white characters as spectators and consumers of “black” culture was less easily avoided. The idea that the audience are watching the play with these characters is made explicit when they begin to comment on the stage action:

Mack: I’m not even listening to you guys anymore. I’m just watching them dance.

Bets: Yes, we are missing the dancing.

Jimbo: I’m not missing a fucking thing.

Best: I would love to dance like this. With you know—

Mack: With hips and shoulders.

Bets: Yes, hips and shoulders. (p. 55).

The moments of sass and dancing that had elicited some laughter from the mainly white audience during Act One were met with stunned and awkward silence when they were re-performed in Act Two to the soundtrack of Suze, Mack, Bets and Jimbo opining about matters of race. On stage, the Frasier’s began to lay the table, piling it high with mountains of fake food while dancing and smiling. What, in the first act, appeared to be a hammy domestic drama with echoes of sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* became, in the second, a grotesque minstrel show.

In Act Two, the depictions of the Frasierers were exposed as ‘controlling images’: representations that perpetuate pernicious myths about blackness and justify and sustain white power in the process (Collins 2000). Simultaneously, white audience members were prompted to contemplate how we might enable the continuation of these stereotypes as patrons of plays about black peoples’ experiences. Some people in the online forum for theatre enthusiasts felt that the play’s first act was enjoyable, but that it became increasingly incomprehensible in the second act. Their enjoyment of Act One suggests they were victims of Drury’s ruse. However, the fact that others, myself included, felt the play improved from Act Two because it became more confrontational and more uncomfortable to watch is essentially a different side of the same coin. It was not until Act Two that I connected the disappointment I felt during Act One to the problematic expectation that the play should be about race. White people’s “enjoyment” of *Fairview* seemed to be predicated on the extent to which the play either entertained us through representations of comedic black characters or challenged us by exploring and exposing the effects of our racism. Either way these responses underline how the white gaze limits the representation of black experiences and forces black artists to be chroniclers of this narrow view.

The fraught relationship between white spectatorship and reductive representations of blackness motivated the earliest conceptualisations of “black theatre”. In the US, amidst the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, W.E.B. Du Bois advocated for a theatre about, by, for and near black people as a way of taking control over the dehumanising portrayal of blackness on stage:<sup>12</sup>

The Negro is already in the theatre and has been there for a long time, but his presence there is not yet thoroughly normal. His audience is mainly a white audience, and the Negro actor has, for a long time, been asked to entertain this more or less alien group. The demands and ideals of the white group, and their conception of Negroes, have set the norm for the black actor. He has been a minstrel, comedian, singer and lay figure of all sorts. Only recently has he begun tentatively to emerge as an ordinary human being with everyday reactions. (Du Bois 1926)

In *Fairview*, Drury suggests that the commodification of blackness for white leisure and pleasure persists. This is not an issue that is particular to the USA. The impact of the overrepresentation of white audience members on the production and reception of plays by black dramatists is also of concern to black practitioners and audiences in the UK. Black playwrights have commented that they must constantly negotiate what and how they represent blackness on account of their audience being mainly white (see Cavendish 2019b; Thompson 2018). In particular, practitioners describe being caught in a system of having to deliver an urban version of blackness—typically young, male, working-class and violent (see Arinze Kene in Costa 2013; Cumper 2009). Black audience members have also expressed frustration at the prevalence of reductive and homogenous depictions of black peoples’ lives on stage (see Johns 2010). In Acts One and Two, Drury orients spectators to the white gaze and its harmful consequences. The play also orients its white spectators to our own gaze. By implicating white spectators in the drama and by making us feel complicit, Drury encourages white spectators through discomfort to be critical and self-critical viewers, and to consider the role we play individually and collectively in the process of normalising whiteness and perpetuating racism in the theatre and beyond.

Act Three challenges white spectators to take responsibility for addressing racism in the theatre by acknowledging our privilege. At the start of the act, the dialogue resumed on stage. The white characters also entered the playing space; however, not as Suze, Mack, Bets and Jimbo but as caricatures of the Frasierers’ family and friends. When a food fight

<sup>12</sup> The four principles of the ‘new Negro theatre’ were as follows: ‘The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. *About us*. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. *By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continued association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. *Near us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people’ (Du Bois 1926).

broke out among the group, Keisha interrupted the chaos and asked if the white audience members would be willing to switch places with the cast on stage:

Come up here folks who identify as white,/you know who you are./You can choose to come up here/to where I've always been, where my family has always/been [ . . . ] Look out from where I am./And let me and my family go out/to where you've always been. (pp. 83–84).

As people began to move on stage, Keisha told a story about a person who at the end of their life felt that everything they had worked for and achieved was fair in comparison with that of their neighbours. At the end of her monologue the actors departed the auditorium, leaving the audience divided.

Keisha's character embodies activism for black people in the audience through her ability to sense something holding her back in Act One and then eventually break through the fourth wall in Act Three. The moment is a metaphor for an awakening of black consciousness which echoes Melissa Harris-Perry's notion of the 'crooked room':

When they [black women] confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure which way is up. (Harris-Perry 2011, p. 29)

Keisha's intervention is also a means of ending the violence on stage. Keisha's parable is about the need for targeted action and support for people of colour to overcome barriers created by racism if racial equality is to be achieved. Keisha's request for white audience members to give up their seats and 'make space for someone else for a minute' (p. 84) represents an opportunity for white people to acknowledge how our race privilege benefits us while marginalising people of colour. White audience members are, therefore, presented with a moral choice. To accept Keisha's request is a gesture of commitment to taking responsibility for our racism. It represents an opportunity for transformation: 'beginning a new life committed to the goal of achieving real racial equality' (Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 15).

At the performance I attended, some white audience members accepted Keisha's request quickly, while others took longer to decide. The stage space filled up gradually with white audience members. A small number of white people remained in their seats. The moment did not reverse the white gaze. The element of audience participation was very exposing for audience members of all races, as a couple of responses in the online forum by people of colour testify. From the moment Keisha made her request until the play's ending, everybody's skin colour was hyper-visible. What was clear by the end of the exercise was the overrepresentation of white people in the theatre. In a practical way, the ending made the audience experience the theatre differently by drawing attention to the racial makeup of the house. For a regular theatre goer who is white and middle-class, the theatre is more than likely an accessible and "safe" space. Its conventions are familiar and, to some extent, so too is the way in which certain subject matters are represented. As Ahmed observes, in white spaces, white bodies feel orientated, comfortable, at ease and at home (Ahmed 2007, p. 158). By making white people uncomfortable in such a familiar space, *Fairview* invites us through disorientation to reflect on what it is that usually makes the space comfortable and why for others it might be a space of discomfort. Drury explains her motivation for the audience participation:

to try to have a theater space—which is always coded as a white space, unless it's a very specific kind of theater—shift for the benefit of people of color. Normally, it's the reverse; people of color have to shift to fit into the room. I thought it could be cathartic to create a space in which some audience members make themselves uncomfortable in order to try to make people of color feel more comfortable. (qtd in Appel 2019)

For white spectators, discomfort is not caused merely by being seen as white. White people need to be seen as white if whiteness is to have social currency (Dyer 1997, pp. 44–45). Rather, the discomfort stems from white people experiencing being seen negatively as white, through the lens of white privilege. In *Fairview*, Drury makes white spectators un-

comfortable by making us feel complicit in perpetuating racism in the theatre (and beyond), and then by asking us for a gesture that signals our willingness to take responsibility for its disestablishment.

### 5. Reacting to Antiracism

It was difficult to gauge people's responses to *Fairview* during the show. Two people walked out of the performance I attended before the play had ended. It is impossible to know if this was in protest; however, a few people in the online forum admitted to leaving early on account of feeling bored, confused or irritated. Because there was no curtain call, it was not possible to measure the audience's appreciation of the play by their applause at the end. From the numerous responses online, it is clear that *Fairview* made most white people feel uncomfortable. For some, this discomfort was perceived as thought-provoking and positive. In the forum, one person noted that, although the play made him feel embarrassed, he valued the fact that it reminded him of his privilege as a white male. On Twitter the play received a lot of positive feedback. Words used to describe reactions have included 'intense', 'uncomfortable', 'astounding', 'disturbing and wildly entertaining', 'shaming', 'heart-thumpingly good and physically confronting', 'stimulating', 'unconventional' and 'dangerous'. These effusive responses appear to endorse the play; however, such grandstanding could also be interpreted as virtue signalling and as a means of reproducing white privilege. Drawing on Shelby Steele, Sonnega argues that guilt is always self-serving because it generates a corrective impulse that seeks to re-establish a feeling of innocence (Sonnega 2001, p. 94). Furthermore, because guilt also prompts a desire to escape, it follows that *appearing* to correct the problem is a more efficient route to innocence than confronting its source. Redemption is not achieved, but rather it is 'the look of redemption, the *gesture* of concern that will give us the appearance of innocence and escape from the situation' (Steele qtd in Sonnega 2001, p. 94). In this light, these comments become framed as ways in which individuals can avoid self-scrutiny or deflect the suggestion of their complicity in the issues the play raises.

There were also a number of ambivalent responses in the online forum. Some people praised the play but did not provide any detail about what they felt was good or important about the work in relation to issues of race and racism. This suggests a wariness of engaging with race for fear of sounding racist. Bonilla-Silva argues that contemporary racism or 'new racism' in the US is defined by its covert nature. This new racism is maintained by the way in which white people who perceive themselves as not racist or ascribe to colour-blind beliefs articulate their experience outside of race. In doing so they 'produce "raceless" explanations for all sorts of race-related affairs' (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 1364). This 'contemporary racial discourse' marked by the absence of race-related language has the effect of making white people "'look good" as they no longer sound "racist."' (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 1364). In some of the seemingly more positive responses in the online forum, subtle strategies to re-assert whiteness consistent with DiAngelo's notion of white fragility (DiAngelo 2018) can be detected. These include avoidance (discussing the play but not mentioning race, racism or whiteness), deflection (saying it was more of a US issue or moving the discussion away from racial discrimination to other areas of discrimination such as ethnicity, class or gender) and denial (saying the play was more applicable to audiences in other areas of the country).

There were a few openly hostile reactions in the press that suggested Drury was not addressing racial issues in *Fairview*, but contributing to them. Writing in *The Spectator*, Lloyd Evans accused the play of 'promoting racial disharmony and entrenching false, divisive and outdated stereotypes' (Evans 2020). Evans interpreted the final scene as a moment for white people to sympathise with what he termed 'black victimhood' (Evans 2020). It was an offer he rejected: 'I stayed seated because I don't believe anyone in modern Britain is condemned to fail, and therefore to remain 'a victim', by an accident of their birth' (Evans 2020). Evans takes a post-racist stance in that he does not deny that individual cases of racism exist, but he refuses to acknowledge that racism might

operate at a structural level. Taking a broader sweep, Ben Lawrence's opinion piece for the *Telegraph*, "The woke arts are ignoring their number one duty: to entertain", uses *Fairview* as an example of a wider 'crisis' in British arts and culture (Lawrence 2020)<sup>13</sup>. Lawrence identifies a trend in the arts towards programming 'serious plays about marginal issues' in the hope that they will attract more diverse audiences. The approach, according to him, is misguided because it produces work that is lacking in quality: 'worries about ticking diversity boxes or striving to fit a woke agenda seem, often, to produce an end result that is overworked and joyless' (Lawrence 2020). Lawrence's article provoked a barrage of angry comments by online readers in support of his views. These commentators claimed that the arts and culture in the UK are biased to the left, ideologically driven and discriminatory against the majority white British population. DiAngelo reiterates that performances of white fragility need to be understood not as weakness, but as 'a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage' (DiAngelo 2018, p. 2). In this light, the aggressive responses in the press represent 'an outcome of white people's socialisation into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy' (DiAngelo 2018, p. 2).

The negative responses to *Fairview* should not be understood as isolated attempts to re-assert whiteness. They speak to wider and equally confidently expressed hostile reactions to debates about race and racism in the public sphere. *Fairview*'s run coincided with two such interconnected debates. The first being about whether or not coverage of Meghan Markle in the tabloid press was racially biased following the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's decision to step back from senior roles in the British royal family. In a rebuttal to accusations of racism in the press, an article in *The Sun* newspaper stated: 'We are sick, though, of woke morons crying racism over press criticism of Meghan and Harry' (The Sun Says 2020). The second incident that prompted a national debate occurred on the BBC's televised debate programme *Question Time* on 16 January 2020. An argument broke out between the white actor Lawrence Fox, who was a panellist on the show, and a mixed-race audience member, Rachel Boyle, about Meghan's treatment by the press. When Boyle suggested Markle was a victim of racism, Fox dismissed this stating, 'we are the most tolerant, lovely country in Europe [ . . . ] It's so easy to throw the charge of racism and it's really starting to get boring now' (Question Time. 2020. Question Time). When Boyle suggested Fox was a privileged white male, members of the mainly white studio audience groaned loudly in support for Fox. And when Fox accused Boyle of reverse racism for calling him a white privileged male, he received a round of applause from the audience. These performances of white fragility can be understood together as part of what Mary Bucholtz identifies as a wider 'affective project of reproducing white supremacy through white public discourse' (Bucholtz 2019, p. 501). They share the view that the UK is a post-racial nation of equal opportunity. To suggest otherwise (to be "woke") offends core English values like tolerance. However, by collapsing issues of race and culture these statements/performances reinforce the relationship between Englishness and whiteness by reproducing the notion that to be anti-white is to be anti-English and vice versa. In this regard, these moments share a vocabulary of vulnerability that 'is part of the larger convergence and mutual dependence of militant racism and mainstream racism in protecting all white people's possessive investment in white supremacy' (Bucholtz 2019, p. 485).

## 6. Making Space

In the UK the whiteness debate is polarised. The venom the topic incurs in the public sphere from mainly white males seems to support DiAngelo's theory of white fragility and how strategies of vulnerability and defensiveness work to re-assert white power. At the same time, fear of engaging with racism is also silencing the debate. This silence is not, as Bonilla-Silva argues, indicative of racism's waning power, but of its ability to change shape

<sup>13</sup> In the UK, the term 'woke' has emerged as a fashionable word among those on the political right to denigrate progressives.

while maintaining its hold (Bonilla-Silva 2015). As a historically and socially constructed category, whiteness' meaning is not fixed, but rather context-specific (Frankenberg 1993, p. 6). Because the discourse on whiteness is largely imported from the US, this adds a further layer of complexity when it is introduced as a topic in the UK, raising questions about its usefulness as an antiracist tool in the theatre.

In *Fairview*, Drury aimed to make black people and people of colour feel comfortable by making white people experience discomfort in a space that usually feels familiar to them. Many of the fragile responses to the play speak to the fact that white people are often challenged by theatre, but rarely challenged for being in the theatre or asked to contemplate how their presence might maintain white power and privilege in a space that confirms their progressiveness. However, not all white people in the theatre perceive it as a comfortable space. The Young Vic operates low price ticket schemes to attract people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, some of whom are white. None of the responses to the play I found reflect on the experience through the intersection of race and class. However, it is conceivable that white people from a lower income bracket might not identify with the theatre as a comfortable space. In the online forum, one white person who was an immigrant from Eastern Europe indicated that she felt troubled by the assumption that because she was white, she was not marginalized in the UK. White identity and white privilege are not singular or universal experiences. The experience of being white intersects with and is influenced by other positionalities and modes of advantage and disadvantage, including class, gender and sexuality (Kincheloe 1999). The audience participation risks alienating some white people, raising questions about how helpful treating whiteness as homogenous is for achieving antiracist aims.

Research has highlighted that in the UK, mixed-race people often identify positively with both their parents and claim a 'dual identity' (Tizard and Phoenix 2002, p. 4). The binary conceptualisation of race that has emerged in the specific context of the USA can be problematic for some British people of mixed heritage. Sherelle Jacobs, a mixed-race journalist, wrote a scathing article about *Fairview* for *The Daily Telegraph*. Jacobs lambasted *Fairview* for being 'as close theatre gets to a Mickey Mouse module on Racial Intersectionality' and criticized the application of the play's inflexible American understanding of race to the UK, which she felt disallowed her to identify during the performance as 'half-white': 'The cartoonish depiction of white people is not the only thing that makes *Fairview* cowardly. A truly brave piece would also scrutinise the tyranny of the "black gaze"—which bullies people like me to identify in a particular way, and—bizarrely in modern Britain—live out African-American stereotypes' (Jacobs 2019). The fact that the choice at the end upset some mixed-race spectators is further evidenced online. One mixed-race audience member attempted to reach out to fellow spectators online to find out how they had responded to Keisha's request. She admitted that it had made her feel confused, sad and uncertain about whether or not she had made the correct choice.

In the UK, there is a long history of African American plays staged in both fringe and mainstream venues. Lynette Goddard has argued that the ongoing tendency among mainstream and commercial theatres to programme African American plays has a negative impact on the development and profile of black British playwrights (Goddard 2015, p. 211). The playwright Winsome Pinnock has echoed these sentiments and highlighted the need for more support for plays that explore black peoples' experiences in the UK. In a recent interview she claimed:

We see a lot of black plays but very few of them are British. The American story is a really important intervention into our theatrical space but it isn't necessarily our specific story. There are theatres in this country that have never produced a play by a black British playwright. (Pinnock qtd in Akbar 2020)

The success enjoyed by African American plays in the UK is due to a number of factors, not least American hegemony (see Pearce 2017). However, the mainstream interest in the African American experience also suggests a preference among majority theatre audiences for engaging with plays about racism that are set elsewhere. Naomi Obeng,

in one of the few reviews of the Young Vic's production of *Fairview* by a black journalist, expressed her worry that white British audiences would not perceive the play as applicable to them:

I've seen a lot of plays that tackle racism and been frustrated by a white audience's lack of implication. Their 'oh well now I just feel bad', the 'but I didn't do anything'. I know this is a play about America and I hope that it doesn't absolve a British white audience from self-scrutiny. (Obeng 2020)

As previously discussed, to some extent, the cultural differences of *Fairview's* setting did offer white British audiences a way of avoiding in-depth self-examination. However, the number of comments that explicitly mention how being made to feel complicit in a play about American racism rankled suggests that the insinuation of a shared experience of racism between the US and the UK provided audiences with a compelling reason to disengage from or dismiss the play. The reviewer for *The Times* chose not to go on stage. In response to Keisha's final monologue, he noted: 'What she says left me moved and riled—not least by the presumption of directly comparable historical experience between the US and UK' (Cavendish 2019a). Similar sentiments were expressed online. These gripes shut down any prospect of debate about historical overlaps between the two contexts or why, despite significant differences, in both the UK and the USA many black groups experience disproportionate marginalisation and discrimination in comparison with similar white groups (Bhopal 2018). They also refuse to acknowledge the play as an opportunity for people to simply express antiracist solidarity with another context. Sonnega identifies guilt as the main reaction among white, liberal theatre goers in the USA. However, in the UK, guilt may not be the dominant reaction to racism among white liberals. Unlike slavery in the USA, the horrors of British slavery and colonialism occurred beyond the borders of the British Isles. To this day, British imperialism is remembered with pride. Furthermore, the historical experiences of racism in the UK endured by post-war immigrants from former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia and their descendants is not widely known or accessible. Arguably, in this context, it is not white guilt that hinders antiracism efforts in the theatre but white denial, born from ignorance and a sense of superiority, that reproduces white privilege in the British theatre.

*Fairview's* ending is utopian in vision. Making white spectators experience their whiteness and the discomfort this generates provides an opportunity to develop a 'feeling of equality' that is not based 'on sympathy for the other but in sympathy with the other' (Kim qtd in Bonilla-Silva 2019, p. 14). George Yancy argues that situations of crisis in which white people are faced with a choice to risk their white self and invite discomfort are vital to the process of challenging racism (Yancy 2015). On stage, white people are momentarily re-oriented to whiteness: the moment allows us to *feel* our whiteness critically. In this state of therapeutic disorientation, we are made aware in an embodied way of how our whiteness reproduces privilege in the theatre and beyond (Yancy 2020, p. 27). The play's ending is not meant to be an end in and of itself. It neither provides a release nor a solution, but a choice: 'A single action or intention does not "undo" whiteness. The concept of *deciding* denotes a life of commitment to "undo", to "trouble", over and over again, the complex psychic and socio-ontological ways in which one is embedded in whiteness' (Yancy 2015, p. xiv). For those who choose to go on stage, the moment rehearses through 'negative affect' (Shotwell 2011, p. 75) a first step towards white people taking responsibility for antiracism (Katz 1978). The message that the onus for finding a solution to racism must be on white people is compellingly conveyed when the actors depart at the end leaving the group of all white audience members together on stage.

Although the play provides an opportunity to challenge whiteness' hegemony, the audience participation also opens the door to securing whiteness. Yancy refers to the way in which whiteness effortlessly re-asserts its power as 'white ambush', described as: 'a form of attack that points to how whiteness ensnares even as one tries to fight against racism' (Yancy 2008, p. 229). The majority of white audience members at the performance of *Fairview* that I attended accepted the invitation to go up on stage, including myself. I felt

very awkward and embarrassed throughout; however, the moment also felt quite powerful. There was an energy in the mass response that suggested a willingness to listen and to respond and that felt like a positive starting point. Yet, although the audience participation appeared to be a demonstration of support for the play's message of antiracism, the moment also risks giving white audience members a false sense that they can 'move themselves outside of racist systems just by a willingness to do so' (Applebaum 2010, p. 182). Most white people who attended the show and then tweeted about it and/or took part in the forum discussion seem to agree that the audience participation was uncomfortable. However, this raises the question: why did some white people agree to do it if they knew it would be uncomfortable? An optimistic answer would be because they meant it. However, critical race theorists have highlighted how white people act to support non-white people only when it 'threatens their own interests and converges with them' (Bhopal 2018, p. 20). The decision to go on stage could also have been motivated by fear of being judged as racist. It could express a desire to feel and to be seen, especially in the context of Black Lives Matter, to be doing something "good", to be a white ally. In this regard, the moment risks encouraging the idea of white heroism (Applebaum 2010). Finally, for many white middle-class liberals, it is in their interests to maintain their image as "good" whites. Tellingly, some white peoples' responses did not dismiss the relevance of the themes to the UK, but suggested that the play would have had more of an impact at another theatre like the National or in theatres outside of London. The implication is that they felt the wrong white people were being challenged and that the play's message was not applicable to them. Such reactions of denial reiterate the difficulty in attempting to dismantle white hegemony if the majority of the audience perceive themselves as exempt or are unwilling to acknowledge their own racism.

*Fairview* represents a significant antiracist intervention in the theatre landscape. Its confrontational aesthetic has stimulated passionate discussions about individual and institutional racism in the theatre and beyond. As the critics warned, the play did indeed stir a range of negative feelings in its white audience members. Drury attempts to navigate the pitfalls of white guilt by preventing audience members from investing emotionally in what is represented on stage. Although the techniques she uses to unsettle white spectators do prompt feelings of guilt and shame at times, these emotions are never indulged. Instead, a critical viewing experience is cultivated where white accountability is emphasised, particularly the ending, which provides white audience members with a small, yet significant opportunity for transformation. Yet, audience responses also highlight the precariousness of such opportunities and how susceptible they are to being defused by whiteness. Attempts to shut down the conversation abound. Such responses are characteristic of the various overt and covert strategies mobilised by white people in debates about racism in the public sphere. They are indicative of a wider project of consolidating white power, and signify the profound challenges the British theatre still faces as it attempts to dismantle racism, even when it appears to be doing just that.

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