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Anne Holmes, Education Director
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Special thanks to Nell Bang-Jensen, An Octoroon Dramaturg
INTRODUCTION

A NOTE FROM THE EDUCATION DIRECTOR

Thank you for choosing to bring your students to the Wilma’s production of *An Octoroon*, by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. I applaud your willingness to take a risk on this one. While on some level we all understand that the most extraordinary learning opportunities emerge when we venture outside our comfort zone, most of us still gravitate toward what’s familiar and safe. *An Octoroon* promises to be a powerful catalyst for discussions around race, identity and stereotypes; if there’s a more urgent conversation we should be having with young people at this moment, I don’t know what that is. Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins has written a smart, intricately layered text to propel these discussions. Director Joanna Settle adds a live seven-piece band, with an original score composed in the rehearsal room alongside the actors, and dynamic step infused choreography to create a theatrical event big enough to encompass such a play. This is a risk worth taking.

If the Wilma were producing Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*, the original 1859 melodrama upon which Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ play is based, I would have a much tougher time arguing for its value in a high school classroom today. While Boucicault is still considered one of the great writers of the 19th century melodrama, there are so many cringe worthy moments throughout the play that it can feel like a minefield of political incorrectness. Similar questions have been raised about the value of reading Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 2016. I believe those concerns have validity and ignoring them would be irresponsible. What is it then about Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ *An Octoroon* that makes it different, particularly given that the playwright has preserved so much of Boucicault’s original text? The crucial difference is that Jacobs-Jenkins provides a meta-theatrical lens through which to view the play, forcing us to consider a contemporary critical perspective on what we are seeing and hearing. Beyond that, he never tells us what to think or feel, leaving us to navigate our own way through this unsettling play. At times it feels like an irreverent romp, delighting in its own theatricality and celebrating the craftsmanship of the great 19th century melodramas. There are moments when we can’t help but laugh and yet we’re not sure if laughing is really okay. In many ways, *An Octoroon* is so suited to the classroom because it repeatedly eschews easy answers, all the way up through the final moments of the play’s deliberate non-ending.

In this education guide we tried to focus on providing key historical background on Boucicault and his original melodrama, as well as introducing you to this astounding, two-time Obie Award Winning Playwright (Best New American Play for *An Octoroon* and *Appropriate*) Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. BJJ’s character breakdown page as well as Boucicault’s plot breakdown page should help with getting clarity on the basics. With this play in particular, Lizzy Pecora and I both found ourselves repeatedly drawn back to the written, video and podcast interviews with Branden Jacobs-Jenkins because we really wanted to hear from the playwright himself as much as possible. We’ve included most of our favorite links to those interviews in the appendix, but I would leave these for after your students have already seen or read the play, so as not to clutter their experience of it with too much imposed meaning. The *In the Classroom* section includes our suggestions for introducing the play with interactive lessons designed to engage students in discussion and get them making their own predictions about its content and themes.

Thanks again for agreeing to go on this ride with us. Your students are going to love you for it!

Anne Holmes
EVOLUTION of AN OCTOROON

An Octoroon is a contemporary play by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins inspired by the play The Octoroon by Dion Boucicault which was adapted from the book The Quadroon by Thomas Mayne Reid

THE QUADROON
by Thomas Mayne Reid
Written in 1856

A novel telling the story of a quadroon slave (1/4th black) living on a plantation in Louisiana who falls in love with a white plantation owner. The title character reflects the “tragic mulatto” figure common in early 19th century fiction. The character was a beautiful young girl who was raised as a white child. She takes after the conventional ingénue “victim” of melodrama.

THE OCTOROON
by Dion Boucicault
Opened at The Winter Garden Theatre in NYC, 1859

A play adapted from the novel The Quadroon. It concerns the residents and slaves of a Louisiana plantation, Terrebonne. The play sparked debates about the abolition of slavery and the role of theatre in politics. A number of commentators have remarked that in making Zoe an octoroon (1/8th black), rather than a quadroon, Boucicault was trying to intensify the tragedy in her story.

AN OCTOROON
by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins
Opened at Soho Rep in NYC, 2014

A play that takes the plot of the antebellum melodrama The Octoroon, and smashes it with a 21st century sensibility. Presented through the eyes of the onstage playwright—BJJ—this pre-Civil War tale set in the Deep South tells of a slave owner’s affections for a woman whose blood is 1/8th black.
**KNOW YOUR PLAYWRIGHTS**

- Born December 29, 1984 in Washington, D.C.
- Valedictorian of his class at St. John’s College High School, graduated with a degree in anthropology from Princeton
- Moved to New York in 2006 at age 21
- *An Octoroon* is his adaptation of Dion Boucicault’s earlier play *The Octoroon*
- *An Octoroon* premiered at Soho Rep (NYC) in 2014
- Played Br’er Rabbit/Captain Ratts in original production of *An Octoroon*
- Won best new American play Obie Award for both his works, *Appropriate* and *An Octoroon*, in 2014
- **FUN FACT:** In graduate school, Jacobs-Jenkins wrote a solo piece which was essentially a monologue about being 22 and disillusioned with school. As he delivered it, he drank water out of a goldfish bowl. In his words: “so the water is going down and everyone’s getting upset because I guess no one wants to watch a goldfish die and, in the end, I’m like, ‘I’m gonna try throwing this back up to save this fish’s life.’ And then I would force myself to vomit up the water and save this goldfish. You know. And it horrified the class.”

**DION BOUCICAULT, *The Octoroon* (1859)**
- Born December 26, 1820 in Dublin, Ireland
- Moved from school to school, attended the University of London for a short while without graduating. Strongly disliked his studies and frequently got into trouble
- Moved to New York in 1853 at age 32
- *The Octoroon* was an adaptation of Thomas Mayne Reid’s novel *The Quadroon*
- *The Octoroon* premiered at the Winter Garden Theatre (NYC) in 1859
- Played Wahnotee in original production of *The Octoroon*
- Wrote/adapted more than 200 plays in his lifetime
- **FUN FACT:** In his time Boucicault was known for his “sensation scenes” (common to Victorian melodrama). In *The Flying Scud* which debuted in London in 1866, the Epsom Derby gallops onstage with cardboard horses, except for one real one, who is championed as the winner.
Heralded by *The New York Times* as “the most conspicuous English dramatist of the 19th century,” Dion Boucicault was born Dionysus Lardner Boursiquot on December 26, 1820, in Dublin, Ireland.

Boucicault enjoyed tremendous success as a playwright, actor and theater manager. He opened his first play *London Assurance*, a six-act comedy, at the age of 21 at Covent Garden in 1841. It was extremely well-received, and in the next four years Boucicault would produce twenty-two plays on the London stage. In 1859 he took over management of the Winter Garden Theatre in New York City, where his play *The Octoroon* premiered to immense success and quickly became one of the most popular melodramas of its time, second only to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

On December 15, 1859, shortly after the play's premiere, *The New York Times* called *The Octoroon* “the great dramatic sensation of the season”:

> Everybody talks about the Octoroon, [sic] wonders about the Octoroon, goes to see the Octoroon; and the 'Octoroon' thus becomes, in point of fact, the work of the public mind...the public having insisted on rewriting the piece according to its own notions, interprets every word and incident in wholly unexpected lights; and, for aught we know, therefore, the “Octoroon” may prove after all to be a political treatise of great emphasis and significance, very much to the author's amazement.

Boucicault’s work is considered the quintessential example of sensation drama, itself a branch of Victorian melodrama. Sensation drama was characterized by the depiction of some overwhelming (sensational) experience, usually some kind of grand disaster—a fire, an earthquake, an avalanche, a shipwreck—and there was always a murder of some kind.

About 150 plays are credited to Boucicault, who, as both writer and actor raised the stage Irishman from caricature to character. To the American drama he brought not only a careful construction that would define popular theater for years to come, but also a keen observation and eye for detail. His willingness to address social themes within meticulously structured drama would be his lasting legacy, and would prefigure the development of drama in both Europe and America.
INTERVIEW with BJJ

Excerpts from an American Theatre interview, May 2014
“Branden Jacobs-Jenkins Talks Appropriate and Octoroon”

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins is a pop vocalist, a mimic and a rollicking raconteur. He’s also an accomplished playwright pushing the boundaries of subject matter and form—a fact that has been noted in U.S. and international theatrical circles. A native of Washington, D.C., who now lives in Brooklyn, Jacobs-Jenkins has won numerous accolades ranging from the Princess Grace Award and the Dorothy Streslin Playwriting Fellowship to the Paula Vogel Award, and productions of his plays have made waves at theatres across the country.

An Octoroon, Jacobs-Jenkins’s riff on Boucicault’s 1859 classic The Octoroon, which had a 2010 workshop at PS122, [and premiered] at Soho Rep in a production directed by Sarah Benson. “Branden is like a performer whose material is text,” Benson observes. “He has a holistic sense of what works in the theatre and uncanny insights into technical issues.” Though his plays reference history, they aren’t necessarily about history. “He’s taking ideas that are huge and complex and naughty and weird, and finding a way of literally theatricalizing them. People aren’t sitting around talking about history in his plays—he’s embedding these ideas in the actual form, and finding ways to make the idea promote the form and the form promote the idea.”

ELIZA BENT: What’s your relationship to melodrama?

BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS: Melodrama is actually what the majority of our American theatrical heritage was until Eugene O’Neill came along and popped us in the face with modernism. But, in addition to the Greeks, he was super influenced by melodrama—Boucicault being kind of the reigning kind of the form in the 19th century. And I think melodrama is an amazing thing—it’s like the science part of what we do. A generation of French guys literally just kept doing things to an audience and refined a codified formula for making an audience feel the way that these French guys thought they should feel at any given moment. This idea that we’re just these animals that are easily manipulated by certain steps or moves or gestures is so profound to me and made me wonder: What is it that we’re doing? Is it ethical? Or are ethics somehow besides the point.
I became really obsessed with Boucicault. He’s actually like our first American dramatist, because he’s this Anglo-Irish guy that came over here and wrote one of the first, most important plays about American life. It was this huge sensation and a direct response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which is this hugely important flag in the history of American theatre. I was interested in how Boucicault would rewrite his plays depending on his audiences—like for *The Octoroon*, he had two different endings: one in which the heroine died (for American audiences) and another where she didn’t (for the British audiences). To me, that did not square up against the idea of a “responsible artist.” An artist had to make an artistic choice and stand by it. The idea that he would be commercially reworking his work just to make money was just... I don’t know.

But as I dug deeper, I realized that’s not actually how it shook down. He tried his original ending in London and the audiences wouldn’t deal with it. He wrote like all these pamphlets and editorials defending his ending as “truthful” but in the end, perhaps a little out of spite, he rewrote the ending. I think a lot of people see this as some sort of... weakness on his part, but I think it’s telling that he burned that draft—that it’s not even in the public domain anymore. Then he made a cut version for the printing, which was never actually produced and I thought, “This is so amazing.”

I did all this crazy archival research at the New York Public Library and I found this insane unfinished essay he wrote on the art of dramatic writing. One thing I’ve always lamented is that playwrights never really write down what they think in a real way. I love Arthur Miller’s theatre essays—this is me being academic and ridiculous. So I find this Boucicault essay and it says how the whole enterprise for us is creating the dramatic illusion. We’re just trying to create the most perfect illusion, because that is where catharsis begins with audiences. And the way we get that illusion is that we create the most believable illusion of someone suffering. And I was, like, obsessed with this essay and that kind of became the guide for *Octoroon*. I wanted to talk about the illusion of suffering versus actual suffering and ask, Is there a relationship between the two?

In terms of meta-melodrama, I just like the idea that this isn’t a new idea. This is like Brecht, but the idea that you could feel something and then be aware that you’re feeling it is really profound to me. That somehow we possess these two faculties, one which is intellectual and gets us through the world, but the one that’s always working is the subconscious feeling place, and that’s what we care about that’s what the theatre is obligated to.*

**Tell me more about breaking apart social constructs onstage.**

I just don’t know how blackness onstage works. It’s just a thing that has always confused me. I don’t know what anyone is talking about when they talk about black theatre, black drama, black actors. I don’t know. No one walks around saying white theatre or white actors. I just want to understand.
I was struck last time about your experience as a performer, and how you talked about being cast in roles that weren’t written for people that are black. I’m curious to hear you tease that out more. It sounded, and please correct me here, that you were cast in some roles in a “color-blind” casting manner but that ultimately that really wasn’t satisfying for you?

I wouldn’t say it was unsatisfying. I wasn’t ever someone who wanted to be an actor professionally. I never thought that I wanted to be an actor for real. It was the thing I enjoyed doing in my little town in D.C. and Montgomery County, Maryland. I enjoyed doing it in college and gradually it became more and more fraught and I didn’t understand why. It seemed like I was being limited for some reason and I didn’t understand why. I don’t want to argue against color-blind casting. But I think color-blind casting is a choice. It’s a political choice that you have to be aware of. It’s not like this automatic get-of-jail-thinking-about-these-issues free card.

And this is why I’m attracted to anthropology, too. How, literally, our very artistic cultural forms are grown out of the millions of tiny battles that are lost and won in any given society. And trying to understand—I never understood what American theatre was. I didn’t know what that meant exactly. Because it didn’t seem to be the stuff I was making. It was bizarre; a bunch of stuff happened.

Even when I was writing my short stories, I’d bring them into class and I had this profound moment. It was the last creative writing class that I took in fiction. I brought in a story to workshop and after we talked about it the teacher said, “Well, my final question is, what race are these people?” And I was completely—you know, it was life-changing.

The real lesson I learned from that was that there was an expectation being placed on me and what I wrote that I wasn’t aware of, and that was to explain something about blackness or depict black life as a foreign object worthy of delineation and inquiry by...who, exactly? Whereas in my experience reading, and growing up and going to shows, I never encountered anything like, “Jane Eyre, comma, white.”

But perhaps, “Jane Eyre, comma, woman.”

I have students and they’ll have character lists, and there’ll be one character, “comma, black.” And I’ll be like, “So, what does this mean? Does this mean that everyone else is Chinese? What is happening? Why doesn’t everyone get this treatment? What is it about blackness that creates so much anxiety that you have to single it out? And why do you feel like this Starbucks employee should be black and not the lawyer? What are the assumptions going into this creative act here?”

• • •

[*Meta (or meta-theater) is loose term for the awareness of performance within a theatrical piece. Bertolt Brecht is the grandfather of meta-theater who began the practice of distancing the artist and audience from a piece of theatre to allow them to reflect critically on what was being presented. Jacobs-Jenkins uses many forms of meta-theatre as a distancing tool in An Octoroon—i.e. the play (THE Octoroon) within a play (AN Octoroon).]
MELODRAMA

“If such imitation of human beings, suffering their fate, be well contrived and executed in all its parts, the spectator is led to feel a particular sympathy with the artificial joys or sorrows of which he is a witness. This condition of his mind is called the theatrical illusion.”
- Dion Boucicault, The Art of Dramatic Composition

STRUCTURE
5-Act Formula
ACT I: Exposition
ACT II: Rising action
ACT III: Climax
ACT IV: Spectacle/Sensation Scene
ACT V: Falling action

SPECTACLE/SENSATION SCENE
• Scenes meant to wow an audience!
• Utilizes technical theater tricks to demonstrate something remarkable on stage
  Ex: The burning steamboat on the water in The Octoroon

PHYSICAL GESTURE
• Exaggerated or stylized movements inform and elicit specific emotions
• Tableaus (or a group of motionless figures) are sometimes used to capture the feel of the previous scene, in which each character holds a pose significant to them
  Ex: Jacobs-Jenkins plays with the tableau convention at the end of Acts I, II, and III

MUSIC
• “Melodrama” originates from the Greek word meaning music and the French word meaning drama and translates to drama with music
• Music has typically infiltrated melodrama since its origins in the 19th century

The band ILL DOOTS (formed by a group of UArts graduates) will play a prominent role in the Wilma’s production of An Octoroon. Their music incorporates jazz, hip hop, and funk to create a style all their own which they call 3EATKRACK. ILL DOOTS has been present for almost all of the rehearsal process—devising original songs and underscoring including some of Boucicault and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ text. They will be on stage for the entire show.

“It’s about projecting emotion as far as you can.”
- Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

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BOUCICAULT’S OCTOROON PLOT

ACT I (Exposition)
JUDGE PEYTON—owner of Louisiana plantation, Terrebonne—dies. His nephew, GEORGE, returns from France to watch over the plantation. PEYTON’s daughter, ZOE has been raised as the daughter of the judge but her real mother was a slave with whom the judge had been having an affair. ZOE has been raised as a white woman by MRS. PEYTON. The plantation residents find that Terrebonne is bankrupt. The overseer of Terrebonne, JACOB M’CLOSKY, vows to own the estate and take ZOE as his wife.

“M’CLOSKY: Then, if I sink every dollar I’m worth in her purchase, I’ll own that Octoroon.”

ACT II (Rising Action)
DORA SUNNYSIDE, a neighbor of Terrebonne, tells ZOE of her love for GEORGE. ZOE tries to tell GEORGE of DORA’s love, but instead GEORGE professes his love for ZOE. ZOE realizes that she, too, loves GEORGE but their love is doomed. Though ZOE has been raised as a white woman, anti-miscegenation laws forbid marriage between blacks and whites. Meanwhile, the young slave PAUL and his American Indian friend WAHNOTEE are sent to collect the mail. In the mail is a check that could save Terrebonne from bankruptcy. After retrieving the mail, M’CLOSKY ambushes and murders PAUL and steals the check. WAHNOTEE finds PAUL dead.

“(Rising with a savage growl, [WAHNOTEE] seizes the tomahawk and smashes the camera to pieces. Going to PAUL he expresses in pantomime grief, sorrow, and fondness, and takes him in his arms to carry him away.)”

ACT III (Climax)
The plantation and townsfolk attend the auction of Terrebonne and all of its slaves. DORA convinces her father to buy Terrebonne. The slaves PETE, MINNIE, and DIDO are sold to a steamboat captain, RATTS. ZOE is declared a slave as well and is put up for sale. M’CLOSKY shows great interest. GEORGE fights M’CLOSKY, but in the end M’CLOSKY puts in the highest bid for ZOE. She is granted one more night in her old home.

“To Jacob M’Closky, the Octoroon girl, Zoe, twenty-five thousand dollars.”

ACT IV (Spectacle/Sensation Scene)
WAHNOTEE is hunted down for having killed PAUL, but it comes to light that PAUL and WAHNOTEE had actually been playing with a camera before M’CLOSY’s attack. The camera took a photograph as M’CLOSKY killed PAUL and stole the check. The fateful photograph unmasks M’CLOSKY who tries to escape. M’CLOSKY sets fire to RATTS’ steamboat on the water. WAHNOTEE swim after M’CLOSKY in the water.

“(WAHNOTEE is seen swimming. He finds trail and follows M’CLOSKY. The steamer floats on at back, burning.)”

ACT V (Falling Action)
The WIDOW PEYTON finally gets her check and Terrebonne and its residents are safe. ZOE, not knowing that she is saved, asks DIDO for poison and kills herself.* WAHNOTEE hunts down and kills M’CLOSKY. The residents of Terrebonne discover and grieve over the loss of ZOE.

“[(WAHNOTE[ seizes M’CLOSKY along the ground, takes up the knife and stabs him repeatedly; GEORGE enters, bearing ZOE in his arms—all the CHARACTERS rush on—noise increasing—the steam vessel blows up—grand Tableau, and...CURTAIN.)”

[*Zoe’s suicide was not received well by London audiences so Boucicault made Zoe live and marry George. Boucicault always considered the original to be the true ending.]
BJJ’S OCTOROON CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

The actor descriptions and character doubling below were taken from the published script with suggested “actor ethnicities listed in [Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’] order of preference”

BJJ

PLAYRIGHT

BJJ played by an actual playwright, African-American, or black actor

GEORGE played by same actor playing BJJ

M’CLOSKEY played by same actor playing BJJ

Played by Ed Swidey

ASSISTANT

played by an Indigenous American actor/actress, a mixed-race actor, a South Asian actor, or one who can pass as Native American

PETE played by same actor playing ASSISTANT

PAUL played by same actor playing ASSISTANT

Played by Justin Jain

PLAYRIGHT

played by white actor, or actor who can pass as white.

WAHNOTEE played by same actor playing PLAYWRIGHT

LAFOUCHE played by same actor playing PLAYWRIGHT

Played by Ed Swidey

ASSISTANT

played by an Indigenous American actor/actress, a mixed-race actor, a South Asian actor, or one who can pass as Native American

PETE played by same actor playing ASSISTANT

PAUL played by same actor playing ASSISTANT

Played by Justin Jain

MINNIE

played by African-American actress, black actress, or actress of color

Played by Jaylene Clark Owens

DIDO

played by African-American actress, black actress, or actress of color

Played by Taysha Canales

GRACE

played by African-American actress, black actress, or actress of color

Played by Alina John

ZOE

played by an octoroon actress, a white actress, quadroon actress, biracial actress, multi-racial actress, or actress of color who can pass as an octoroon

Played by Campbell M. O’Hare

DORA

played by a white actress, or actress who can pass as white

Played by Maggie Johnson

BR’ER RABBIT

played by the actual playwright, or other artist involved in production

RATTS played by the same actor playing BR’ER RABBIT

Played by Aaron Bell
BLACKFACE in AMERICA

“Here’s when blackface is OK... when you have a black face!”
- Larry Wilmore, The Daily Show 2009

THE EARLY STAGES
Blackface is a form of theatrical makeup used by (typically white) performers to represent a black person.

Minstrelsy is a form of American entertainment that began in the early 19th century and capitalized on blackface.

Minstrel shows and blackface lampooned black people as foolish, lazy, superstitious, happy-go-lucky, and musical.

THE RISE
1850s: White composer Stephen Foster writes some of the most well-known American songs for minstrel shows, including “Oh, Susanna!” and “Camptown Races”.

1859: The Octoroon premieres. Blackface and minstrelsy are both a prominent part of the production.

“Actors who dramatized these characters applied burnt cork to their complexions, to affect a supposed racial marker. They sang and danced according to accepted conventions, to enact a Northern, romanticized rendition of ‘blackness.’”
- Adam Sonstegard

1903: In one of the first films ever—Uncle Tom’s Cabin—the main black characters are played by white actors in blackface. Black actors are cast as extras in the film.

THE 20th CENTURY
Though minstrel shows were dying off in the beginning of the 20th century, the stereotypes and characters lingered.

Amos ‘n’ Andy was an American radio (1920s-50s) and television (1950s) sitcom set in the historically black community of Harlem. The original show was created, written, and voiced by two white actors who played all of the characters.

When the show moved to television, black actors took over the majority of the roles, but the stereotyped characters lived on.
PERFORMATIVE STEREOTYPES in CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

“[Branden Jacobs-Jenkins] reminds us of these histories that are forgotten but not gone... [and] of this long tradition of how black folks have used performance as a way to manage these kinds of histories and to speak back to them.”
- Daphne Brooks

FLIPPING THE STORY

1984: Eddie Murphy wears whiteface in an SNL sketch about white privilege called “White Like Me”.

2000: Spike Lee’s satirical film Bamboozled is about a modern minstrel TV show featuring black actors in blackface and the violent fallout from the show’s success.

2005: Dave Chapelle’s satirical character “Racist Pixie”—a tiny minstrel who appears on the shoulder of African-Americans encouraging them to embrace racial stereotypes—appears on Chapelle’s Show. While taping the sketch, a white male staff member laughed loudly and long at this character. Chapelle says, “[That] was the first time I’d ever gotten a laugh I was uncomfortable with.” He ended the show shortly thereafter.

REDFACE

Redface refers to the creation and propagation of American Indian stereotypes and caricatures—i.e. the image of the chief, brave, princess, or noble savage; the wearing of feathers, beads, or war paint; etc.

AN OCTOROON

An Octoroon by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins premieres in 2014. It calls for a black actor in whiteface, a white actor in redface, and an Indigenous American, mixed race, or South Asian actor in blackface in a meta-theatrical exploration of the 19th century melodrama The Octoroon.

A THING OF THE PAST?...NOT SO FAST...

Blackface was banned from the historically white, working-class Mummer’s Parade in 1964, though minstrel-like characters have popped up since. In the 2016 New Year’s Parade in Philadelphia, mummers donned brownface and dressed as Mexican stereotypes. Many contemporary mummers say they are surprised and hurt when these characters infiltrate the parade.

Blackface, redface, and countless other racial stereotypes continually resurge (in and out of the public eye) in the annual celebration of Halloween, at sporting events, and in everyday American life.
BR’ER RABBIT

“These tales were created out of sorrow. But the hearts and minds of the black people who formed them, expanded them, and passed them on to us were full of love and hope. We must look on the tales as a celebration of the human spirit.”
- Virginia Hamilton, The People Could Fly

ORIGINS OF BR’ER RABBIT

19th century plantation slaves in America produced a body of folklore about their experiences inspired by memories and traditions from Africa. They told tales in which various animals took on characteristics of people found in the plantation environment. Br’er Rabbit was small and apparently helpless compared to the powerful bear, the wily fox, and the ferocious wolf. But the slave teller made him smart, tricky, and clever. Though he still got into trouble sometimes, just as the slaves did, which made him seem all the more human to them.

WHITE RE-TELLING OF BR’ER RABBIT

These folktales were first recorded in the late 19th century. In 1880, the white journalist Joel Chandler Harris collected and published this oral literature in Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings. In The People Could Fly, Virginia Hamilton writes:

Harris’ Uncle Remus told animal tales in fractured English to the little white boy of the plantation house. But author Harris was not concerned with reproducing exactly the tales or their language. Harris and his contemporaries used phonetic dialect as a literary device. They felt that an exaggerated colloquial language best symbolized what they regarded as the quaint appeal of lowly, rural people.

BJJ’S BR’ER RABBIT

In the original production of An Octoroon, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins played Br’er Rabbit. He chose to cast himself as one character who embodies two conflicting traditions: African-American slaves’ oral folklore and the white appropriation of those tales—quite a complex duality.

In An Octoroon, Pete and Paul’s language embrace Harris’ vernacular. Interestingly, Dido and Minnie’s dialogue reflects a more modern dialect. As Jacobs-Jenkins says, he decided “to make them talk how some of my friends talk...and how I talk.”

“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.”
- Branden Jacobs-Jenkins
# TIMELINE of RELEVANT EVENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 20, 1852</td>
<td><em>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</em> by Harriet Beecher Stowe is published and often adapted for the stage. <em>The Octoroon</em> was written in direct response to <em>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</em>. Boucicault was sure he could capture the “real” slave experience better than Stowe.</td>
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<td>January 1856</td>
<td><em>The Quadroon, or A Lover’s Adventure in Louisiana</em> by Thomas Mayne Reid’s novel is published. <em>An Octoroon</em> is an adaptation of <em>The Quadroon</em>.</td>
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<td>December 2, 1859</td>
<td>John Brown is hanged for his rebellion at Harpers Ferry in West Virginia. Brown was a white American abolitionist who believed armed insurrection was the only way to overthrow the institution of slavery in the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 5, 1859</td>
<td>Boucicault’s <em>The Octoroon</em> premieres at the Winter Garden Theatre in NYC.</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 1, 1863</td>
<td>President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation declaring “that all persons held as slaves” within the rebellious states “are, and henceforward shall be free.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td>Florida establishes the first law that uses the ‘one-drop rule’ which states that anyone with at least 1/8th blood must be labeled a person of color. Virginia had debated over such a rule in 1853, but decided against it due to the fact it might adversely impact the white population due to generations of interracial relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 9, 1865</td>
<td>The Battle of Appomattox Court House in Virginia is the location of one of the last battles of the Civil War, during which the Confederate Army surrenders to the Union Army.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14, 1865</td>
<td>John Wilkes Booth shoots Abraham Lincoln at the Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. The Theatre playbill announces that Boucicault’s <em>The Octoroon</em> will be presented at the theater beginning April 15th. These performances never happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Joel Chandler Harris’ <em>Uncle Remus</em> is published. Br’er Rabbit appears in this collection of appropriated African-American folktales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 12, 1967</td>
<td><em>Loving vs. Virginia</em> results in the Supreme Court declaring anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional, making interracial marriage legal throughout the U.S. The case was brought by Mildred (black) and Richard Loving (white) who had been sentenced to a year in prison in Virginia for marrying each other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following was compiled by the Wilma Education Department from the Wilma’s An Octoroon Dramaturgy Packet by Nell Bang-Jensen

Dion Boucicault (8)
See page 6 of guide

“People cared about him when he was alive” (8)
Boucicault’s obituary in The New York Times called him “the most conspicuous English dramatist of the nineteenth century” and went on to say that “his name has always been in sight; he kept abreast of the times almost to the last”. However, despite success in his lifetime, in the 20th century Boucicault faded to obscurity. Most scholars have blamed this shift on Boucicault’s failure to abandon melodrama for realism. Other scholars take the position that his early success is responsible for his later obscurity, as Boucicault was overexposed and overproduced (he adapted more than 200 plays in his lifetime).

The Octoroon/an octoroon (8)
See pages 11 of guide

“But then all the white guys quit” (8)
Though difficult to confirm entirely, when Branden Jacobs-Jenkins was working on the first iteration of An Octoroon at PS 122, the Village Voice reported the following: “After a falling out between the playwright and Irish director Gavin Quinn, after which Jacobs-Jenkins has assumed direction, the Voice has heard rumors of rehearsal room difficulties.”

“The majority of deaths resulting from bee swarms...” (11)
BJJ’s point that the majority of deaths resulting from bee swarms are from suffocation, not stings, is true. This is because African Honey Bees are attracted to CO2 which is expelled while breathing. Because of this, these bees aim for the mouth and nose first. People and animals die of asphyxiation when the nose or throat swells shut from the stings.

Dionysus (12)
Also “Bacchus.” The son of Zeus. He is the nature god of fertility and vegetation, but is popularly known for his connections to wine, ecstasy, and theater. It was believed he had the power to inspire and create ecstasy, hence the widespread festivals of Bacchus/Dionysus that were characterized by heavy drinking, debauchery, and theatrical performance. Portrayed as an older, bearded man in ancient Greek art, but later portrayed as young and beardless.
**Winter Garden (13)**
A theater in New York City. It opened in 1850. It burned down for the first time in 1854, was rebuilt, and burned down again in 1867. In its seventeen-year life span, it changed names several times and hosted a variety of theatrical performances—minstrel shows, cabaret, musicals, and critically acclaimed dramas—under several different managers, including Boucicault, who named it Winter Garden at the beginning of the 1859-60 season. The venue had one of the largest stages in NYC at the time, but Boucicault remodeled the space, cutting the auditorium in half.

**Petting Zoo (13)**
There is no evidence that The Winter Garden actually had a petting zoo. That said, Boucicault did install artificial tropical plants and sprayed them with perfume to make the space feel like a real garden in the middle of a New York winter.

**“Everybody hated on me and they were soooo jealous” (14)**
Boucicault faced a number of lawsuits, public slander, letter and newspaper editorial feuds (the 19th century equivalent of Twitter trolling), and was a favorite target of the press. The press enjoyed pointing out anything Boucicault did as being motivated by the need to self-advertise.

**“I brought you people copyrights” (14)**
In 1844, during his time in Paris, Boucicault discovered that French playwrights earned ten percent of the receipts from their performed works, which greatly differed from the model in London that had the playwrights receiving a small fee for the play and never earning any further profit. Boucicault attempted to introduce a system similar to the French one in London, which resulted only in London theaters being hesitant about producing or buying Boucicault’s works. However, after moving to the United States, Boucicault found a like-minded community that also wanted to pursue creator rights. Together with Robert Montgomery Bird and George Henry Broker, Boucicault managed to help push a copyright law through the US Congress on August 18, 1856.

**“I invented matinees, bitches!” (14)**
For a long time Boucicault had been credited with inventing the matinee, but its origins go back long before Boucicault took over the Winter Garden Theatre. In New England, in particular, there was a long tradition of Saturday afternoon theater due to a Puritan law that forbid theater performances after sundown on Saturday nights. The law stayed on the books until the 1850s, and Saturday afternoon theater performances were common in Boston well before Boucicault had even set foot in the United States. However, these performances were sporadic, and it wasn’t until Boucicault popularized matinees that they became a regular part of the week’s programs and a major profit revenue source for theaters.
“Me many stage tricks” (14)
Boucicault can also be thanked for fire-proof scenery, profit-sharing systems for playwrights, and actor training in the United States. He is also responsible for sunken footlights, limelight, and numerous scenic improvements.

“You really save on makeup” (15)
Blackface emerged centuries before its adoption in the United States. White actors were portraying black characters in Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas, most famously in Othello. A 1769 performance saw the first real portrayal of the blackface stereotype in the character of “Mumbo.” Blackface quickly became a hit not only in the United States, but in England as well. While the Playwright claims that the nice thing about the future is “you can actually use Negroes in your plays now”, black theater existed in the U.S. at the time. In 1821 the African Grove Theater was established in New York, the third attempt at a black theater and the most successful to that point. The company staged the first play written by an African-American, The Drama of King Shotaway. The theater was eventually shut down in 1823.

Plantation Terrebonne (17)
There is no record of this plantation existing, but there is a Terrebonne Parish in Southern Louisiana that was founded in 1822, which was probably where Boucicault got the name. Terrebonne means “good earth” in French.

Voo vay voo poo chez avay mwah (20)
A misguided attempt at “Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?” = “Do you [formal] want to sleep with me?” a French phrase that has become well known in the English-speaking world through literature and pop songs.

Self-developing liquid….applied to the photographic plates (21)
A reference to the Collodian Method—the dominant method of producing photographs from the 1850’s to the 1880’s. The first step was to smooth and clean the glass plate, before “flowing the plate,” which meant to pour a collodian chemical liquid to cover the surface of the plate. In a darkroom, the plate was then dipped in a silver nitrate bath for 3-5 minutes, in order to sensitize the plate to light.

Picaninny (23)
A term used to refer to the children of African-American slaves. It became popularized by the 1852 book Uncle Tom’s Cabin, in reference to the character Topsy, who was child-like and unruly. Robin Berstein, writes that in the context of the U.S., a picaninny is characterized by three qualities: “the figure is always juvenile, always of color, and always resistant if not immune to pain”.

![Uncle Tom's Cabin](image)
These names may have been taken from the popular 1855 poem by Henry Wordsworth Longfellow *The Song of Hiawatha*. In part XII of the poem “The Son of the Evening Star,” there are two lines that seem to recall the words Boucicault has Wahnotee use for Paul and Zoe, as Longfellow writes: “And for Oweenee, the faithful!” and “Called her sweetheart, Nenemoosha.” Longfellow attributes the works of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft as his source for both the story and the Native American words. Most of the words in the poem were derived from the Obijwa language.

“The myth of the “drunken Indian” is a product of the early colonial introduction of alcohol to the native population. Alcohol abuse emerged in some Native American communities, to the point where some individuals started trading goods for alcohol, harming not only themselves but economically damaging their community. In 1802, Congress passed an act that allowed the president to issue a prohibition aimed only at Native Americans. A popular myth still exists that Native Americans have less of a tolerance to alcohol and are thus more predisposed to alcoholism.

“She makes me quiver…” (25). Historians have pointed out how common it is in the “Octoroon genre”, for the Octoroon character to be sexualized in a way that would have seemed offensive to a white woman at the time. There is no doubt that Zoe is a lady; and yet, because she is one-eighth black, she is seen as being luxurious. Zoe is the supreme object of desire.

“While a judgement stood against you it was a lien on your slaves” (26)
Laws regarding manumission (the freeing of slaves by their owners) and debt have existed since the Romans. Laws in the U.S. differed from state to state. In the Louisiana Civil Code of the time, the law would have allowed Judge Peyton to grant Zoe her freedom as her slave-owner. However, once he went into debt all of his properties had to be surrendered to his debtor, Thibodeaux. Even though Zoe was granted freedom by her father, she was still his property in the eyes of the law and bank.
Plates (28)
Plates preceded film as a capture medium in photography. Photographic plates were glass plates, thinner than glass used for windows, coated in the light-sensitive emulsions of silver salts. They became less commonplace around the turn of the 20th century, as film was less fragile and more convenient than glass plates.

The nails are of a bluish tinge (31)
The belief in fingernails as a racial indicator emerged in the late 18th century. It became an extremely popular motif from the 1840s to the 1950s. The idea was that near the root of the fingernail, the small half-moon portion right before nail meets skin would point to someone’s race; no matter how “white” they may appear. This myth said that if there was a light bluish/blackish shade to this part of the nail, it meant that the person had black ancestry. If that portion of the nail was a lighter shade of white than the rest of the nail, it proved the person was 100% white.

One drop in eight is black (31)
The one-drop rule was a racial purity measurement that considered anyone with at least 1/8th black ancestry to be categorically black. While laws were proposed that would judge a person’s race based on the one-drop rule as early as 1853, no such law was actually passed until 1924. A major reason for the lack of a one-drop rule in the 19th century was an acknowledgment by many that most people would not pass the racial purity test. These laws were designed as an anti-miscegenation measure, aimed at stopping interracial marriage. By 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court declared all anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional, making interracial marriage legal throughout the U.S., and making the one-drop rule a piece of overturned and unenforceable legislation.

Mark of Cain (31)
In Judeo-Christian tradition, the Mark of Cain was a curse placed on Cain after he killed his brother, Abel, and tried to hide the truth from God. After the slave trade began in the United States, many Protestant denominations began viewing black skin as the Mark of Cain. This line of thinking eventually caused the split between the Northern and Southern Baptist faiths, as Southern Baptists used the Mark of Cain as a justification for slavery, and even taught that there were two separate heavens: one for black people and one for white people.

Br’er Rabbit (31)
See page 15 of guide

Tomahawk (32)
A tomahawk is a type of single-handed axe invented by Native Americans in North America, originally consisting of a relatively short wooden shaft and a stone blade. When European colonists arrived, they introduced metal for the blades, which didn’t break as easily as stone. Both colonists and Native Americans primarily used tomahawks as weapons, but they were multi-purpose tools that could also be used for everyday tasks like chopping wood or hunting.
Invest in swamps (35)
If the fictional Terrebonne plantation were in the “Bayou Country” region of Southern Louisiana, it would be a very swampy area, and thus more difficult to maintain. George is wondering why Ratts, a steamboat captain, would want to invest in such a plantation. Steamboats were the main method of transporting people and goods, so a steamboat captain would have been prosperous already. It wouldn’t have seemed worthwhile for Ratts to also take on the challenges of running a plantation in the swamps.

Free papers (38)
Free papers were a way for states to make money, because they charged for free African-Americans to register for them (and re-register every few years), so state governments codified their use. It was the only form of legal identification available to people of color before the Civil War, and they were required to carry them at all times to avoid being arrested and sold into slavery. However, a testimony at an anti-slavery convention in 1834 indicates that individual white slave catchers often abused their right to search African-Americans in order to find and destroy their free papers, so their protection, though legally respected, was not total.

Slave auction (42)
Throughout the auction, the auctioneer and potential owners discussed the slaves’ fitness to work, child-bearing abilities, and any handicaps or abnormalities the slaves might have. Prior to the sale, buyers could examine any of the slaves up close, being as invasive as they wanted—feeling their muscles, looking in their mouths, making them walk and move in various ways. The seller would often cover his slaves with grease or oil to make their skin look healthier—they would also put grease around the slaves’ mouths, to make it appear as if they have just been eating a hearty meal, though they were kept in pens prior to the auction and were seldom fed. Slaves were often sold along with livestock and dry goods (coffee, tea, ribbon, etc.).

Acts of a melodrama (47)
See page 10 of guide

Spectacle/Sensation Scene (47)
See page 10 of guide
1. WHAT’S IN A LOGO?
“Logo” is the term given to the image that we use to market our productions. The process of coming up with a production’s logo is highly collaborative and involves many meetings between the artistic department, the marketing department, and in the Wilma’s case this year, our associate artist (set designer) and photographer Matt Saunders. The idea is to create a design that gives the viewer a reasonably accurate sense of the play’s tone, style, and thematic content and at the same time is enticing enough to draw them into the story and compel them to purchase a ticket. Rarely does a logo achieve all of those things to everyone’s complete satisfaction. The An Octoroon logo might be one of the few exceptions. Many of us involved in the production feel like this one comes about as close to getting it right as any logo can.

Logo Based Predictions
Have students spend a minute looking at the Wilma’s logo for An Octoroon on the cover of the guide, the postcard (attached in e-mail), or a poster. It is preferable to look at the logo in color, if you need hard copies of these materials let us know and we can send them to you. After students have spent some time viewing the image, guide them through a discussion (or written exercise) about the following questions.

- What do you notice about this logo? Describe it in as much detail as possible. What’s compelling about it?
- What can you deduce about the thematic content of An Octoroon based on the logo? (The title is part of the logo.) What can you infer?
- What predictions might you make about the tone and style of the Wilma’s production of An Octoroon based on this logo? In terms of the play’s tone, is it likely to be a serious drama, a comedy, or something somewhere in between, like satire? How about the style of the play? Are we in the realm of realism? A logo can be a bit like a visual poem; don’t be afraid to read it like one.
- What questions does the logo leave you with?

2. THE RHYTHM OF MELODRAMA
Many of us have preconceived notions of what melodrama is; Boucicault’s The Octoroon may challenge or coincide with those notions. Regardless, Boucicault’s language can seem antiquated for a reader and daunting for an actor. Have student read the GEORGE/ZOE scene (attached on page 27). Then discuss students’ initial responses to the language and content of the scene.
Rhythm Exercise
This exercise asks students to explore rhythms that emerge in Boucicault's language and punctuation. It emphasizes moments in the text where a pattern halts abruptly or undergoes a subtle shift. On the page, the language may feel distant or jarring, but the words and punctuation are the fuel for the action of this play. Encouraging students to unpack these rhythms will allow seemingly obsolete scenes to pop from the page.

Split students into small groups. Have groups gather in a circle to do a reading of the GEORGE/ZOE scene aloud. The task is for a person to read the text and stop at the first punctuation mark they see (, . – … ! ?) then the next person in the circle should pick up the line. This should continue for the entire scene. In groups and/or as a class, students should reflect on what they heard, felt, and experienced from the text read this way.

For example:

**ON PAGE**
ZOE: My love! My love? George, you know not what you say! You? My ... husband? Do you know what I am?

**OUT LOUD**
Student 1: My love!
Student 2: My love?
Student 3: George,
Student 4: you know not what you say!
Student 5: You?
Student 6: My ...
Student 1: husband?
Student 2: Do you know what I am?

For Theatre Students:

**Variation 1** Move chairs to the side of the room. Have everyone stand and move around the space. Have individual students read the entire scene’s text out loud in their own rhythm, and at each punctuation mark, make a sharp turn in their body. Have everyone do it at the same time for anonymity.

**Variation 2** Set up a table surrounded by several chairs. Have two students cast as GEORGE and ZOE read the text moving from one chair to another around the table every time they reach a new punctuation mark.

3. CHARACTER BREAKDOWN
Have students read BOUCICAUT’S OCTOROON PLOT on page 11. Then have students look at BJJ’S OCTOROON CHARACTER BREAKDOWN on page 12. Students should compare characters in Boucicault’s plot with the casting of Jacobs-Jenkins’ characters. After students have spent time examining these two pages, guide them through a discussion (or written exercise) about the following questions.

- What can we speculate about Jacobs-Jenkins’ play based on looking at BJJ’S OCTOROON CHARACTER BREAKDOWN?

- What do you notice about Jacobs-Jenkins’ casting requirements?

- What do you notice about Jacobs-Jenkins’ character-doubling? What do you think Jacobs-Jenkins’ goal is in creating character-doubling groups? (i.e. BJJ as GEORGE and M’CLOSKY)
AFTER SEEING AN OCTOROON

Post-Show Discussion
All art is subjective and no two people who see the same play will have the same experience of it. We recommend beginning your post show conversations with a “reader response” approach. Validating each viewer’s subjective experience serves to stimulate rather than shutdown thoughtful, probing conversations about the play. Challenging students to back up comments with specific details will encourage higher-level critical thinking without dismissing individual opinions.

- As you think back on the play, is there a particular scene or moment that continues to stick with you? Do you remember how it landed on you at the time? (i.e. were you moved, amused, stunned, disturbed, etc.?) Can you identify any specific theatrical element(s) that contributed to the impact of that moment for you? (i.e. an actor’s performance, the connection between two actors, a choreographed movement, a musical effect, lighting cue, etc.)

- What questions do you still have about the play? These can be anything from points of confusion to questions about certain choices made by the director, dramaturg or members of the production’s artistic team. They could also be questions related to issues that the play tackles such as content and themes.

- If you read or knew of An Octoroon or The Octoroon before seeing the show, how did this production differ from your expectations? Were there any aspects of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ retelling of The Octoroon that were unexpected or surprising? Was there a story/theme/interpretation from the Wilma’s specific production that was unexpected or surprising?

- Although The Octoroon was written over 150 years ago, what about it still feels relevant or stale to you in 2016? Did it resonate with you in light of more recent events? What tactics or methods were used in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ retelling that made this version contemporarily relevant?
APPENDIX

LINKS
VIDEO: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins & Ralph Lemon Interview with Daphne Brooks
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGjXpuxrGs8

VIDEO: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins & Sarah Benson Interview
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psqmqqvIcS8&feature=youtu.be

http://www.wnyc.org/story/octoroon/

Soho Rep’s An Octoroon Dramaturgy Feed
http://sohorep.org/show/an-octoroon

Theatre for a New Audience’s An Octoroon Dramaturgy Packet
https://issuu.com/tfana/docs/octoroon-360/1
AN OCTOROON  
GEORGE AND ZOE SCENE

GEORGE: We have known each other but a few days, but to me those days have been worth all the rest of my life. Zoe, you have suspected the feeling that now commands expression — you have seen that I love you.

ZOE: Me! You love me?

GEORGE: As your husband — under the shelter of your love — I could watch the storms of fortune pass by without a care —

ZOE: My love! (Realizing, recoiling.) My love? George, you know not what you say! You? My ... husband? Do you know what I am?

GEORGE: I know you are illegitimate, but love knows no prejudice. Has not my dear aunt forgotten it — she who had the most right to remember it?

ZOE: (Aside.) Alas! He does not know! And will despise — spurn me when he learns who, what, he has so loved. (Aloud.) George, oh, forgive me! Yes, I love you — I did not know it until your words showed me what has been in my heart and now I know how unhappy — how very unhappy I am.

GEORGE: Zoe, what have I said to wound you?

ZOE: Nothing; but you must learn what I thought you already knew. George, you cannot marry me; the laws forbid it!

GEORGE: Forbid it?

ZOE: There is a gulf between us, as wide as your love — as deep as my despair; but, oh, say you will pity me! That you will not throw me from you like a poisonous thing!

GEORGE: Zoe, explain yourself — your language fills me with fear.

ZOE: George, do you see that hand you hold? Look at these fingers; do you see the nails are of a ... bluish tinge?

GEORGE: Yes, near the quick there is a faint blue mark.

ZOE: Look in my eyes; is not the same color in the white?

GEORGE: It is their beauty.

ZOE: No! That — that is the dark, fatal mark of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black — bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the rest; those seven bright drops give me love like yours — hope like yours — ambition like yours — passions hung from life like dewdrops on morning flowers; but the one black drop gives me despair, for I’m an unclean thing — I’m an octoroon!