



SATIRE AND META- THEATRICALITY

December 12, 2024

An exploration of satire and meta-theater, as tools used by diasporan playwrights, especially Alice Childress, to critique and deeply interrogate the theater industry and its practices.

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In the early days of Broadway, the mainstream theater industry of the United States, “Blackness” was treated as something the industry could capitalize on, disregarding and disrespecting the actual people from which Blackness was derived. White playwrights, producers, directors, and actors actively decided to strip the aspects of black people and culture that would entertain the masses and be profitable, such as one-dimensional depictions and caricatures, leaving black artists to either join them to succeed in the industry or create work outside of the recognized theater canon. To explore “Blackness” as it relates to the theater industry at large, we must dive into the history of “blackness” in the American theater industry as well as the ways a black woman playwright, Alice Childress, laid the foundation for what black theater-making could be through her use of theatrical tools as a way to critique the theater industry, which treated black people and particularly black women poorly. Ground-breaking plays such as *Trouble in Mind* by Alice Childress, *The Colored Museum* by George C. Wolfe, and the modern musical *A Strange Loop* by Michael R. Jackson will serve as case studies for how blackness shows up in plays written by playwrights of the diaspora, through their creative and daring uses of satire and meta-theatricality.

Through this exploration, I aim to answer these questions: How did these specific plays, written by black playwrights, touch on issues that concern black people through their uses of satire and Meta-theatricality, as tools to challenge racist ideologies as well as the traditional frameworks of theater? What theatrical tropes are allowed to be shared with the masses and at what cost to the black community and those across the diaspora? How can women of the global diaspora explore satire through their works? With shows led by black artists who push the envelope on how blackness can be explored, how does Broadway treat them, especially plays

written by black women? The three plays mentioned above explore the self-reflective and symbolic nature of meta-theatricality and satire specifically used simultaneously by black playwrights whose works comment on the complexities and vastness of blackness and specific sub-communities or identities that coexist. These shows create spaces where such complexities are explored through their approaches to telling stories that speak to conditions within the theater industry as well as offstage within the personal lives of the people of the Global Diaspora.

There have been many conversations surrounding what Meta-theatricality is and its functions throughout the centuries, dating back to Shakespeare's use of the "play within a play" practice in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* up to Jackson's usage in *A Strange Loop*, but what exactly makes a play metatheatrical? Scholar Katherine Newey details in her study of Metatheatre, that "the self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of theatre which refers to itself, to its making or performing, or its dramatic and theatrical illusions" is what defines this genre (Newey 1997). This idea of "self-consciousness" or a social awareness that a piece displays can be found in Childress' play, whose stories and unique characters grapple with aspects of blackness, a complex identity that is worth deep exploration. It is also important to note that meta-theater may be a theatrical tool that is less employed by women across the diaspora due to its deeply personal and reflective nature, which could cause backlash from people who do not enjoy attending performances that make them think deeply about the problems that are at hand.

Tropes and stereotypes such as Mammy and Uncle Tom, were popularized within the theater industry stemming from minstrelsy and America's thoughts and portrayals of blackness in all mediums. In Douglas Jones's "The Black Below": Minstrelsy, Satire, and the Threat of Vernacularity," he highlights the shift from the white-dominated form to an art form that appealed to black people as it "offered them work other than the drudgery African Americans

were accustomed to as well as outlets for their creativity” (Jones, 2021, p.132). Black people were able to sing, dance and highlight their creative capabilities, combining “their own talents and cultural tastes” ultimately displaying “racial authenticity, as former slaves or descendants of slaves who created the moves, music, japes, and tales that white minstrels made popular, but could never execute perfectly” (Jones, 2021, p. 131).

The freedom that black American artists found in expressing their creativity connects to the forms of storytelling and movement that are popular on the continent of Africa, specifically among West African ethnic groups and cultures. Explorations of plays written by African women playwrights such as *Foriwa* by Ghanaian dramatist Efua T. Sutherland, serve as examples of how storytelling, live music, and dance were combined and showcased in single performances. What audiences, performers, and creatives across the diaspora enjoyed was the freedom to tell stories in ways that were creative and exciting combining all aspects of performance otherwise known as Total Drama. Minstrel-like performances also found their way onto Ghana’s stages in the early to mid-1900s, with Ghanaian performers taking the entertaining qualities of American minstrel shows and sharing them with Ghanaian audiences. Race was not a significant factor in West African minstrel-style shows unlike across the diaspora on stages in the United States.

These opportunities for creative expression weren’t without problems though as Robert Toll detailed in his book, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, “Black minstrels became the acknowledged minstrel experts at portraying plantation material. But since they inherited the white-created stereotypes and could make only minor modifications to them, black minstrels in effect added credibility to these images by making it seem that Negroes actually behaved like minstrelsy’s black caricatures” (Toll, 1977). Since Minstrelsy was deeply rooted in white supremacy and perpetuated a sense and ideology of black inferiority,

white audiences enjoyed these performances which made them popular across the United States. Due to being consumed by the public in large amounts, the sentiments the art form represented shaped people's thoughts and behaviors towards the people minstrelsy portrayed. This was dangerous because this belief of black inferiority and white supremacy penetrated beneath the surface viewings of these performances and crept into many systems of oppression against black people and made its way into how black people were portrayed on stage and screen in the coming years. These portrayals also can be seen on global stages as members of the diaspora are asked to take on these types of roles purely for entertainment purposes such as the 'plus-size comedic relief character' that has similarities and connections to the 'Mammy' trope.

Although white performers would essentially put on a "black life" as if black people were only props to be used and mocked with blackface and racist stereotypical acting/situations, black people also would inhabit these roles, gaining notoriety for their skillful performances even if they were demeaning and humiliating. The harmful and image-threatening caricatures made popular in the times of minstrelsy's reign transitioned into characters and themes in "lynching plays" of the early 1900s, even being critiqued in groundbreaking playwright Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind*, one of the early users of meta-theatricality in a black-written play.

Trouble in Mind is a metatheatrical exploration of American Theater, consciously highlighting its roots in racism and abuse, specifically towards black people. For African Americans, theater has continuously been an outlet to perform and potentially serve as a source of income, but these advancements oftentimes come at a cost. Alice Childress masterfully intertwines her response of using satire to critique the practices of the theater industry with the numerous humiliations that black actors face throughout her play. With scenes where the black characters who are also actors within the play, get to speak to each other in real ways about what

they must accept to put food on the table, Childress removes the curtain of silence that historically asked black actors and theater-makers to put on smiles, leaving their truths behind. Childress' choice to remove the curtain was risky, as she was a black woman playwright critiquing an industry that already favored men, leaving black women at the bottom of the hierarchy. Without Childress' courageous spirit and her anger with the theater industry, with special attention to the roles and stories that the industry could imagine black artists occupying, playwrights George C. Wolfe and Michael R. Jackson could not share their plays that got people's attention 30 years after. Although Childress' play was released in 1955 and stopped from becoming the first play written by a black woman to premiere on Broadway, the issues and situations Childress satirizes are cyclical, existing years before and still occurring decades after. When experiencing the play, Childress' mockery of abusive behavior in and out of the rehearsal room, prompts us to look at where these harmful behaviors stemmed from and how they continue to show up almost 7 decades later.

Whereas *Trouble in Mind* focused majorly on a theater industry controlled by white industry professionals where black performers had no other choice but to take on these caricature-based roles, George C. Wolfe shook up his approach to metatheatre to comment on the stereotypes and tropes black artists succumb to in the theater industry that they have a hand in controlling whether it be as playwrights or actors with the agency to choose to write or play these roles. In the scene "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play" the narrator or commentator character tells the audience that they are about to watch "A searing domestic drama that tears at the very fabric of racist America" (Wolfe, 1987). He then sets the stage for the play within a play that will satirize the 'Black Mama on the couch' genre as well as black acting methods and characteristics, directly calling out of the critically acclaimed play *A Raisin in The Sun* by

Lorraine Hansberry, as it was and perhaps still is the quintessential black family drama. Each character in this scene satirizes a particular role that black actors play as a part of a bigger exploration of blackness displayed in theater. The Black family structure consists of “Mama” a god-fearing, overly optimistic, matriarch of a fatherless family that strives towards achieving their American Dream. Her speech patterns as well as how she treats her children “Walter Lee Beau Willie Jones” and “Medea” are reminiscent of the inherited characteristics of The Mammy stereotype. She speaks in a voice that reflects the melodramatic and overly emotive nature of the shows the scene parodies. Her son Walter Lee Beau Willie Jones, receiving his name and mannerisms from a combination of a character in *A Raisin in The Sun* as well as *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange, satirizes the black man who can’t seem to overcome systemic racism by the hands of the white oppressor trope. He also stands in as the token colored man that *For Colored Girls...* criticized for being abusive towards black women such as his wife, “The Lady in Plaid”, who exists to show the type of diasporan woman character that Shange brought to life in her play. The Lady in Plaid is easily recognizable as a parody of the women in Shange’s play due to how the actor dances through each line of the monologue and speaks in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) which the play is famously written in. The lady in Plaid’s monologue also speaks to the purpose of the original play, which was to provide a space where black and brown women could openly express the hardships of life they faced, despite the various factors and people in their lives who had stolen their sense of joy or belonging or self-worth. It is important to note how although Wolfe may have been satirizing Shange’s characters, he decided however to have the Lady in Plaid speak about how her story connects to her sisters all over the world including on the African continent, to express how both Shange and Wolfe’s plays connect to the Global African Identity.

The following ‘scene within a scene’ features the character Medea, the sister of Walter and daughter of Mama who speaks as if she has been cast in a Shakespearean tragedy. Through the narrator of the scene's role of presenting each character within the scene a pseudo-Oscar Award for their performances, Wolfe comments on the noticeably stereotypical roles that black actors have been allowed, encouraged, and praised for playing by the theater industry, whether it be an overly emotive Mammy character like Mama, or an equally over emotive, abusive, black man who gambles his life away such as Walter. The way the character Walter constantly shifts the scene back to his narrative shows how women's voices in theater can easily go unnoticed or become overshadowed by a man's story. In Wolfe's case, he decided to critique both men's and women's roles in choosing to play these types of roles within the theater space.

Wolfe goes as far as to even have Walter shot to death at the climax of the scene, referencing the unjust police brutality that Black men have faced from the time the play was written in the 1980s to today in 2024. The scene ends with a musical number where the living members of the cast wish that Walter had only been born in an ‘All-Black Musical’ where he would have never been killed off and would have been able to live a happy laugh of singing and dancing every day. The significance of the All-Black Musical reference connects with the history of minstrelsy in the late 1800s/ early 1900s and the pressures of writing a black story with an artificially happy ending that playwrights such as Wolfe and current playwright Michael. R Jackson grappled with this in the 2000s. The scene continues with Walter getting up to join the other actors as they begin to perform as if they were in a black musical equipped with song and dance that satirizes the trope, creating an eerie resemblance to Minstrel shows. As the scene ends, audiences may wonder why he chose to satirize both a theatrical and personal culture that he is part of or if his play went too far by critiquing some of the most famous and cherished plays

written by black playwrights. Alice Childress opened the gate for Wolfe to critique black playwrights, as she critiqued the theater industry and the types of roles that Wolfe reflected on.

So, what happens when we as audience members encounter satire in theatrical works? In “The Black Below”: Minstrelsy, Satire, and the Threat of Vernacularity” Douglas Jones explores black satirists’ reasons for using satire noting they, “revel in exploiting the permeability between the low and high, in wrapping the effusive, impudent, and taboo material of Black vernacularity in the finery of rarified theatrical and literary aesthetics” (Jones, 2021, 142). Where plays such as *Trouble in Mind* used satire more subtly, Wolfe draws out areas of blackness that were taboo, from the transatlantic slave trade to the theater industry and its practices, and satirizes them fearlessly and in in-depth ways. When encountering satirical depictions of blackness, audiences feel that “such incongruities strip us, readers and the audience, of the moralism, ideological moorings, and standards of cultural evaluation that genre otherwise promises” (Jones, 2021, 143). In these moments of experiencing this discomfort two things can happen, the illusion can be cracked open allowing audiences to consider the circumstances and situations that are being exposed to them, or as Danielle Fuentes Morgan paints in her book, *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century*, “satiric misfires” can occur (Morgan, 2020). These misfires can occur for many reasons including, “the misreport of the contemporary realm; the misrepresentation of the past and its historicity; or a fundamental misreading of the satiric import by the audience themselves” (Morgan, 2020). Although these moments can be dangerous as the message of the piece can easily be misconstrued or twisted, not being able to use satire in the ways they feel are right stops them from being “vulnerable by revealing their own biases, difficulty with the subject material, or even their own fallibility as thinkers on the subject being discussed” (Morgan, 2020). The fear of satirical misfires strips

black playwrights of the self-reflective nature that is integral to their use of satire as a tool for storytelling and experience sharing. The fears mentioned previously connect to the reasons why satire has not been a theatrical tool that has been commonly used by Diasporan women playwrights. If African women used satire more often in their plays, they run the risk of male audience members disregarding the messages of their plays simply because the subject matter may be difficult to tackle with humor. Satire, however, does have a way of uniting audiences and shedding light on topics that people may not be willing to accept without some sense of entertainment attached.

Where *Trouble in Mind* has uncomfortable moments where the truth about how black actors are treated is revealed like a slow burn, meaning the play works itself up to those big moments where the play starts to “crack” or reveal the truth about the society the characters in the play live in which in turn causes us to think about ours, Wolfe’s approach smacks you in the face with outrageous satire in the first scene of the play setting audiences up for what’s to come. It begins in your face and ends in your face with Wolfe’s mixture of satire and meta-theatricality in the play and scene providing perfect grounds for questions about the limitations and definitions of black theater, which leaves the audience both black and non-black, receptive to Wolfe’s critiques and curious of what black playwrights will produce next.

With its catchphrase being “It’s a Big, Black and Queer-ass, American Broadway Show” *A Strange Loop* stands on the shoulders of Wolfe’s unapologetic approach to storytelling fused with an exploration of the black experience, which is complex and has many sub-identities. Like his predecessors, Jackson also takes on the play within a play idea but highlights a different theatrical genre known as “The Gospel Play” which has tropes and stereotypes of its own. Where *Trouble in Mind* attacks the white supremacist plays and stereotypes of her time, and *The*

Colored Museum attacks the few black shows that were accepted and praised by the white mainstream (exploring why that is, how we got in the door as playwrights and actors, and the ways we had to do it that still showed us in a light far less than what we are), *A Strange Loop* attacks and takes the form of a style of theater which was created and caters to the black Christian community. “The Gospel Play” stems from African American churches where according to Michael Weaver’s “Makers and Redeemers: The Theatricality of the Black Church” “Black people come to seek a sense of order in their lives and to gain some respite from the rigors of living in American society as a disadvantaged and oppressed group. Certain cultural traits, including music and language, are affirmed in the church, as the cultural reality is interwoven with Black religion” (Weaver, 1991). Within the walls of the church, black people could showcase their interests such as playwriting and performance fused with traditions and practices that were happening within the black church and the experiences of the churchgoers. It is within this context that globally known writer and actor Tyler Perry, who rose to fame as a playwright and performer in his gospel plays which exploited black people for the sake of faith-based entertainment but also drew a large following of black Christians who identified with the stories and characters he created. Where some black people found solace and a sense of belonging in the church and through gospel plays, others felt that these plays were stereotypical and limiting in terms of what stories black playwrights could write such as the character Usher in *A Strange Loop*.

Michael R. Jackson’s self-reflexivity throughout the piece opens up a conversation about what happens when sub-identities of blackness clash with each other in the lives of black people as well as in theatrical genres. Usher is a black gay playwright struggling to write a play that reflects his identity. Jackson’s storytelling, through Usher’s plight to write his musical, is an

answer to George C. Wolfe's critiques of the nature of black musicals, as this musical isn't only a place where black people smile, dance, and sing. Usher describes feeling trapped by the things he identifies with or that Blackness is linked to such as Church and the gospel play genre, saying "on days his blackness feels like another hurdle, that won't get out of his way"(Jackson, 2020).

Usher's thoughts (played by actors), as well as his parents, try to define him, separating his identities in the process which leads to him trying to appease the pressuring forces by satirizing what it would look like if he wrote a gospel play. Following a scene where Black Cultural icons/ancestors tell Usher that Tyler Perry writes real life and that he should follow suit, Usher does just that but in a satirical fashion which ultimately exposes the caricatures within The Gospel Play genre including, "a sassy black matriarch" and a "lonely spinster who loves God" (Jackson, 2020). The show Usher puts on titled "Show Me How to Pray: A Spiritual Urban Drama" is reminiscent of Wolfe's play within a play from the matriarch character to over-the-top acting and the connection to struggle at the center of both pieces. Eventually, he stops the play within a play and finds himself back in his reality of struggling to finish his play as well as struggling to exist through his identities. But as these struggles and pressures from his family start to take their toll on Usher, he decides to place himself into a Gospel Play that brings identities as a gay, black, playwright to the front of the narrative. Equipped with an elaborate set change, character shifts and the inclusion of his actual family and his relationship with them makes this climax of the show grounds for the discomfort that satire can create in audiences. Jackson is aware of this and follows this intense moment with a self-reflective conversation with Usher and his thoughts, questioning what he was trying to say with this moment in the play within a play. One of the Thoughts asks if Usher's showing of a "hateful Tyler Perry-style gospel play is real life" and Usher replies "It wasn't hateful. It was complex" (Jackson, 2020).

The complexity that Usher speaks of is the complexity that Childress tried to address within *Trouble in Mind*, over 60 years prior. Complexities lie within the vastness of the black experience, which spans across the global diaspora, and the boxes that oppressors try to put black people in, instead of hearing their stories whole. Within conversations surrounding the suppression of women of the diaspora's voices in theater, it is important to point out that oppression can come in various forms such as the exclusion of African women playwright's contributions to the diasporic theater canon to the silencing of their stories through a lack of recognition and scholarly research that cites them. By bringing these forms of oppression to the forefront and connecting Childress' work as a revolutionary diasporan woman playwright to the plight for more recognition and celebration of African women playwright's contributions, I hope to help open up more conversations around how the theater industry can treat women of the diaspora with more respect and provide artists with more resources to reach larger audiences.

Both *Trouble in Mind* and *A Strange Loop* were recently featured on Broadway, allowing audiences a look into two plays that deeply interrogate what it means to be a black person who gives their life to the theater industry. These shows, however, have since closed, with *Trouble in Mind* barely remaining open for 3 months. In the 2021/22 Broadway season 9 plays were written by and led by Black artists and none of them stayed open for a complete year, while some of their white counterparts received an opportunity to do so, reaching more audiences. The theater industry supports what "sells" if it's black stories, they'll try to get more "black shows" into a season, but they won't let them stay open long enough to truly challenge the industry and people's views through these stories. The fact that Childress's play finally got its Broadway Premiere after being shut down 66 years prior due to Childress's refusal to change the play's deeply stirring story, depicts how the theater industry is making changes for more inclusive

storytelling outlets. Childress's play, a piece that exposes how the theater industry continues to treat black artists, proves to be eerily relevant concerning how long the show was allowed to play to Broadway audiences.

The complexities of Blackness as it relates to culture, responsibilities, limitations, theater-making, and more should be able to be critiqued, satirized, and assumed by black people throughout the diaspora who live through these circumstances. From our days performing in minstrel shows to performance opportunities in lynching plays and eventually black-written works, we've always been linked to our blackness and the makings of it. The adoption of metatheatre and satire by black playwrights has been shown as an effective way of deeply investigating the network of identities that tie back to how we move through the world as Black people. These tools should be explored and adopted by other members of the diaspora to bring awareness to certain tropes or theater practices that African women and people are tired of seeing on their stages and in the theater industry's practices. These works show the remnants of the things we carry but also a sense of curiosity about what the future of black artistry and creation can look like, especially for women writers who stand on Childress' shoulders.

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