

This Body is Just Meat: Identity, body perception, and death in three adapted plays by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

By Matthew Reeder

Abstract

The plays of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins amplify our current social conversations around identity and body perception. With particular interest in three adapted plays, *An Octoroon*, *Everybody*, and *Appropriate*, this paper examines the innovative and subversive tactics that Jacobs-Jenkins uses to activate identity and body perception as complex and risky tools for dramatic engagement. In *An Octoroon*, and *Everybody*, Jacobs-Jenkins repurposes the framework of two historical plays for a contemporary audience and drops these antiquated plays into the epicenter of our current social conversations around race, body perception and identity. In *Appropriate*, the playwright intentionally appropriates and exploits the narrative body and the accepted identities of 'The Classic American Theatre' and asks the audience to stand witness as the foundations of that great house crumble to dust. Viewed together, these three adapted plays—which do not soothe nor comfort, nor even offer a satisfying sense of justice—suggest that human life and the stories left in its wake are fleeting, unpredictable and ephemeral, and that any meaningful inventory of identity is made restless by the inevitability of death.

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*'Hi everyone. I am a "black playwright." What does that mean? I have no idea, but I'm here to tell you a story' (Jacobs-Jenkins, *Appropriate* 139).*

Plays are a social conversation. Perhaps more than any other fine art form, the theatre contains a foundational agreement between human storytellers and their witnessing community. Novels ask the solitary reader to look inward, visual art invites the viewer into a conversation of perspective and perception, and music is an individual journey of the imagination and the spirit. The theatre, however, has always been about human bodies and stories colliding with other human bodies and stories. The theatrical art form demands a unique synergy between performer and witness, and if the witness is removed from the experience, the resulting power is compromised. A lone character stands on a stage in an empty theatre and says, *'I'm here to tell you a story.'* The impulse dies in the silence. The social conversation is lost.

Social conversations in theatre often address the narrative of cultural identity. The great plays of any era ask the attending audience to investigate the collective notion of "we." The "hero" of a play carries within their theatrical blood and bones the DNA of the culture in which they were born. The hero is a timestamp, a record of a culture's aspirations and failures, its values, and its prejudices. The archetypical flawed hero is both a representative and a result of that cultural record, an avatar through which an audience can interact with the best and the worst in themselves and their culture. Whether one considers the plays of ancient Africa and Greece, the plays of Shakespeare, or the plays by

contemporary playwrights like Caryl Churchill and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, the social conversation of theatre is an ongoing examination of the constantly evolving state of “we.” Theatremaking and theatregoing become a collective attempt to recognize a cultural identity in ourselves, and to distinguish ourselves from the people and places that birthed us, our parents, our communities, our countries, our gods.

While identity is not exclusively a modern theatrical theme, the degree to which the contemporary theatre is engaging with the question of identity is notable. Perhaps there is no playwright more actively and subversively engaged with the complexities of human cultural identity than Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. As a playwright, Jacobs-Jenkins is keenly and critically aware of the prominence of identity in our current social conversations. In his emerging canon of eight stylistically divergent plays, identity is not simply a flag to be waved, or a social badge to be displayed as a hashtag in a social media profile, but a complex and inherited system of social perceptions and narratives that did not originate with us and certainly will not end with us. Each play addresses the dynamic question of identity through the clouded lens of uncertainty. In wildly subversive and theatrical ways, Jacobs-Jenkins is dismantling what we think we know and understand about our individual selves and the bodies that enshrine and complicate them. As a playwright with his sights set on the performative exploration of identity and the politics that trail behind them, the social perception of body as a complex and flawed vehicle for narrative is a central image through a growing and formally varied canon.

Jacobs-Jenkins is far too keen to ignore the fact that plays centered on identity must also acknowledge and question, in some fundamental manner, the identity of the bodies who face the stage from the anticipatory darkness of the audience, and how those bodies might perceive the bodies that move about onstage. Even as he resists and

challenges the notion of the audience as monolith (Thompson), Jacobs-Jenkins's plays are deeply aware of the audience as partner and are pulsing with the curiosity of who might be sitting in those audiences in any given night.

'Hi everyone. I am a "black playwright." What does that mean? I have no idea, but I'm here to tell you a story.'

These are the opening lines of Jacobs-Jenkins's 2014 play, *An Octoroon*. The lines are spoken directly to the audience by a mostly naked black actor whose black body is in full view of the audience. The black actor is playing a character named BJJ, who is a fictionalized version of the playwright himself, and is preparing for the show by putting on "whiteface" in preparation for playing multiple white characters, including the antagonist (a white slave owner) and the protagonist (the white hero of the play). As he speaks, he gives himself "an impressive wedgie," and proceeds to drink almost an entire bottle of whisky without ever becoming inebriated. Moments later, another naked actor, this one white, but also calling himself "the Playwright" emerges into the scene, is visibly and inexplicably drunk, and tries to relieve himself from an "impressive" but wholly inexplicable wedgie. The two "playwrights" begin exchanging juvenile verbal barbs in full view of the audience, as if their relationship is long standing, trailing behind them a history of uncomfortable camaraderie and competition.

An Octoroon is a tale of two very different playwrights with very different social and ethnic identities in social conversation with each other and with their audience. Jacob-Jenkins' *An Octoroon* is an audacious adaptation of a 19th Century melodrama *The Octoroon*, written by Dion Boucicault. In its time, *The Octoroon* was a wildly popular melodrama

about love and race, set on an old cotton plantation. Written by a white playwright for what was almost certainly a white audience, the original play is full of racial tropes and stereotypes, even as it tries clumsily and not without patronization, to be empathetic to the plights of slaves during the era. The “hero” of the play is unsurprisingly a white man, and his “empathy” towards the plight of the slaves is based largely on his sexual desire for a woman who is almost imperceptibly black - the “Octoroon” (an archaic term for someone who is one-eighth black) of the title. In Boucicault’s time, black actors were not permitted to act onstage, so the black characters were played by white actors in blackface. In Jacobs-Jenkins’s adaptation, the black playwright character tells the audience that the white actors have dropped out of the play because they were “uncomfortable” with the slavery theme of the play, so the actors of color must put on whiteface in order to bring these white characters to life. Jacobs-Jenkins’s adaptation is a fun house mirror image of the original social conversation Boucicault was trying to have with his audience, and deftly demonstrates how bodies are perceived by a specific audience when they inhabit a character during a specific moment in time.

There is a dual identity to these playwright characters; one is a black actor playing a fictionalized version of Jacobs-Jenkins, and the other a white actor playing a fictionalized version of Dion Boucicault, but they are, somehow, the exact same character in the metatheatrical world of the play. They are both “the playwright.” They are the yin and yang to the *Octoroon* story, separate characters but also inextricable from each other, both painting their bodies with an identity that does not belong to them in front of an audience that does not know them. *The Octoroon* is, after all, a forgotten play by a white playwright about the experience of black slaves and the slavery experience, while *An Octoroon* is that same play adapted by a black playwright for a modern audience.

This dizzying, audaciously theatrical and self-aware opening moment might as well be an introduction to this playwright's entire body of work. Certainty of any kind – especially the kind that relates to our increasingly tribal definitions of contemporary identity and narrative— does not live comfortably in these plays.

Although Branden Jacobs-Jenkins has crafted many incisive and subversive original plays such as *Neighbors* (2010), *War* (2014), and *Gloria* (2015), he is frequently drawn to plays from the past. His 2017 play *Everybody* is a fiercely experimental and theatrical reimagining of a 15th century morality play, *Everyman*, and might be Jacobs-Jenkins's most direct and playful engagement with the current social conversation about identity.

If one was to overhear a transcript of that social conversation on the street, it might sound something like this: *I am who I am and my life is what it is because of who and what I am, and I define myself based on who I believe I am, and you define me based on who I appear to be and who you believe me to be.* The process of owning and proclaiming our own personal identities are an attempt to understand and acknowledge ourselves in relation to a volatile world, and to have others understand and acknowledge us in return.

In *Everybody*, Jacobs-Jenkins asks us to pause that social transcript and to consider instead the elusive question of self. If the expression of identity begins with the great "I am," then what does it mean to be an "I"? Does the self originate in our minds, our beliefs, our interactions, our desires, our deeds, or does it originate in the physical, biological reality of our bodies? Or does the self arise out of a complex combustion of these elements? Jacobs-Jenkins is a playwright, not a philosopher nor a social scientist, so he wisely lets the play itself raise these questions and asks the audience to sit in the resulting discomfort of the play's ambiguity. But the

investigation into self isn't merely scribed into the fabric of *Everybody's* investigational theme. It is a functional chromosome built directly into the bone and tissue of the playscript itself.

A typical playscript is the careful arrangement of an impulse. As written, a playscript is an incomplete thing, a formula of words and actions that form a point of origin for something latent and yet unborn. As the primary architect of that latency, the playwright often feels pressure to dictate and clarify certain impulses and intended realities, clearly outlining narrative and dramatic instructions to the unknown engineers of the play's eventual physical body. However, the playwright is not the mother of a play. Regardless of the love she feels for the playscript, or how much of her DNA exists within it, the playwright does not give birth to the play. It is not her child. Even though the playwright is the originator of the playscript, she is only the dreamer of the play itself. If human identity is largely determined by how a body stands in relation to other bodies, and the perceptions and prejudices that results from that relation, the same can be said about a play. A playscript is abstract. A play is not. When performed by a company and perceived by an audience, a play is a living, breathing organism, one that stands in front of a public gaze, outside of its creator, and says "I am." The creator quickly loses control of its creation.

Because of this, the playwright often attempts to circumscribe much of the play's latent identity, especially regarding its characters. The playwright envisions a specific character in a specific light, proscribing explicit features to the character so it can appropriately exist within the genetic code of the play's world. Consider the description of the character "BJJ" as he is described in the *Dramatis Personae* of the *An Octoroon* playscript: "played by an actual playwright, an African American actor, or a black actor" (Jacobs-Jenkins, *Appropriate* 133). These kinds of "requirements" have significant impact on not only the identity of the

character being portrayed, but on the identity of the actor that should be allowed to bring the character to life. In the *Dramatis Personae* for Jacobs-Jenkins' *Appropriate*, for instance, the character of River Rayner is carefully described as "white, early 20's but looks younger" (Jacobs-Jenkins, *Appropriate* 7). By stating this, the playwright clearly indicates that this character can be inhabited only by a specific kind of body, and only by adhering to these proscribed physical and social identities can a character properly manifest in this theoretical world.

The current social conversation around identity is largely a result of a reckoning we are having with the realities of our bodies and the things that we have been told about them. Black bodies and white bodies, female bodies and male bodies, old bodies and young bodies, the lines we are redrawing around these binary and antiquated classifications are a dramatic reshifting of a broken, segregational narrative that has played out violently and rapaciously over the course of human existence. The stories we have been told about our bodies are falling apart, breaking us down, tearing us apart, shifting how we view ourselves and each other in profoundly significant ways.

As a dramatist, Jacobs-Jenkins seems to be keenly interested in this cultural shift and *Everybody* is a direct challenge to the certainty of identity and the cultural perception that results from engagement with it. The *Dramatis Personae* in the *Everybody* playscript is markedly different from the one in *An Octoroon* or *Appropriate*. Instead of prescribing the internal and external identities of each character and the actors who should interpret them, Jacobs-Jenkins notes that "the play is written for a company of nine performers of varying generations and gender and ethnic identities" (*Everybody* 4). In the very next sentence, he takes this notion a step further by insisting that "the exact breakdown of roles should vary from performance to performance via lottery or some other element of

chance.” This mechanism not only urges productions towards inclusivity in casting, but expressly prevents a production from making any predetermined decision about the social, cultural, or physical identity of any of the characters until the performance itself is already underway. Each night, a different body falls into a different role. Each body views itself differently within each role and is perceived differently by the prejudiced gaze of its specific audience. Each body brings with it the consequence of its own “I am,” inserting into the character its unique baggage of self, and all of the social, cultural and spiritual implications that come with it.

Jacobs-Jenkins’s curiosity around the dramatic function and cultural perception of the body is evident in the title of the play itself. The title (*Everybody*) is a deliberate change from the source material (*Everyman*). A quick consideration of this choice could lead the reader to view it as a simple neutralization of the masculine into something more inclusive, something that acknowledges the abundant variety of human personhood and identity. But the playwright’s choice of *Everybody* instead of *Everyone* or *Everyperson* is significant. *Everybody* deftly associates the character and the play itself to current conversations around body presentation, perception, and identity. *Everyman* is overly gendered and patriarchal. *Everyone* and *Everyperson* is certainly more universal and inclusive, but *Everybody* manages to be both inclusive and thematically pointed. *Everybody* points our subconscious to the corporeal. As human beings, we exist in that specific machine of body that we are born in, and our journey towards, through and beyond identity is always in direct relation to that body. We are revered, celebrated, identified, categorized, ridiculed, persecuted, abused, and murdered because of that body. The body is a vessel but also a prison, a sheath of bone and meat that both protects and imprisons the intangible, mysterious music of self.

Even though the body is the most immediate and visible signpost of our complex identities, our actual bodies are remarkably malleable and inconsistent. The body can be a source of pride and strength, but also a profound source of betrayal. Three quarters of the way through *Everybody*, the character of Everybody meets the character of Love. Before the play is allowed to continue, Love insists that Everybody remove their clothes and stand in relation to the nakedness of their body, in full view of the audience's gaze. Love also removes their clothes, and the scene becomes a disarming series of exclamations as the two naked characters run about the stage screaming "I'VE BEEN VERY DISSAPPOINTING TO MYSELF.... BECAUSE MY BODY IS A MYSTERY TO MYSELF ... I AM ANGRY AT MY BODY ... BECAUSE IT KEEPS CHANGING ... I DON'T LOVE CHANGE ... I DON'T LOVE THAT I HAVE NO CONTROL ... BUT I HAVE NO CONTROL ... THIS BODY IS JUST MEAT" (Jacobs-Jenkins, *Everybody* 44-6). That last phrase, 'this body is just meat' becomes a kind of riotous mantra that evolves into "I SURRENDER! I SURRENDER! I SURRENDER!" until the scene and the character collapse into the aftereffects of revelation, as the characters sit in silence with their bodies. Jenkin's stage directions in this moment are enigmatic, and the question mark at the end of the stage direction is an intentional alarm bell rung for some future production. Even the playwright is uncertain.

"Everybody –naked, exhausted—achieves something. Catharsis?"
(Jacobs-Jenkins, *Everybody* 46)

In this moment, and in the play, the quest for understanding of self is inextricable from the experience of living inside the fragile, transient bodies that we did not choose to inhabit, the physical machine of our

personhood, the uncooperative spring from which our identity perpetually spits and bubbles.

The ancient play *Everyman* is constructed as an inquisitive journey towards the unavoidable finality of death. The play examines the strange fabrics that weave together to form a life, and what remains of that life once Death (also a major character in the play) calls us away from that life. Since we as humans are conscious of the inevitability of our own death, we are instinctively self-aware of the consequence of our transient lives in ways that other animals are not. As human beings, we know that our bodies are our vehicles through our lives, and that we experience our lives through the realities of our bodies. When those bodies fall, what remains of us? When the final wisp of our human experience dissolves back into the darkness of the earth, what comes with us?

Jacobs-Jenkins's *Everybody* contains a similar journey, but it is powerfully and even awkwardly ambiguous about death itself. The only thing we currently and unequivocally understand about death is that it results in the dissolution of the physical body. In death, the physical body becomes quiet and still and melts back into the murk and humus of the earth itself. This reality is explicitly raised in the very beginning of *Everybody* during a very long "pre-show" introduction when a theatre usher—who is also a character in the play—and who is also God—attempts to summarize a Buddhist idea about death, to prepare the audience—who are also characters in the play—for the experience:

Everything about you—your existence, your experience, your memory—everything is like a bunch of flowers. And, like flowers, when you die, all those things that made you You are broken down into the raw material that is used to make new bunches of flowers, so You, as you 'experience' 'yourself' in 'reality,' a.k.a. this unique

bunch of flowers, are never coming back. So think about that and what do you want to do with the rest of your life, vis-à-vis that. Or something. (Jacobs-Jenkins, Everybody 10)

Since the awareness and finality of death is a powerful truth in this play, *Everybody* becomes more acutely and playfully interested in the bodily experience of life. Because identity is so strongly connected to the congenital gifts and betrayals of the body itself, and the body is what is destroyed and consumed by death, Jacobs-Jenkins seems to question the attention that is paid to the realities of the physical body and the hardline identities that seem to arise from a reckoning with it. When the most visible indicator of our lived identity and its expression is no longer able to be gazed upon, what happens to our great “I am?”

An inventory of identity is made restless by the inevitability of death. This is especially clear in *Appropriate* (2013), Jacob-Jenkins’s fiercely realistic play about a white American family attempting to come to terms with the emerging reality of a troubling racist past. In *Appropriate*, the estranged New England Lafayette family returns to the southern plantation estate of its recently deceased patriarch to tie up the loose ends left by his death. In doing so, the family discovers an old photo album that contains vintage photographs of murdered black bodies. The discovery of the book is directly followed by a gruesome discovery of jars seemingly filled with preserved body parts. The entire play is a failed attempt by the family to reconcile with the discovery of these morbid heirlooms, and what that discovery means for the identities of the Lafayette family. Whereas *Everybody* seemed concerned with the identity of the individual body in the face of inevitable death, *Appropriate* seems interested in the identity of a collective body. A family is a collection of individual experiences that contribute to a broader collective narrative.

This collective narrative is the History of the family, that proverbial tree of ancestral legend, and the stories that bring nutrients to the root systems and sprawling branches of that tree are as anecdotal and mythological as they are factual. But the questionable accuracy of these stories makes them no less definitive in the life of a family. The personal freedom that comes with the complex expression of the great “I am” is further complicated by the familial expression of the “we.” The great “I am” of individual identity is expected to sit squarely within the story of the greater “we,” and when it does not, identity begins to crumble, and dysfunction emerges. As the Lafayette family sits on their dead father’s couch in their dead father’s home, pages through a secret album full of dead black bodies, and proceeds to tear each other apart over the question of who he was and who he was not, the foundation of the family’s identity – that epochal narrative of collective identity and understanding—begins to rumble and the dust begins to fall from the rafters.

There are many subtle provocations in *Appropriate*, but perhaps none so compelling as Jacobs-Jenkins’s decision to provide no answer nor conclusions to the origin, purpose, or true ownership of the album or the jars. There is no nameplate in the album, no notes on the jars, no implicating photographs of the father. These relics simply exist in the old home of the family. They stand as dark beacons to a violent national history made personal, an indication of the wide-reaching implications of national shame and a grim celebration of the sociopathic narrative of American racial violence. By the end of the play, there is no clarity for the Lafayette family or their identity, only more uncertainty. We have learned nothing about the true purpose or authentic ownership of those grim relics. But we have watched this white family tear itself and its collective identity apart. The body of the family’s identity becomes dismembered

and decomposed, returning to the darkness of the earth, a very different kind of death.

There is another kind of identity that Jacobs-Jenkins is examining in *Appropriate*. Like *An Octoroon* and *Everybody*, there is a covert power in the title of the play itself, which seems to have nothing to do with the Lafayette family. Even though *Appropriate* is not a true adaptation in the vein of *An Octoroon* or *Everybody*, the play is not wholly his own. In writing *Appropriate* and titling it as such, Jacobs-Jenkins is intentionally appropriating and exploiting the public body and the accepted identity of 'The Classic American Theatre.' The playwright who began an earlier play with the line, "Hi, I am a 'black playwright'" has subversively crafted a "white" play in the tradition of the 'Great American Family Drama,' which features a cast of privileged white characters who only mention and discuss dead black bodies as a personal problem to be dealt with (or capitalized upon). In doing so, this "black playwright" (who did not want his image on any of the play's publicity materials) ingeniously lobbies for a spot on the mainstream American theatre marquis next to Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets, William Inge, Arthur Miller, and Tracy Letts. The deeper cultural narrative of *Appropriate* is something much more incendiary than the existential plight of another white American family. The very house of the Lafayette family—that venerable physical body that that contains the great and troubling "I am" of the family—that very house that is also a representation of the great "I am" of the classic American Family Drama itself—that very house must fall, and the American Theatre audience must witness its death.

The final extended scene of *Appropriate* contains nothing but sound and empty space. There is no family. The Lafayette family has consumed itself and scattered its ashes to the wind. There are no human bodies to perceive. The only remaining body is the old house itself. Fragmented and

abandoned, bones dusty and old, the house begins its own kind of death. Time desecrates the house. It begins to decompose, becoming consumed by dust and shadow and the roar of cicadas as its stately walls and rafters begin to crumble and discarded human things begin to fall through a cracked floor that can no longer support the weight of what remains. The body of the old house is just another kind of meat, a decaying and disappointing container for an abandoned narrative—failing, consumed by time, exposed, unburied.

In the final moment of the play, a lone unnamed figure steps into the shambles of the abandoned and decrepit house. A dim flashlight beam dances around in the silence.

“Just before he leaves, he takes a look around thinking “Look at this place.” He leaves.

*In the blackout, there is silence” (Jacobs-Jenkins, *Appropriate* 115).*

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