

2017 SAA Seminar: Shakespeare in Black America abstracts

Leaders: Patricia Cahill
and Kim F. Hall 1

Patricia Akhimie

‘Fair’ Bianca and ‘Brown’ Kate: Shakespeare and the Mixed-Race Family

This paper explores the world of a new production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, still in the earliest stages of development, that will employ non-traditional casting and re-envision Katharina (“as brown in hue / As hazelnuts, and sweeter than the kernels”), Bianca (“fair Bianca”), and Baptista as members of a mixed-race family, living in the U.S. South in an unnamed time period that may evoke both the antebellum and Jim Crow eras. The production is conceptualized, cast, and rehearsed under the guidance of José Esquea, producer/director of the Soñadores Productions Shakespeare series (formerly of Teatro LA TEA), a classical theater group that features Latino/a, African-American and Asian-American actors, and mixed-ability casting (the combination of professional and amateur actors, from the surrounding community) reflecting the demographics of Manhattan’s lower east side, where the company has been housed. This paper considers the terms of class and race-based social differentiation at work in the play and in the production’s exploration of mixed-race families (Katharina will likely be cast as and played by a bi-racial woman, Baptista a white man, Petruchio a black man). *The Taming of the Shrew* turns audiences’ attention to the problem of Kate, a sister who does not match, and to a family at a moment of crisis. As with mixed-race families in films like *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959), it is at the moment that suitors seek to court and marry adult children of mixed heritage—“brown” Kate and her sister “fair” Bianca—that the color line reappears.

Pat Cahill

The Infinitely Expressive American Negro: Shakespearean Performance and Racial Terror in Atlanta circa 1906

For our seminar I consider a photograph reproduced in the July 1906 *Voice of the Negro* depicting a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* at Atlanta University—an HBCU founded in 1865 by the American Missionary Association, with subsequent assistance from the Freedman’s Bureau. The performance it depicts was the second annual “class day” exercise directed by the pioneering Black educator Adrienne Herndon, who was among the first faculty of color at Atlanta University, where she taught students elocution and introduced annual commencement week Shakespeare performances. I’m struck by the comic exuberance in this photo: by its depiction of sheer joy in performance. What did it mean in the summer of 1906 to speak of and to Black America via Shakespeare’s romantic comedy? This question is especially significant, I think, because the *Shrew* performance the photo records occurred just three months before the horrific race riot of September 1096 in which, for several days, white mobs broke into Black-owned business and openly terrorized and killed Black people in their workplaces and on the streets, partly in response to false newspaper claims that Black men had assaulted white women. Because this *Shrew* performance happened before the massacre, we might be tempted to assert that the photograph exists apart from—in blissful innocence of—the terror and trauma that Atlanta’s black population would soon confront. But I want to argue otherwise, and to focus on the radical potential of the photograph and of the performance culture of which it is a part,

especially given the visual violence more typically directed against Blacks in early 20th century America. Ultimately, by drawing on the work of performance theorist Daphne Brooks, I suggest the *Shrew* photo should be read as registering a bold assertion of what she terms “bodies in dissent” in the face of continual threats to Black humanity.

Vanessa Corredera

“How Dey Goin to Kill Othello?!”: Key & Peele and Shakespearean Universality

In a year celebrating the 400th anniversary Shakespeare’s death, promotional materials repeatedly made the case for his continued significance, with words and phrases like “lasting legacy,” “relevance,” “timeless,” and “international appeal” recurring. Shakespeare Lives, sponsored by the British Council, was a series of events and activities marketed as “exploring Shakespeare as a living writer who still speaks for all people and nations.” And The Shakespeare Theater Association “chronicl[ed] celebrations of Shakespeare’s life, work and universal appeal” through performances and readings. These are, essentially, claims for a universal Shakespeare. Such claims may be appealing, but as several scholars remind us, we must be wary about the way these assertions gloss over the ways in which Shakespeare may be a source of alienation and exclusion rather than of humanistic integration. Specifically, assertions of universality gloss over Shakespeare as a shibboleth for approved “high” culture often imagined as white. A reminder of precisely this dynamic appears in a surprising place; bi-racial comedy duo Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele tackled Shakespeare’s “whiteness” and the limits of his universality in a sketch entitled “Othello Tis My Shite,” which appeared on Season 3 of their eponymous comedy show. A close reading reveals how Key and Peele imagine Shakespeare and race, specifically, Shakespeare’s representation of blackness. Essentially, Key and Peele invoke Shakespeare in order to explore the racialized boundaries of the dramatist and his iconic work. According to this sketch, Shakespeare’s universality finds its limits when confronted by its potential irrelevance to the black experience due to its inauthentic depiction of blackness. As such, Key and Peele’s satire challenges the narrative of universal Shakespeare.

Ambereen Dadabhoy

Wincing at Shakespeare: Looking B(l)ack at the Bard

In this paper, I will explore how black actors have taken on Shakespeare as not only a barometer of white culture but as a text through and against which to access their subjectivities, to simultaneously express via Shakespeare their alterity and belonging. In particular, I will focus on how Keith Hamilton Cobb in his one-man play, *American Moor*, grapples with construction of Black masculinity not only in Shakespeare’s *Othello* but also in the apparatus and hierarchy of the American theater system, which he contends limits the possibility of Black subjectivity and creativity. Cobb’s appropriation of Shakespeare’s play can be placed in a long lineage of black border crossing when it comes to Shakespeare. Moreover, Cobb’s play, which is a literal and metaphorical rehearsal of *Othello* enmeshes Shakespeare’s play within a racial schema and history that it (*Othello*) authorized over 400 years ago. At the same time *American Moor* envelops Shakespeare’s tragic hero in a familiar embrace of love and acceptance, acknowledging within the white man’s—Shakespeare’s—construction of black identity the subjectivity of black,

diasporic existence. Cobb's conversation with Shakespeare embodies and challenges the anxieties underpinning Du Bois's claim, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not."

Kim F. Hall, Barnard College

Yearning: Reading Itinerant Shakespeare

This paper focuses on a scene from Afro-Canadian actor Richard Berry Harrison's (1864-1935) unpublished memoir, "*Even Playing De Lawd*." After a life as an itinerant elocutionist (primarily of Shakespeare and Dunbar) and drama teacher, at the age of 66, Harrison became famous as "De Lawd" in the Pulitzer-prize winning play, *The Green Pastures*. On this page Harrison briefly describes encountering Frederick Douglass while they were both in Saint Paul during the 1892 Republican Convention. Douglass performs scenes from *Othello* for the actor and eventually introduces Harrison at his Saint Paul performance in a local church. The paper uses a mixture of personal reflection and analysis to explore ways of reading "impromptu, unstaged moments of black Shakespeare performance."

Lynn Maxwell

'Shakespeare for all times and peoples': Shakespeare at Atlanta University (Center)

In this paper I explore what it means to require Shakespeare at a historically black college by looking at Adrienne Herndon's 1906 essay "Shakespeare at Atlanta University" and W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*. After exploring how Shakespeare requirements participate in a contemporary conservative agenda, I argue that both Herndon and Du Bois imagine possibilities for radical politics in the performance of and study of Shakespeare. Herndon claims Shakespeare for Black actors suggesting that they might better convey Shakespeare's plays than white actors, and she uses Shakespeare performances to build local community and a space for Black theatrical performance. Similarly, Du Bois finds in Shakespeare a way to move "across the color line." Reading these two texts together suggests that it might mean something different to teach, study, and perform Shakespeare in a Black space and that other kinds of politics might still be enacted through Shakespeare at Spelman and other HBCUs.

Nedda Mehdizadeh

Othello in Harlem: Re-writing Shakespeare's Moor of Venice in Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet*

This reflection centers on Djanet Sears' play *Harlem Duet* which imagines Othello's life before he meets Desdemona. It traces race relations across three main time periods – the story of HIM and HER in 1860, HE and SHE in 1928, and Othello and Billie in the present. The apartment that the couple shares on the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards in Harlem acts as the constant pivot point around which the events of the play unfold. The main thread takes place in the present where Othello, having developed his career as a college

professor – an accomplishment Billie funds with her own inheritance money – chooses to shed the limits of his racial identity and join the “human race”; his coming marriage to his white colleague Mona, he believes, proves that while he has progressed toward a more inclusive way of life, Billie simply holds onto a painful, marginalized past. Heartbroken, Billie – short for her full name Sibyl – plots to exact revenge by poisoning the handkerchief her husband gave her when they first married. And anyone who comes into contact with the object will be doomed.

Though the present-day thread occupies the bulk of the play, I find myself wondering about HE and SHE from 1928. Aside from the Prologue, this thread only appears in two additional scenes – both of which occur in near succession at the end of the play. The guiding question that begins my rumination of the play, then, is, what work does the 1928 thread do for *Harlem Duet*? Why does Sears include the Harlem Renaissance – indeed bookends the play with it – as a temporal guide? In other words, what does the HE and SHE of 1928 tell us about the cycle of injustice that seems to be the heart of *Harlem Duet*? It is my contention that the 1928 timeline seeks to address the challenge those in the margins experience as they carve out space within a privileged world. Sears’ play sits at the margins of theater, keeping good company with the histories of Black minstrelsy and the Harlem Renaissance, as well as other time periods like slavery and civil rights; her positioning of the 1928 timeline as a set of bookends to the play further underscores the marginal place it holds. But even as it shores up the voices at the margins, it frames the play with crucial questions about identity and performance that continue to affect how we see race relations today. Perhaps her play can act as a guide for the rest of us, particularly as we find ourselves within a political climate that seems to threaten the most vulnerable among us. With her “rhapsodic blues tragedy,” Sears demonstrates that that who occupy liminal spaces can transform them into sites of productivity, even in the face of injustice.

Elizabeth Rivlin

Shakespeare and Contemporary Middlebrow Fiction: Elizabeth Nunez’s *Prospero’s Daughter* and Terry McMillan’s *How Stella Got her Groove Back*

In this paper, I discuss two novels that I label as middlebrow in their aspiration to define a reading public in which African-Americans play a constitutive part. Each is written by a woman of color and each is engaged on some level with Shakespeare. Elizabeth Nunez’s *Prospero’s Daughter* (2006) is an adaptation of *The Tempest* set on a tiny island off of Trinidad on the eve of its independence from Great Britain. Nunez retells the story from the perspective of her Caliban and Miranda, represented as young lovers whose affiliation eventually triumphs over the horrific abuse perpetrated by her imperialist, racist father. This novel echoes but also in some sense domesticates influential Caribbean anti-colonialist readings of the play, stressing the ability of readers of color to enlist Shakespeare as their ally. On the other hand, Terry McMillan steers away from adapting Shakespeare, even though she gives her heroine’s love interest his last name. *Stella* (1996) insists on readers’ right to know Shakespeare and ultimately on their right to make

their own Shakespeare, as McMillan herself has done. Both Nunez and McMillan mix literary and commercial strategies to cultivate a capacious Black public that can encounter Shakespeare on its own terms.

Jessica Walker

**“What should his sufferance be?”:
Protesting Injustice in Shakespeare’s Venice and 21st-Century America**

This essay considers parallels between the impossibility *The Merchant of Venice*’s Shylock faces in seeking redress for Antonio’s antisemitism and the criticisms commonly employed against those protesting racial injustice in the 21st century. While these observations can be applied more broadly to the current Civil Rights movement (i.e. Black Lives Matter), the essay focuses in particular on reactions to athlete Colin Kaepernick’s 2016 protest against police brutality and how his attempts to draw attention to injustice were, like Shylock’s, ignored and misinterpreted. In considering the methods used to dismiss and condemn protest, I examine the similarities between Antonio’s performance of Christlike passivity and the modern right’s appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nonviolence, as well as exploring Portia’s behavior towards Shylock in comparison with the public persona of right-wing pundit Tomi Lahren.

Emily Weissbourd

Beyond *Othello*: Juan Latino in Black America

My paper takes a circuitous route to Shakespeare. The object I have chosen is Velaurez B. Spratlin’s 1938 book *Juan Latino: Slave and Humanist*. Spratlin was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. in Spanish in the United States and a professor at Howard University. His book contains a biography of Juan Latino, a black man born into slavery in 16th century Spain who became a professor of Latin at the University of Granada and wrote the Latin epic *Austrias Carmen* to commemorate the battle of Lepanto. Spratlin’s book also contains the only English translation of Jiménez de Enciso’s *Juan Latino*, an early seventeenth century Spanish play that depicts the black poet’s professional and romantic successes. Although Juan Latino is largely forgotten in the present day, in the 1920s and ‘30s publications such as *The Journal of Negro History* and *The New Negro* referred to the poet as an important figure in the intellectual history of the African diaspora. My essay examines discussions of Juan Latino (the historical figure) and *Juan Latino* (the play) in African American Journals in the 1920s-30s. In doing so I suggest an alternate history of twentieth-century references to blackness in early modernity, one that gestures to Spain rather than to England, and that proposes a transnational and transhistorical black diasporic identity. I argue that these references to black achievements in early modern

Spain are inextricable from African American solidarity with the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War.

L. Lehua Yim
Reading Hawaiian Shakespeare:
Haunted by the Indigenous Residue under Settler Colonial Race-ing

This paper takes as its starting point a political cartoon called “The Hawaiian Situation Explained,” drawn by a caricaturist named Van Sant and published in 1893 on the front page of the December 14th evening edition of the *New York World*. In it, we see Queen Lili‘uokalani depicted as a “black savage” gazing uncertainly at a throne on the dais before her, bayonets jutting threateningly out of the seat, as a crown hangs precariously above. The cartoon is captioned: “It Is Said that Queen Lil Is Really Not Eager to Return to the Throne.” This cartoon depicts a problem caused by the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom by a junta of white Hawaiian, American, and other European sugar growers. The representation frames a critical moment in settler colonialism’s project of native elimination as also a moment of white supremacy’s racialization of the Hawaiian queen as black. In it, Hawaii arguably becomes an extension of “Black America.”

This essay examines the uses of Shakespeare’s texts and his construction as a famous story-teller in Hawaii’s mid- to late-nineteenth century English and Hawaiian language newspapers. This work is an initial attempt to put critical indigenous studies and critical race studies in conversation under the aegis of the SAA. Shakespeare’s textual movement through colonial settlement and civilizing educational projects have been interpreted instruments of cultural colonization and subjugation. But Native appropriations and translations of Shakespeare offer a myriad of socio-political uses unrecognized by that account of Shakespeare’s movement. Reading Hawaiians using Shakespeare in the midst of the most intensive phase of their seeming political elimination, this paper reveals an “indigenous residue,” textual strategies of the persistence of Native political and social world-making, in Hawaiian newspaper discourse.