

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Shakespeare, Race, and the Practical Humanities**  
**Ian Smith, Lafayette College**

**“‘Practical’ Arts and Humanities”**

**Russ Bodi**  
**Owens College**

In 2013, David A. Hollinger lamented the attitudes of STEM and business fields who only suffered the inclusion of humanities in their curricula if corporate sponsorship demanded it. His colleagues saw no inherent value in the study of arts and humanities beyond a casual nod to political correctness.<sup>1</sup> With such well-documented attitudes in mind, I am addressing the practical function of literary concepts among diverse students whose majors lie outside arts and humanities. Having taught literature for many years, I have discovered that while beauty and meaning are vaunted as germane to literary studies, our values are not contagious to all students and come short of meeting their practical needs.

As director of my college’s Honors Program, I have had the opportunity to develop and teach an “Interpretations Seminar,” formerly called “Great Readings,” a requirement for all Honors Scholars. Thus, the class includes some of the most culturally, ethnically, academically and racially diverse students imaginable. To meet their aspirations for relevance and to make the class challenging, we focus on literary theory as our primary methodology, allowing students to characterize how and why they approach texts. Literary criticism opens for them a variety of approaches they have never considered before, revealing applicable techniques that meet their practical needs, while investigating literary and other “texts” qualitatively. Surprisingly, these students adapt well to this critical venture.

**“Reading *Titus*, Seeing Aaron”**

**John Casey**  
**Brown University**

When Aaron is directly asked whether he has “see[n] Aaron the Moor,” he proffers a provocative response. “Well,” he says, “more or less, or ne’er a whit at all.” These words are often glossed as mere puns meant to amuse, but there is cause to take Aaron’s equivocal and evasive response seriously. This is the only instance in the play where the nomination “Aaron the Moor” is spoken. When we look to the page, we find Aaron’s nominal identity split - he is referred to alternately as “Aaron,” “the Moor,” or simply “Moor.”<sup>2</sup> This inconsistent naming practice persists across the three quartos through to the 1623 folio where Aaron is more frequently (though not exclusively) called “Aaron.” While Shakespeare’s text settles on the proper name, the *Titus* tale also circulates simultaneously as a ballad where Aaron is solely “the Moor.” How might we keep the character of Aaron in our sights while the stock figure of “the Moor” clouds our vision? Are we, like Aaron, forced to concede that we have only seen him “more or less, or

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<sup>1</sup>Hollinger, David A. “The Rift: Can STEM and the Humanities Get Along?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 60, no. 7 (October 18, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Two brief examples of this inconsistent split: In Q1 (1594), we find the stage direction “[...] *manet* Moore.” followed by the speech prefix “*Aron.*” (C2v). Later, we see “*Enter Aron alone.*” followed immediately by the speech prefix “*Moore.*” (Dv).

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ne'er a whit at all"? What does it mean to see Aaron as he is made differently visible in different versions of *Titus*? Attempting to see Aaron in print means tarrying with staid Shakespearean questions (e.g. What's in a name?) and their relationship to contemporary activist movements (e.g. #sayhername), but also prompts us to consider how certain modes of racialization take place via seemingly minor semantic decisions that are often elided, unrecognized, or ignored.

**“Implicit Bias in Introductions to *The Tempest*”**

**Benjamin Hilb**  
**Francis Marion University**

In his recent article “We Are Othello: Speaking of Race in Early Modern Studies,” Ian Smith, in the context of an intervention in discussions of race in Shakespeare’s play and early modern studies more broadly, glosses various forms of implicit racial bias as discovered in two studies in social psychology (117 n.50). Given that much research suggests implicit bias, including unintentional racial prejudice, affects virtually everyone’s perspective, how might implicit racial bias show up in literary criticism? One way social and cognitive psychologists measure implicit bias or ‘automatic preference’ is by asking subjects to respond to racialized images or words as quickly as possible, without much if any conscious deliberation. For example, “The Shooter Task,” the subject of a widely cited study of implicit bias, is a videogame test in which participants are shown images of black and white males, some of whom are holding a gun, and asked to “shoot” or “not shoot” persons that appear – with the goal of shooting any armed persons – as quickly as possible.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast to such quick decision-making, literary scholarship is or at least seems the exemplum responsive deliberation, of highly considered, meticulously stated, carefully organized thought. Yet one form of scholarship requires summative coverage of a literary work in limited space, if not time: the headnote or introduction. This essay argues that the demands of textual introductions — the pressure to say much in brief — can, like shortened response times, elicit implicit bias. Focusing on introductions to *The Tempest* in particular, I will examine treatments of Caliban therein with attention to implicit racial bias, which appears as what I call uneven ambivalence, or contradictory discourse that nevertheless, in micro shades of meaning and ordering of words and sentences, tends to favor and disfavor certain sides of oppositional hedging or qualification. In introductions to *The Tempest*, such favoring is often accorded to Prospero while the racialized figure of Caliban is implicitly disgraced.

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<sup>3</sup> See Correll, Joshua, Bernadette Park, Bernd Wittenbrink, and Charles M. Judd, “The Police Officer’s Dilemma: Using Ethnicity to Disambiguate Potentially Threatening Individuals,” in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 83, No. 6, 2002, 1314–1329.

**“The Interplay of Gender and Race in *Othello*: An Examination of Three Controversial  
*Othello* Performances and their Contexts”**

**Chelsea Leigh Horne**  
**American University**

The role of *Othello* is fraught with racial tension, both within Shakespeare’s text and across historical contexts. In the increasingly polarized discourses of race and gender extending to a global scale in today’s world, *Othello* offers a rich ground through which to unpack and inspect fears, prejudices, and inequalities. Who can play “The Moor?” Who is allowed to play “The Moor?” Who wants to play “The Moor?” And more significantly, how and why? Some contemporary black actors have refused the eponymous role, claiming that there is no need for a black actor to actually play the character, as *Othello* was written for a white actor to perform (the question of whether the actor in Elizabethan times wore blackface is still not definitively answered). The casting of this play says much about the goal of any one production. This paper seeks to examine three productions of *Othello*, across three different centuries and historical contexts, where the titular role was played by three actors of varying race, nationality, and gender: Ira Aldridge, Laurence Olivier, and Susanne Wolff. The aim of this analysis is to explore questions of gender and race as they have developed over time.

**“Using Black Shakespeare for Social Change”**

**Fayaz Kabani**  
**Allen University**

This essay argues that the best strategy for Shakespeareans looking to engage in an anti-racist project in the wider public sphere is to develop a Black Shakespeare series for a video streaming platform. Given that the humanities do their most visible work in the arts, academics can intervene by offering their insights to the public in an easily consumable and bingeable cultural artifact. While representing minorities as full human beings is important, the main goal of this potential series is to highlight power dynamics largely informed by race and to get the audience to confront its own bias. Ultimately, the hope is that through confronting their own bias, more people would advocate for major, meaningful social change.

**“Shakespeare, Race, and Counterstorytelling”**

**Joan Pong Linton**  
**Indiana University**

My contribution to this seminar deals with “white rage”<sup>4</sup> as a phenomenon that warrants a response from the academy, especially the Humanities, by way of reframing the public conversation, both in public venues and on the internet. At least two challenges stand in the way of productive conversation, however. The first is the misconstruction that progress made by

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Anderson, *White rage: the unspoken truth of our racial divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

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racial and gendered minorities have unjustly eroded the traditional privilege and economic wellbeing of white males; as such, white rage masks the structural injustices perpetrated upon minorities through decades of legislation and political maneuvering. The second is the cognitive toll that the internet technology and media environment have taken on users' understanding of history. In addressing these challenges, I propose a course that brings together Shakespeare's plays and the use of counterstory<sup>5</sup> in approaching matters of race. Not only do the plays abound in dominant and counter-stories on race, but, as historically distanced texts, they afford occasions for what Gayatri Spivak calls "broad reading," a practice by which one attempts "to rethink the past as contemporaneous diachronies."<sup>6</sup> Shakespearean counterstories thus serve to sharpen our engagement with the past and present of race through "broad reading," even as they offer models that enable students to create their own stories to counter the dominant stories licensing "white rage." Such critical engagement and creativity would prepare students to lead in community workshops on telling stories and counterstories around a play, engaging participants across the town-gown divide, including rural areas where possible. Students are our best ambassadors to the future and beyond the classroom. Their success would also make legible the Humanities' counterstory in the culture wars. My paper will attend to the theoretical grounding and practical logistics of such a course, using *Othello* as a test case, and partnering with a local organization on mediation and restorative justice.

**"Race and Privilege in Tim Blake Nelson's *O*"**

**Natalie J. Loper**  
**University of Alabama**

*O*, a teen adaptation of *Othello*, is set in a private boarding school in South Carolina. The play's military and domestic conflicts unfold on the basketball court, in dorm rooms, and in the offices of school administrators. The film was set for release in 1999 but was shelved for two years after the massacre at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. The studio feared that *O*'s ending, which contains similar scenes of teen violence, could be viewed as sensationalizing or even promoting teen violence. When my department screened *O* as part of our Shakespeare film series last fall, most of the audience was visibly shaken when the credits started rolling. My students said the film helped them visualize and understand Shakespeare's focus on race, and it inspired a conversation about racism, date rape and #metoo, and school shootings. *O* invites its viewers to reflect on how race and privilege operate in Shakespeare's play, in our world, and in our personal experiences. In this essay, I focus on one symbol that critics have misunderstood, the hawk. When examined alongside early modern falconry techniques, the Iago character's use of the bird serves as a dark reminder of white supremacy. Shakespeare's plays and the adaptations they inspire do not provide answers to life's difficult questions, but studying these works within humanities classes and beyond provides a platform for discussion and, hopefully, for serious reflection and social progress.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael McPherson, "Story vs. story." *Design Culture* (2006). <https://www.commart.com/columns/story-vs-story>

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Why Study the Past?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.1 (March 2012): 1-12.

### “Who’s Getting Paid”

**John Ray Proctor III**  
 Tulane University

The purpose of this discussion is to interrogate who it is that is making a living off of the institution of Shakespeare in performance. I intend to examine the relationship between race and gender and professional theatre makers who have, and who exercise, hiring authority. I want to begin with a brief introduction of the practice of “non-traditional” (or color-blind) casting at American Shakespeare festivals, beginning with Joseph Papp and the Public Theatre’s Shakespeare in the park in the mid-1960s. I am curious about the demographics, specifically with regards to race and gender, of who received a salary (or a living wage). I am curious about how many more “white men” brought home paychecks, than did “women” or “performers of color?” I am curious about the agency and autonomy of the directors who decided exactly who got a paycheck, balanced against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement.

I am curious about the practicalities of interracial casting practices at a time when the societal boundaries of race were being challenged in tumultuous, and often violent ways, on a daily basis. According to Richard Schechner live theatre is codified via the language of “play, wonder, and imagination,” resisting the limitations imposed by perceived boundaries and investment in the rigid perception of structures of reality (or the ‘real world’) precisely because of the unspoken artistic contract and cognizance of the audience. Schechner argues that the audience is engaged in the created fictional phenomenon of the theatrical experience, however, that same audience is simultaneously immersed in an actual phenomenological experience of participating in a theatrical event, regardless of whether they have chosen to suspend their disbelief – and get lost in the world of the play – or if they have chosen to remain emotionally distant from the fantasy. The reality of the theatrical event is that the phenomenon of theatre can push boundaries and transgress in ways that the “real world” could not and did not, in the mid 1960s. The practice of nontraditional/interracial/cross-gendered casting, begun by Joe Papp with Shakespeare in the Park in New York in the mid 1960s had real-world/practical consequences. Women and performers of color were able to take home salaries for performing in Shakespearean production, in ways they had not been able to before. This moment in practical theatre history continues to ripple, mutate, and manifest into contemporary theatre casting practice, and generates contemporary analysis and readings of race and gender in Shakespearean performance.

In the 2010s casting in Shakespeare productions, at American Shakespeare Festivals, is a site of intense racial scrutiny, and the dogged clutching onto to “what is mine” and “what belongs to me.” This point of view has been voiced, in print and in interviews, by numbers of white male actors who whose point of view is that this movement toward casting equity means a loss of “property” that they had perceived of as theirs. That that perception exists is curious in that Shakespeare in performance began as a space created by white men.

Casting authority is being challenged and questioned. Actors of color and women are occupying roles and being present on stage in ways that have never happened before. The presence of women and performers of color in roles, and production positions, and technical positions is

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changing the spectacle-text and performance-text, and the emerging definition of what (and how) Shakespeare *means* in America.

**“Teaching Servant Leadership with *Othello*”**

**Donovan H. Sherman**  
**Seton Hall University**

As humanities instructors, we are constantly litigating our practicality. One practical feature of our instruction, we are told, is our ability to inject into otherwise cold-blooded disciplines a sense of ethics. In this paper, I explore *service* as one such mode of ethics. I explore both the ways race always attends historical and theological discussions of servitude and the pernicious legacy of refusing to admit this relationship. Teaching *Othello* in particular offers a powerful way to see the perils of believing in an absolute separation of slavery and servitude—and, perhaps more dangerously, believing in the interchangeability one with the other. How might Shakespeare’s drama help us educate our students to serve in such a way that admits to the reality of race’s historical entanglement with discussions of bondage?

**“Philology Used to Be a Thing, Too: Shakespeare, Race, and Hysteresis”**

**Andrew Tumminia**  
**Spring Hill College**

Subjective experiences do not necessarily coincide with the objective realities shaping them, nor do objective conditions invalidate subjective perceptions. Yet our culture struggles to keep the objective, the subjective, and the relationship between them straight. While we rightly continue to disentangle particular histories from the larger historical narratives imposed on us, too often we fail to relate to each other. And what is happening across racial, gender, class, age, and party lines in the “real world” also parallels what is happening within the academy: individual disciplines are required to justify their own existence in a battle for survival.

Such uncertain times can occasion what Pierre Bourdieu, a student of the practical, calls the *hysteresis effect*. Bourdieu is best known for his ideas of *habitus* and field; the field reproduces its way of doing things, or (roughly) its *habitus*, over time, and consolidates under a historically entrenched, automatic common sense (*doxa*). In this way, a field’s history helps to determine its present and shape its future. The hysteresis effect comes into play when the habitus no longer suits the field. Bourdieu has written about a previous “crisis of faith” in the academy, in 1960s France, which experienced a “profound transformation in the logic of the professors’ collective action” (xxv, 150). According to Bourdieu, members of the professorial field didn’t just decide one day to adjust in unison; as time chugged along, those better attuned to the wider contemporary culture replaced inward-turning adherents to outmoded, though long-established, methods and perspectives (150-51). A similar turning outward—across disciplinary lines and beyond the institutional gates—may again help. By embracing even greater interdisciplinarity and engaging in work more intentionally pointed toward functioning practically in the “real,” contemporary world, our field might discover practices that speak louder than our present

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assurances of continued relevance and value. Frank, honest discussions of race are integral to that effort. My paper will explore Bourdieu's notion of the hysteresis effect in tandem with a discussion of the subjective experiences and objective realities of Miranda and Caliban, emphasizing especially the disparate, objective, and often racialized conditions shaping their educations.

**“Clemente, Caliban and the Practical Humanities”**

**Deborah Uman**  
**John Fisher College**

In 1997 Earl Shorris published a book about poverty in America, an excerpt of which was published in *Harper's Magazine*. In both, Shorris details his creation of the Clemente Course in the Humanities, which brought college-level instruction in traditional humanities subjects to adult learners with a household income of less than 150% of the poverty threshold. Shorris explains that his inspiration for the course was a conversation with a woman in prison who said that teaching the “moral life of the downtown” as a “moral alternative to the street” was the way to end poverty. Since his first class in Manhattan, the Clemente Course has spread to over 30 cities across the United States and around the world. I am working on developing a Course in Rochester, NY and have offered a pilot version at a housing unit for single-parent families living in economic distress. Our syllabus focused on theories of education, which we discussed in connection to Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. This paper will consider what it means to view instruction in the humanities as a path out of poverty, examining the data associated with Clemente Courses as well as the ideological questions raised by valorizing a tradition of western texts and pedagogies. *The Tempest* offers a complex, racialized analogy to analyze the uses and abuses of education, and I will reflect on our class discussions about the play as part of this initial inquiry into the Clemente model of teaching the humanities as a tool for political and economic liberation.

**“Racial Capitalism, Climate Justice, and Shakespeare's Venice”**

**Charles Whitney**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

Legendary African-American scholar Cedric J. Robinson uses the term “racial capitalism” to emphasize slavery's crucial role in early capitalism's success, and to refer to ways that brutality toward slaves authorized practices such as enclosures of common land and eviction of “racialized” tenant farmers during Shakespeare's time. Robinson also used the term to designate capitalism's continuing reliance on a range of ethnic and racial forms of discrimination.

Today the term aptly describes U.N. climate-change mandates that deny our shared vulnerability. They reject the approach of climate justice, decreeing that mitigating climate change must not interfere with capitalist economic growth--which privatizes or “encloses” public goods--and that the predominantly white nations most responsible need not compensate those most affected. In Trump time that approach authorizes what has become a white-nationalist-death-cult racial

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capitalism. It calculates that, at least, whites in rich countries will be the last to go. For those reactionary cohorts, frequent news of mostly black and brown climate-related refugees cements the resolve to enclose, to build walls.

Perhaps climate justice and its opposition to racial capitalism ought to play a significant role in the teaching of the practical humanities. The multi-cultural, multi-racial entrepot depicted in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* provides a microcosm for exploring questions of justice, including climate-change policy, in relation to racial capitalism. With Robinson's own account of American performances of *Othello* on stage and screen as a guide, my presentist reading finds both plays validating a nevertheless failing aspiration toward a just community.