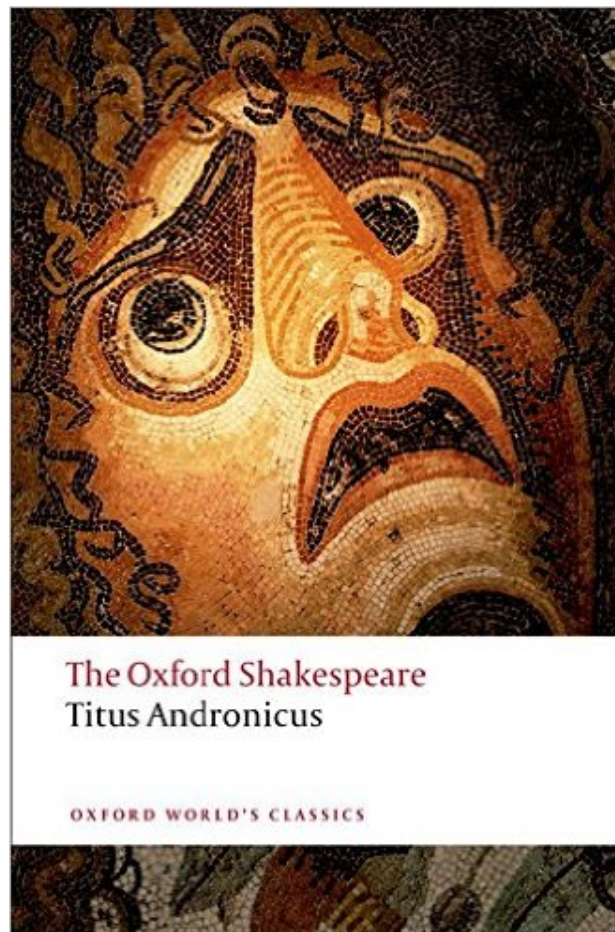


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## (Early) Modern Literature: Crossing the Color-Line

By David Sterling Brown



I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

When the structure of an academic course poses an intellectual problem, students are bound to a curriculum that requires them to resolve critical issues because it is not simply the literature but the very foundation of the course itself that makes students think. Thus, I conceived of (Early) Modern Literature: Crossing the Color-Line largely by reflecting on a profound undergraduate experience in a Shakespeare class that made me feel both curious and uncomfortable: an instance when Trinity College professor, Milla Cozart Riggio, referred to a scene in *Titus Andronicus* as a “moment of black power.” As the lone African-American student in the room, it felt as though the professor sat Shakespeare directly next to me. In 2013, when I returned as a visiting scholar to Trinity, a small liberal arts college with a predominantly white faculty and student body, I wanted to recreate that experience on a class-wide scale for my students, nearly half of whom were people of color. Therefore, I designed a curriculum that aimed to shift the demographics of a traditional Shakespeare course by placing historically disparate texts and black and white authors in conversation with one another.

On the level of racial representation and inclusivity, the color-line is always crossed in my early modern classroom, even when Shakespeare and his contemporaries are the sole authorial voices, because the authors always enter the room through me. My personal and professional identities, my being African-American and an early modern scholar, are inextricably linked for students who become educated about the English Renaissance through my black voice, from my black body. When I teach, no longer sitting as the sole student of color in an undergraduate early modern classroom, I *stand* with Shakespeare and he winces not. Crossing the Color-Line altered my pedagogical and personal relationship with Shakespeare. And it was through this course that my students’ perspectives on Shakespeare, and his relation to the world around them, also changed.

***On the level of racial representation and inclusivity, the color-line is always crossed in my early modern classroom, even when Shakespeare and his contemporaries are the sole authorial voices, because the authors always enter the room through me.***

In Crossing the Color-Line, students re-read early modern texts by William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe—primarily through a racial lens—after first studying theories and concepts such as the “color-line,” “veil,” “mask,” and “double-consciousness” articulated by Frederick Douglass in “The Color Line” and W.E.B. Du Bois

in *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>1</sup> Students also used the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature to look forward and consider the African-American experience as depicted in works by James Baldwin, Harriet Jacobs, Adrienne Kennedy, Nella Larsen, and Suzan-Lori Parks. As anticipated, synergy developed among the different texts because my students arrived at each class keen on understanding key questions that arose as they read. By the end of the Fall 2013 term, my students devised answers to their questions, answers that were documented weekly in 500-750 word essays called the “inroad” assignment.<sup>2</sup> This writing exercise, from which I will include excerpts, required students to enter into a text with the specific goal of assessing its value within the context of Crossing the Color-Line and in relation to the critical concepts used by Douglass and Du Bois.

Crossing the Color-Line was not simply a foundational course theme that established dialogue between the professional and personal, social and political, past and present, and black and white; “crossing” also defined the actions students took to generate new intellectual ideas and bring more of themselves into the classroom. As I argue, a radical course such as Crossing the Color-Line showcases, through literature and other media, how instructors can transcend identity politics to construct a methodology and pedagogy that intricately connects the academic to the personal and experiential. Because Shakespeare was not the sole authorial voice in the room, or the only early modern author in our syllabus, Crossing the Color-Line actively rejected the homogeneity one can often find in an early modern classroom. For one thing, by not being Shakespeare-centric, the course valued the female perspective and resisted an androcentric authorial focus. For another, by positioning “the problem of the color-line” as relevant in the early modern period, the combined study of African-American and early modern English texts challenged critical race studies to include pre-nineteenth-century literature (Du Bois 9).

### W.E.B. Du Bois: Sitting with a “Racist”?

In one of our initial class discussions, at least one of my students was not persuaded by Du Bois’ assertion (and this essay’s epigraph): “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not” (67).<sup>3</sup> During our examination of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* in week two, a student declared that “Shakespeare was a racist,” a claim primarily based on the dramatist’s portrayal of cultural others, such as Aaron the Moor, as inferior and barbaric in comparison to the play’s Roman characters such as Titus—someone who kills two of his own children. This student boldly called out what seemed to be an obvious double-standard. However, the controversial “racist Shakespeare” formulation briefly silenced the class; my students’ facial expressions revealed that not everyone agreed. Ultimately, “Shakespeare was a racist” offered a key, and memorable, point of inquiry in a course that concentrated on the historical and cultural context of race, prejudice, and racism, as well as other social issues. If, in fact, Shakespeare was a racist—if modern notions of race are actually applicable in the period, another question students

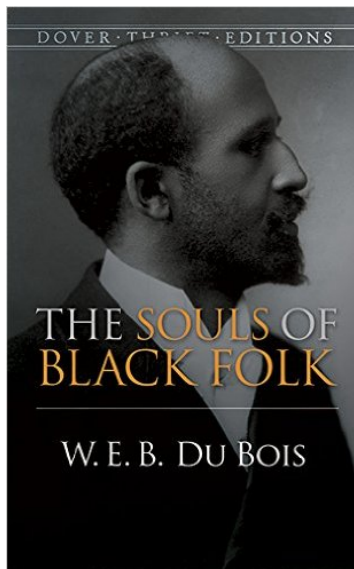
considered—then why doesn't Shakespeare "wince," as Du Bois notes, when sitting next to a black man? After the uncomfortable moment of silence, my students began to challenge respectfully the "racist Shakespeare" notion by dissecting the African-American author's language.

On the most basic level, class members reasoned that, by sitting with Shakespeare, Du Bois metaphorically crossed the Postbellum color-line. He advertised his personal agency by clarifying whose choice it was to sit next to whom. His color-line assertion, which expands on Douglass' previously mentioned work in "The Color Line," bridged the disparate texts in the course by rhetorically uniting the black and white authors. And Du Bois' allusions—not only to Shakespeare but to other great non-American, white rhetoricians and philosophers such as Balzac and Dumas, Aristotle and Aurelius—emerged as contradictions for my students (67). If Du Bois, serving as a synecdochic representation of black people, could "sit with," "move arm and arm with," and even "summon," as he proclaims, the previously named white people, then why couldn't black people also coexist with white people in America (67)? In the context of *Souls of Black Folk*, my students reasoned that Shakespeare was not racist. They concluded that Du Bois exploits the "cultural capital" and brand recognition represented by Shakespeare, transforming the early playwright into a politically charged rhetorical weapon black people can use to fight prejudice, racism, and socio-political inequity (Guillory vii-xiv).

One of the things that made Du Bois' Shakespeare allusion so fascinating for my students was how it implies that education shaped Du Bois' reality. Similar to his white American counterparts, Du Bois "consumed Shakespeare and ... his name" (Sturgess 15); afterwards, Du Bois deployed his knowledge of England's esteemed dramatist for his own literary audience by invoking Shakespeare's name and echoing his poetic style through blank verse. Commenting on an African-American character in Du Bois' text, one student noted in an inroad assignment, "John left home because he wanted to better his community and himself by getting an education. He sought to cross the color-line."<sup>4</sup> John, much like Du Bois himself, defies America's Jim Crow laws by metaphorically sitting with the white man. In *Souls*, Du Bois suggests Shakespeare can teach black and white America, and the world, about tolerance and race as we modern people understand the concept: as a critical tool for analyzing ethnic difference.

## Inroads: Black and White Authors

In *Crossing the Color-Line*, the constant traversing of boundaries empowered students to create conversations that crossed lines between texts and between the academic and personal. Our first unit, "The Color-Line and the Shape of Identity," capitalized on the earlier Douglass and Du Bois



readings as students studied Shakespeare's *Titus* and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, specifically using Du Boisian concepts to examine religious and racial lines of difference. The "color-line" is not wholly applicable in Marlowe's play because color is not the concern there; Christians, Turks, Jews, and other religious ethnic mixes were not explicitly separated by a color-line during the period. However, my students discovered Du Bois' color-line theory does resonate with the racial and ethnic tensions depicted in *Titus* between the Romans and the "barbarous" Goths and Moors (1.1.28). By reading *Malta* right after *Titus*, students identified integral points of contact between Aaron the Moor and Barabas the Jew because of the parallels between anti-Semitism and racism. Both characters' "racialized

status[es were] underlined by the other characters in the play[s]" through their actions and language (Ogude 158). For my students, the similarities between Aaron's and Barabas' second-class positions far outweighed their differences.

The act of constantly thinking between texts, or between two different historical moments, trained students to look backwards and forwards. In an inroad assignment written during the second week of class, one student analyzed part of act 4, scene 2 from *Titus*, the moment the Nurse presents Aaron with his biracial lovechild. The student writes,

*The Nurse very clearly lists "black" in a string of other negative adjectives, drawing a color-line by making that [the child's] defining characteristic. . . . This relates to Frederick Douglass' article "The Color Line," in which he states, "They can resort to no disguises which will enable them to escape its deadly aim. They carry in front the evidence which marks them for persecution." The Romans instantly mark even this innocent child.*

The concluding sentence hints at the irrationality of racist thinking, for the newborn's blackness prevents the white characters from seeing his innocence. Additionally, this student offered a compelling argument about Du Bois and Aaron, the latter of whom announces that "Coal black is better than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue" (4.2.100-101). The student explains,

*Aaron's argument on behalf of his race relates to Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk, when [Du Bois] says, He "would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world." While Douglass makes a point that one's color can never be hidden, Aaron takes this as one of [his] best attributes because [blackness] is strong and not*

*something that should be attempted to be covered or changed.*

As the student observes, similar to Du Bois and Douglass, Aaron and his son are outsiders whose blood and color are wrong according to the dominant culture.

It was during unit two, "Sexuality, Race, and the Paradox of Passing," that the members of my class began to move beyond discussions predominantly about race and racial identity. While this particular unit contained none of Shakespeare's plays, students continued to sit with his work as they studied Larsen's *Passing*, Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, and Marlowe's *Edward II*. In an inroad assignment focused on the moment in *Passing* when Irene Redfield first interacts with her estranged friend, Clare Kendry, one student expanded on the second unit's themes by incorporating class and wealth into an analysis of race, exoticism, and physicality:

*Clare's eyes are also closely examined and referenced several times throughout Part I [of the book]. They are constantly referred to as "black eyes," an adjective that not only speaks of their literal color, but also takes on another meaning when set in her "ivory skin." . . . This dichotomy makes her "exotic" and incredibly persuasive. It is this blend of the social power that a wealthy white woman has, combined with the unique beauty of her mixed features, such as the full lips and arresting eyes, that makes Clare so magnetically attractive.*

Du Bois, Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" also entered this student's analysis. The ensuing class discussion about Clare's exotic features compelled students to comment on the physicality and hypersexuality of the Gothic and Moorish characters in *Titus*. Moreover, the exchange allowed the conversation to cross the boundary between academic and pop culture as students critiqued famous women such as Kim Kardashian, a public figure who has voluptuous physical attributes stereotypically ascribed to the black female body—full lips, a large butt, and wide hips. Class members argued that, similar to Clare in Larsen's *Passing*, Kim Kardashian is perceived as a safer object of desire because her non-black skin, which covers what might be generalized as African-American features, is devoid of the social stigma surrounding blackness. Whether it was in relation to our literature, or Miley Cyrus and the historical West African origins of "twerking," students used their writing assignments to scrutinize myths about race, class, gender, and sexuality that pertained to the past and their present. In class, students referenced our previously studied texts and theories to engage in complex conversations that problematized sexuality, desirability, beauty standards,

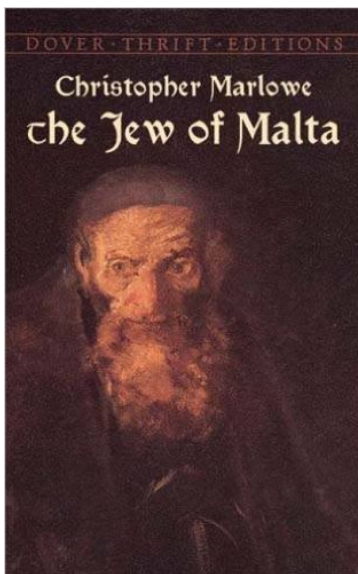
and privilege by associating those topics with race and assimilation.

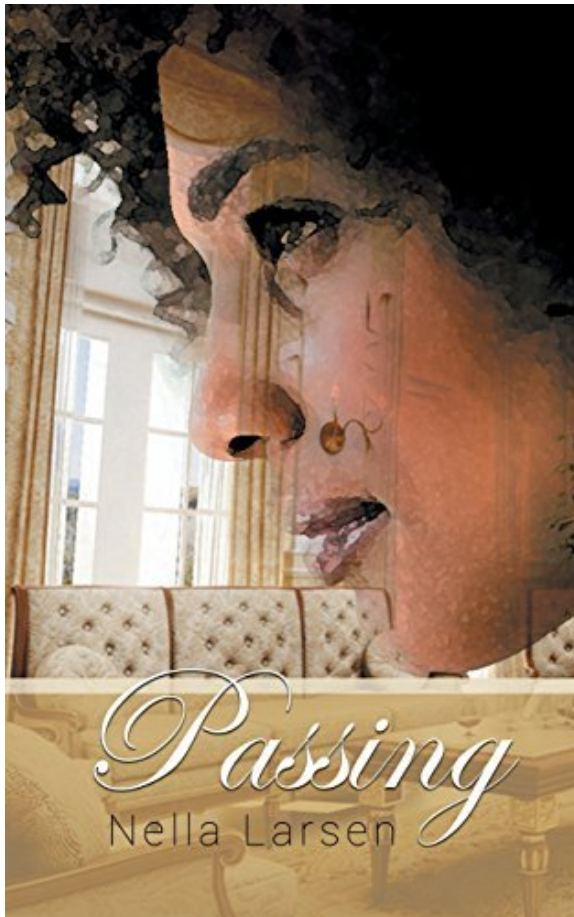
Students carried ideas discussed in the first weeks of the semester into our final unit, "Constructions/ Destructions of the (Early) Modern Family," and continued to enhance the sophistication of their textual associations. When we studied Harriett Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* toward the semester's end, a student astutely identified how literacy helped determine the specific outcomes for Jacobs and Shakespeare's Lavinia, a character from *Titus* who, despite having her hands cut off and tongue cut out, communicates crucial information about her attackers because she is literate. When we studied Shakespeare's *Tempest*, students analyzed excerpts from William Apess' *A Son of the Forest* and evaluated the negative effects of colonization, thus linking the early modern play to Native American history. And when students reflected on the allusion to *Hamlet's* Ophelia in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* (124), they used the literary reference to compare and contrast black and white femininity by acknowledging distinctions in the social perception and treatment of black and white women.

From the beginning, I hoped my students would develop a specific analytical skill set throughout our weeks together, so we concluded the course with two difficult texts, *Hamlet* and Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. *Hamlet* was especially a challenge for students to contextualize because the play does not deal with race overtly. When my students looked to me to start this discussion, I said *Hamlet* was the "wild card" in the syllabus and that I did not have the answers. Eventually, a fruitful conversation developed as students turned to their inroad assignments and considered the significance of memory, a central topic in *Funnyhouse* and *Hamlet*. Both plays effectively dramatize the dangerous

consequences of not having a distinct identity that exists in relation to but separate from one's parents. The trauma transmitted from parents in Kennedy—from Negro-Sarah's mother and father—and in Shakespeare—from the Ghost of King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude—presents itself as a psychological stain that causes personal destruction. A student perceived this association and noted that in *Hamlet*,

*This fixation on death, suicide, and burial, which we see in Hamlet's monologues, reminds me of Negro-Sarah's fixation on her father's murder and the violence committed against some of her "selves." Negro-Sarah had also been shattered by the tragedy of her society, and constructed violence around her to make sense of her personal chaos. Hamlet's personal chaos is similar in some ways because he creates an alternate personality for himself to present to others, whether he is fully aware of it or not.*





*Hamlet's sanity is questioned by his family members as well as the reader, just as the reader of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* sees several sides of Negro-Sarah and questions her understanding of her "selves" and the reality around her.*

In this thoughtful critique, psychological darkness productively linked *Hamlet* and *Funnyhouse*, inspiring additional comments about related textual intersections.

This particular student saw past the color-line and came, like Pat Parker, to view *Hamlet* and *Funnyhouse* as dramas "examin[ing] the racialized metaphors of blackness itself as a sully[ing], dirty[ing], or muddy[ing]" (Parker 137). Despite their myriad differences, Negro-Sarah and Hamlet relate through their stained psyches. Students learned that tragedy, death, mourning, and violence were key thematic associations aligning the racially dissimilar early modern and African-American characters through metaphorical blackness. Furthermore, gender surfaced as a concept that united *Hamlet* and *Funnyhouse*, as a student also argued, "Constructions of the royal family throughout [*Hamlet*] bring to mind other explorations of family dynamics and blame. Just as Negro-Sarah blames her black father for creating her mixed-race self as a product of rape, Hamlet blames his uncle for tearing apart his picture-perfect family. He, too, holds his mother's chastity in high regard and thinks she has become "impure" due to her incestuous marriage to her deceased husband's brother. In other words, Claudius in *Hamlet* and Negro-Sarah's father in *Funnyhouse* both

commit equally destructive social and sexual violations; and Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet* and Negro-Sarah's mother are blackened by the impropriety of their respective sexual histories that disturb their children.

Such provocative connections were explored further through required in-class presentations that developed student insights articulated in their inroad assignments. The ten-minute presentations required class members to produce an entirely new paper that linked their previously written inroad thoughts to the reading outlined in the syllabus for presentation day. Sometimes this meant students connected their ideas from the first half of a specific text to the second half. However, if the reading due on presentation day was a new text, then students had an added challenge: relating the end of Marlowe's *Edward II* to the beginning of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, for example. The inroad presentations afforded students frequent opportunities to develop their in-class, face-to-face communication skills, what sociologists Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs stress as one of the "core liberal arts skill[s]" that aids students' learning processes (112). During our most contentious conversations, students respectfully disagreed with one another and learned to value open dialogue. Students' submitting their inroad documents before class through Moodle, an online learning platform, enabled me to tailor my instruction to their concerns, to identify moments of confused textual interpretation, and to ensure that students comprehended the challenging literature. Class often began with issues students found to be most difficult. Or, we concentrated on the scenes and language that made students most uneasy, such as the conclusion to Larsen's *Passing* where Clare's white husband shockingly discovers that she has been passing and is, in fact, "A nigger, a damned dirty nigger!"(111).<sup>5</sup>

By the term's end, each student had completed ten inroads, which gave them an archive of ideas to draw from as they developed their final papers. In general, I saw improvement in all of my students' writing and I attribute this, in part, to how the inroad trained course members to engage actively with the material. One of my former students candidly shared, "I thought the weekly inroads were quite progressive. I won't lie, I probably groaned when you first mentioned them, but I ended up really loving having an outlet every week where I had to examine some/any aspect of the text I found interesting. It was also a really good way to hear other people's thoughts." The inroad assignment facilitated the exchange of students' textual interests. I then synthesized their thoughts so class discussions generally considered what intrigued them most.

## Connections: Read, Heard, Seen, Felt

The topics covered in Crossing the Color-Line led to some difficult discussions that inevitably made students uncomfortable. Thus, pedagogically, I believed it was imperative to provide students with experiential learning opportunities that would move them across the color-line through a variety of exercises. For instance, my students had the opportunity to see a production of *Macbeth*

directed by Darko Tresnjak at the Hartford Stage. The off-campus trip allowed students to see that “the true discipline of drama study is to find out how drama works, how it performs under the conditions for which it was written, how it communicates and affects an audience” (Styan 61). While nearly all of my students had previously read *Macbeth*, this was the first time most of them were seeing a live production of the play, which was not included in our syllabus. For undergrads accustomed to managing drama on the page, the *Macbeth* performance was challenging, especially because students could not look at the language. Rather, they had to listen to the actors, watch the action, and decipher the complex meaning of the words. As they viewed the play, my students had the added difficulty of determining how *Macbeth* related to our course.

The questions students first brought to the live production were relatively simple: inquiries about Macbeth’s ambition or the nature of the three witches. However, visualizing the drama, and then connecting it with ideas expressed in our African-American texts, fundamentally changed the kinds of questions my students wanted answers to about *Macbeth*. In a class discussion following the performance, a dramatic exchange between Malcolm, son of King Duncan, and Macduff, a Scottish nobleman, emerged as a possible touchpoint between the African-American and early modern literature:

*Malcolm:*

*Black Macbeth*

*Will seem as pure as snow, and the poor state  
Esteem him as a lamb, being compared  
With my confineless harms.*

*Macduff:*

*Not in the legions*

*Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned*

*In evils to top Macbeth.*

*Malcolm:*

*I grant him bloody,*

*Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful,*

*Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin*

*That has a name.*

(IV.iii.53-61).<sup>6</sup>

Students interpreted “black Macbeth” metaphorically, especially since they had learned about blackface and the absence of black actors on the early modern stage, but they still questioned the phrasing that reinforces the color of Macbeth’s character (see Courtney 113 and Hill 3-11). Can Malcolm’s comment connect Macbeth, a character who commits treason and murders his king, to a racially black character such as Shakespeare’s Aaron? Since early modern players were white, how was physical blackness represented on the stage? And how do Macbeth’s onstage actions make him emblematically “black”? When considering such inquiries, students referred to our earlier secondary reading, Margaux Deroux’s “The Blackness

Within,” and reflected on how early modern geohumoral theory might justify Malcolm’s reference to Macbeth as “black,” a complex term that is a negative modifier and signifier even in our modern world (see also Floyd-Wilson).

*Macbeth* was a profound site of in-class analysis for students because, as they deduced, Shakespeare crosses the color-line rhetorically. Through plays such as *Hamlet* and *Titus*, the playwright offers a glimpse into how early modern people divided their own world in terms of specific binaries: contrasts between black and white, or dark and light, or evil and good “that might be called the originary language of racial difference in English culture” (Hall 2). Thus, Shakespeare’s work presents emerging notions of modern racial stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> In *Macbeth*, the “black” man’s soul and conscience are stained. While the Scottish people should recognize Macbeth as evil, Malcolm justifiably fears that Macbeth’s ability to “wear the mask that grins and lies” will enable the villain to deceive the masses (Dunbar “We Wear the Mask”). Students argued that the “black Macbeth” scene builds on amplified rhetoric denoting what it means for Macbeth to be black: criminal, threatening, and amoral. Through its negative connotation, “black” provides an intriguing point of contact between the African-American and early modern literature that have more in common than is generally thought.

Besides seeing the *Macbeth* performance, students had other opportunities to cross boundaries that enriched their educational experiences. For example, they formulated interview questions for and learned from my paternal grandmother, Christine Wright, who was born in Jim Crow Mississippi in the 1930s and spent her childhood working on a sharecropper farm. The interview, complemented by a PowerPoint presentation I titled “Incidents in the Life of a Sharecropper,” allowed me to bring more of myself into the classroom as I crossed the line between the personal and professional, between being a deferential grandson and a college instructor. In Crossing the Color-Line, course members also heard and analyzed the lyrics of what Du Bois calls negro “sorrow songs”; they connected their personal experiences with racial profiling, classism, homophobia, and gender discrimination to our critical conversations;<sup>7</sup> they interacted with Trinity’s Women & Gender Resource Action Center director, who came to our class to discuss rape and sexual assault, sensitive subjects that pertained directly to our early modern and African-American literature and campus life; they watched film clips, critiquing the visual representations of the issues we covered in our literature; and they shared outside resources with me—articles, web links, YouTube videos, movies, and texts from other courses—and used me to disseminate those materials to the class. Perhaps most importantly, they taught me to appreciate the value of unpredictability and improvisation in the classroom—the value of simply seeing where things go.

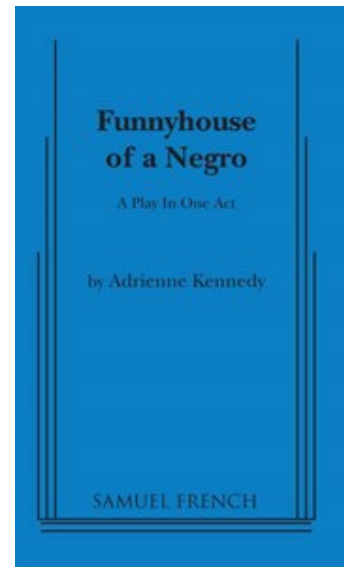
One of my fondest memories from this course relates to a 1960's literacy test a student emailed to me early in the semester, a test designed for black people who wished to vote in Louisiana (see *Slate*). To create a teachable moment, I printed out the literacy test and administered it to my students. I put a \$20 bill in front of me and promised to give it to whoever finished the test first according to its original directions: "Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have 10 minutes to complete the test." The test included 30 convoluted statements, such as "Place a cross over the tenth letter in this line, a line under the first space in this / sentence, and a circle around the last the in the second line of this sentence" (statement #22) and "Draw a figure that is square in shape. Divide it in half by drawing a straight line from its northeastern corner to its southwest corner, and then divide it once more by drawing a broken line from the middle of its western side to the middle of its eastern side" (statement #23).<sup>8</sup> Initially, my students were thrilled about the prospect of earning the money, but they were quickly dismayed upon realizing the literacy test was impossible—even for their college-educated minds.

By sitting with the literacy test and trying to achieve an unattainable goal, my students experienced how the system was designed for black people to fail. The inequity was palpable, and so were my students' frustrations and the empathy they felt for the black voters. To build on my students' disenchantment, we returned to *Souls* and *Titus* because the subject matter of the course resonated (more or less) with contemporary issues. At one point, an African-American student spoke candidly from a personal place about inferiority and an experience with what he felt was racial profiling on campus. My students listened attentively to their classmate's disclosure and then discussed the effects of biased policing and prejudicial legislation. In a later class discussion, they equated the black people in 1960s Louisiana with Marlowe's Barabas, a character whose home and wealth are seized by the Maltese governor mainly because Barabas is a Jew in Malta. No longer concerned about the \$20 bill, my students' frustrations were focused on the illusory nature of equality.

## Retrospection

As an experimental course, *Crossing the Color-Line* was not without some challenges. What would I change a second time around, aside from shortening the reading list, which was too dense (eleven major texts in thirteen weeks)? I would be clear with students about the personal demands of this class from the beginning. The course required a depth of responsiveness and self-awareness that may not be typical in other literature classes because I intended for all students to feel uncomfortable, as I felt in "Shakespeare." But, given the sensitive course material—and students' fears of offending one another or sounding ignorant, as articulated in their course evaluations—it would have been helpful had I designed initial small-group activities to build trust and foster the sense that our classroom was a safe academic space where students could articulate whatever thoughts the literature inspired within

them. One way of doing so would be to discuss transparently the ways in which their inevitable discomfort will be productive for their learning. Next time around, I will not only encourage students to bring outside information, and their academic and life experiences, into the classroom as they often did, but I will also encourage them to bring *Crossing the Color-Line* into dialogue with the various other spaces they occupy on a daily basis.

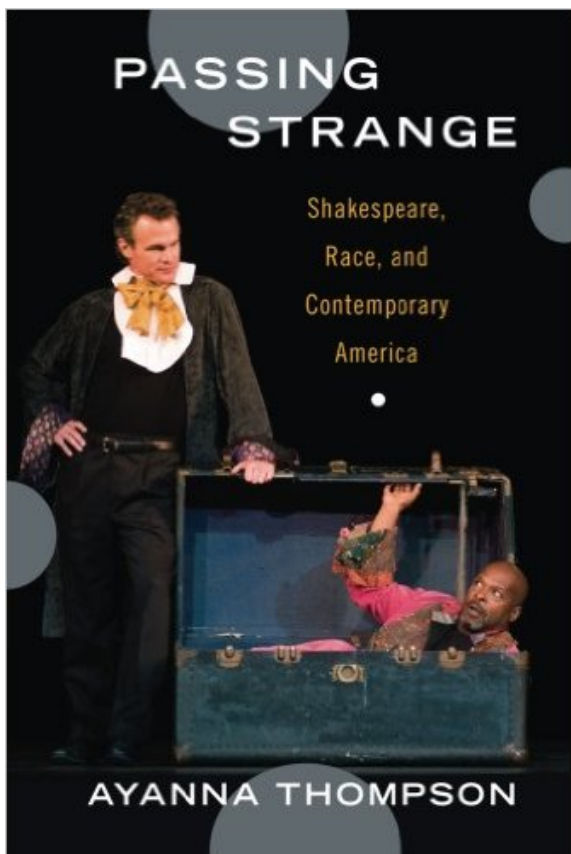


Through recent communication, I learned that some of my former students have, in fact, taken their knowledge from the course beyond the boundaries of the academic institution. When commenting on prejudice in America, one student wrote: "Especially with the #BlackLivesMatter movement and some of the horrific incidents that have been happening across the country, I will often use some of the language [from] this course to understand how blackness and otherness [have] been perceived before—and how it is relevant to the current conversation." Another student shared, "The idea of bringing to light the issues race can have on a person and time period is something that is becoming more necessary in today's world. Sometimes people discuss only the fact that issues exist. It's not too often you get to not only look back to see how different things were in the past, but also how similar they were. I find myself thinking of issues we discussed in *Crossing the Color-Line* still in my daily life today."

Hidden within these students' retrospective insights are literary characters such as Shakespeare's Aaron, Marlowe's Barabas, Kennedy's Negro-Sarah, and Larsen's Clare. And I have no doubt students are also thinking critically about real people such as Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin, whom we discussed in class, and the many human casualties of other "horrific incidents," as my former student put it: Sean Bell, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Samuel DuBose, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Akai Gurley, Bettie Jones, Corey Jones, Levar Edward Jones, Quintonio LeGrier, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and the nine people who perished in the June 2015 mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. My former students, almost weekly, are witnessing people—especially minorities—being mistreated because of characteristics endemic to who they are. Yet, as indicated by their comments above, these students are not just observing; rather, they are having "conversations." They are still "thinking" about what they learned in *Crossing the Color-Line*, a course that advocated for heterogeneity.

In the conclusion to *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*, Ayanna Thompson

implies, with some suggestive evidence, that the lack of substantial diversity within the early modern field stems from the homogeneity of most modern Shakespeare classrooms. Thompson writes: "If the field were to support the inclusion of race studies more systematically and consistently, then our ranks may diversify more rapidly and thoroughly. I find it depressing that I can name most of the Shakespeareans of color despite the fact that our professional organizations are relatively large. On the most simplistic level, this means that we need to encourage our undergraduates and graduates who are interested in both Shakespeare studies and race studies to pursue a career in academia" (180). Diversifying our ranks, or simply reimagining how we teach sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, is essential for increasing the appeal of early modern studies for students who might not otherwise see themselves as fully interested in, comfortable with, or capable of succeeding in the field. By increasing the appeal of early modern studies, and bringing it into dialogue with later literature, we can use different critical tools to highlight under-studied and undiscovered issues in early modern texts. And we can sustain the conversation that Du Bois initiates, the conversation between the past and the present that shows how and why Du Bois can sit with Shakespeare.



## Works Cited

- Anderson, Lisa M. "When Race Matters: Reading Race in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*." *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*. Ed. Ayanna Thompson. New York: Routledge, 2006. 89-102. Print.
- Chambliss, Daniel F. and Christopher G. Takacs. *How College Works*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014. Print.
- Courtney, Krystyna Kujawinska. "Ira Aldridge, Shakespeare, and Color-Conscious Performances in Nineteenth-Century Europe." Ed. Ayanna Thompson. *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 103-122. Print.
- Deroux, Margaux. "The Blackness Within: Early Modern Color-Concept, Physiology and Aaron the Moor in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*." *The Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 19 (2010), 86-101. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. "The Color Line." *The North American Review* 132.295 (1881): 567-577. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994. Print.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. "We Wear the Mask."  
<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173467>>
- Floyd-Wilson, Mary. *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. Print.
- Hall, Kim. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995. Print.
- Hill, Errol. *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors*. Amherst: The U of Amherst P, 1984. Print.
- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.
- Ogude, S. E. "Literature and Racism: The Example of *Othello*." Ed. Kaul, Mythili. *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*. Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1997. 151-166. Print.
- Parker, Patricia. "Black *Hamlet*: Battening on the Moor." *Shakespeare Studies*. 31 (2003): 127-164. Print.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Venus*. New York: Dramatist's Play Service, Inc., 1989. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. "Hamlet." *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson, 2009. 1091-1149. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. "Macbeth." *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson, 2009. 1255-1292. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. "Titus Andronicus." *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson, 2009. 966-1004. Print.
- Slate. "Take the Impossible 'Literary' Test Louisiana Gave Black Voters in the 1960's."  
[http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_vault/2013/06/28/voting\\_rights\\_and\\_the\\_supreme\\_court\\_the\\_impossible\\_literacy\\_test\\_louisiana.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2013/06/28/voting_rights_and_the_supreme_court_the_impossible_literacy_test_louisiana.html).
- Sturgess, Kim C. *Shakespeare and the American Nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Styan, J. L. "Shakespeare off the Page." *Teaching Shakespeare Today: Practical Approaches and Productive Strategies*. Ed. James E. Davis and Ronald E. Salomone. United States: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993. 61-71. Print.
- Thompson, Ayanna. *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.



Thompson, Ayanna. "What is a 'Weyward' *Macbeth*?" *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*. Ed. Scott L. Newstock and Ayanna Thompson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2010. 3-10. Print.

## Notes

- 1 In his essay, Douglass alludes to the eloquence of Shakespeare's Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* (568).
- 2 The assignment's name suggested that each literary work was a rhetorical landscape for students to explore.
- 3 Du Bois' quotation presents the opportunity to discuss blank verse with students.
- 4 Quotations have been extracted from my former students' inroad assignments as supporting evidence.
- 5 One student noted in recent correspondence, "Our class discussions made me feel uncomfortable because the issues we discussed were heavy. There were several times when I felt 'white guilt' due to the subject matter."
- 6 There is a Western history of black actors being cast in a couple roles where the characters themselves are traditionally white. Black actors played Macbeth and Richard III sometimes (Anderson 100). It is also interesting to note that "the classic Shakespearean texts that include black characters (Aaron, Othello) rely on stereotypes that represent black men as aggressive, transgressive and violent" (Anderson 92).
- 7 This idea is scrutinized more thoroughly in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, which explores the "play's weyward history within dialogues about race" and "positions this 'Scottish Play' in the center of American racial constructions" (Thompson 8).
- 8 As one of my former students noted in recent correspondence, "So many students spoke from really personal spaces about the texts, which I thought made for a really unique environment."
- 9 A virgule has been inserted to denote the original line break in the literacy test.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://d-scribe.org/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/).