

TH 313: African American Theatre and Culture

Fall 2017; M/W 4:00-5:45 PM

Location: Tufte 914

Instructor: Reza Mirsajadi

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Course Description

What makes a performance a Black play? How does one take control of histories of oppression, problematic and nonexistent representations, hegemonic narratives, and linguistic forms to create a drama that speaks TO and FOR a community? How does one perform Blackness? And who gets to be counted as "black," anyway?

These questions are at the heart of this course, and will come up each week as we grapple with new plays, historical periods, and critical voices. The class offers students an introduction to the history of African American theatre, from the nineteenth century to the modern day, with a focus on how playwrights have evolved the dramatic form and claimed control of their identities to speak to black lives, cultures, and histories. Performance is a form of self-expression but it is also a means by which African Americans have generated and transmitted political analysis, shared knowledge and wisdom, organized communities, and galvanized resistance. Students will engage with a wide range of performance styles, from dramatic texts and films to manifestos, live theatre, music, dance, and spoken word, in an effort to promote a deeper understanding of what it means to be Black in America. The class is structured to provide a foundation in both African American history and critical race studies, while also focusing on intersectional identities, such as black women, LGBTQ people of color, and transnational identities. The course aims to promote open dialogue and discussions that bridge the readings with current events, as well as fostering stronger analytic and writing skills.

Course Objectives

- to develop a language with which to discuss issues of race, identity, and society
- to deepen and probe one's knowledge of African American performance history and practice
- to explore ways in which theatre can function as a site of activism, protest, and revolution
- to foster a dialogue that honestly engages with theatre, history, theory, and lived experience
- to strengthen critical reading, research, writing, and analytical skills

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Careful, insightful reading or viewing of assigned plays and articles in preparation for class each day.
2. Active, thoughtful and intensive participation in class discussions and projects.

3. Weekly reading responses, ten total.
4. One event critique, four pages.
5. Power web and a response, one page.
6. Wikipedia project: one encyclopedic entry.
7. Final paper: 8-10 pages on a topic of the student's choosing

Participation:

A great deal of the learning in this course takes place in the classroom. To participate effectively, you must be present and on time for class. Be advised, however, that participation is more than simply showing up for class. To receive full credit for participation, you must be prepared to engage in classroom discussions, share your work, and show knowledge of the readings.

Attendance:

- Attendance MATTERS in this course! Being absent will affect your participation grade and will make it difficult for you to keep up with assignments. You are allowed two absences throughout the semester, which can be used for whatever purpose.
- Please let me know if you must miss class due to illness, travel issues, family commitments, religious observance, etc. Absences for legitimate reasons are understandable, but I must be notified IN ADVANCE, and more than two absences will lower your final grade. Emerson policy recommends that anyone with more than three absences should withdraw from the course. If there are extenuating circumstances, please discuss them with me and we can try to make arrangements for you.
- Your success in this course will depend on your engaged participation in class. Our discussions will be based on assigned readings, so it is crucial that you keep pace with assignments and prepare material for the day it is assigned.
- Regular and respectful contributions to our ongoing exploration of African American theatre are an essential part of this class.

Inclusivity and Engagement:

Our goal is to collaboratively construct a class environment that fosters intellectual exploration and expression. We will be exploring material in this course that may include language or subject matter that is particularly emotionally charged, difficult, upsetting, or traumatic for members of the class. I ask that you be sensitive to yourself and your classmates. I also recognize that the nature of some of our material has the potential to cause individuals to relive traumatic experiences. Please see me if you experience apprehension about approaching particular readings, assignments, viewings, or discussions that stem from this concern.

Every student in this class will be valued and respected as an individual with distinct experiences, talents, and backgrounds. Students will be treated fairly regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, socio-economic status, or national

identity. Issues of diversity will be an integral part of our class discussions, assigned readings, and assignments. We will approach our work in this course with a shared foundation of respect and a shared responsibility to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students. I encourage you to ask questions and/or to state any concerns you have -- either in class for further discussion, or privately with me -- about the sometimes sensitive, uncomfortable stuff that may emerge.

If you have any concerns or suggestions for improving the classroom climate, please do not hesitate to speak with me, or to contact the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at 617-824- 8528 or by email at diversity_inclusion@emerson.edu. If you have a disability that may warrant accommodations in this class, please register with the Disability Services Coordinator at 216 Tremont Street, 5th Floor, (617-824- 8415), so that, together, we can work to develop a plan for providing necessary accommodations.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments are due by the start of class on the date stated, unless otherwise specified; they cannot be made up unless there has been an excused absence, upon the discretion of the instructor. For every week day (not class day) an assignment is late, the grade for the assignment will be reduced by one full letter.

Readings:

There will be reading assigned for each class, which may encompass play, films, critical/historical analyses, live performances, or YouTube videos. The reading/viewing must be completed before the start of class, and students must be able to discuss them in depth. Please bring the readings to class with you, whenever possible!

Weekly Responses:

Throughout the semester, you will be required to respond to the readings for the class session on our Canvas Discussion page. Your response can be personal, but I encourage you to use a scholarly voice and truly grapple with what is going on in the play and how it relates to the outside readings and what we have been talking about in class. Make sure that you cite the readings, use direct quotations, and be specific in your argument.

The class will be divided in half, so that one group responds only on Mondays and the other responds on Wednesdays. **You are required to write a total of 10 responses throughout the semester**, which means that everyone has either two or three weeks off. **Responses should be posted on Canvas by 2PM on the day that class is to meet.** An acceptable response will be a thoughtful analysis that synthesizes the readings and has a strong argument in 350-500 words (although you are free to write more if you are so moved).

Power Web:

You will create a diagram that looks at power in *The Escape; Or, a Leap for Freedom* and charts the characters based on how much power they hold. The way you interpret this assignment is completely

up to you, both in the method of analyzing power and representing it.

To accompany the power web, you will hand in a one-page explanation of your work and methodology. **(Due September 25 at start of class)**

Wiki-Scholars:

This will be our class attempt to fill in what Suzan-Lori Parks calls the (w)hole of history. Individually, you will each create a Wikipedia username, complete training through the online portal, critique an article, and add a line to an article of your choice. In groups of two, you will work on a new article (or a very under-developed existing article), and can choose between ONE black theatre artist, ONE black theatre company, or TWO related plays. The timeline and due dates for the project are below, as are a list of subjects you might consider and the requirements for what to include within your articles.

Timeline and Deadlines:

Week 1: Introduction to the Wikipedia Project

- Assignments **(due Monday 10/2)**:
 - Create a Wikipedia username
 - Register through the online class website
 - Complete the training under “Practicing the basics”

Week 2: What Makes a Good Article?

- Assignments **(due Wednesday 10/11)**:
 - Critique an article of your choice on its “talk” page
 - Choose your topic (make sure you have reliable sources to back it up!)

Week 3: Learning to Edit

- Assignments **(due Monday 10/16)**:
 - Add 1-2 sentences (with source footnote) to an article of your choice
 - Begin researching your topic
 - (OPTIONAL) Begin drafting your article in your sandbox

Week 4: Expanding and Reviewing

- Assignments **(due Monday 10/23)**:
 - Submit your sources for the article via email to the professor
 - 5 separate resources required, at least one being a book or reputable journal article
 - Expand your draft

Weeks 5 and 6: Finalizing the Work

- Assignments **(due Monday 11/6)**:
 - Finalize your draft
 - Publish the article on Wikipedia

Week 7: Presenting the Work

- We will present our articles in class on **Monday 11/6** and **Wednesday 11/8**

Things to include in your articles:

PLAYWRIGHT:

Introduction: brief summary of what this person is best known for and major accomplishments

Early/Family Life

Education
Career as a Playwright
Production History
Career in other fields (film, music, art, etc.)
Style/Philosophy/Themes
Critical Reception
Awards
Personal Life
List of Works
(whatever else you think is relevant)

THEATRE COMPANY:

Introduction: brief summary of the company, what they do, years of operation, location
History
Mission Statement
Major Productions
Critical Reception
Awards
Playwrights and directors they have worked with
Outreach Initiatives
(whatever else you think is relevant)

PLAY:

Introduction: brief summary of play, playwright, initial or major productions, and awards
Plot (divided by Acts/Scenes)
Characters (with analysis)
Initial Production
Critical Reception
Awards
Other Major Productions (or film versions)
Themes/Symbols
Cultural References (if applicable)
(whatever else you think is relevant)

Grading (20% of final grade):

Practicing the basics (username, tutorials, etc)	10%
Critique an article on its TALK page	10%
Add one sentence with citation to an article of your choice	10%
Submit your sources	10%
Final article	40%
In-class presentation	20%

The final article will be graded for clarity, quality of information, and strength of resources. Make sure that whether you publish a new article or add to an existing one, you are adding at least 750 words of Wikipedia content.

Event Critique (4 pages)

Over the course of the semester, you are required to attend one live event that is of interest to the themes of this course, and write a critique for it that will be turned in to the instructor. Examples of appropriate events would be live theatre or dance, talks, rallies, symposia, etc. If you are unsure whether or not an event will qualify, please consult the instructor.

The critiques should NOT be a summary of what occurred. Rather, it should be thoughtful reflections on the event, its themes, and its relation to our discussions in class on African American theatre, black performativity, and cultural memory. The critique should be *descriptive* and *reflective*: not a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” judgment, but a consideration of the how the event fits within the histories of African American theatre that we have been discussing. *How is it in conversation with the plays and scholars that we have read in class?*

The critique should be emailed to me by **two weeks after the event took place, along with proof that you attended the event**. It must be turned in by the last day of class.

Final Paper:

Write an 8-10 page paper on a topic of your choice, following the directions below.

Half of this paper is a close textual/artistic analysis and depends on bringing in direct quotations and specific examples from your artist’s work to support your argument about how they address a particular theme. Bring in interviews with your artist – what have they said on the record about this topic and their relationship to it? What have other scholars and cultural critics written about your artist’s take on the topic? Most importantly, however, I want to hear *your* opinion about how they’ve addressed this issue. Do you agree or disagree with the artist’s self-critique and what others have said about it? Why or why not? In addition to the three artistic pieces at the center of your paper, you must bring in **at least three other resources on the artists (interviews, articles, reviews, etc.)**.

The other half of this paper is **either** a thematic **or** historical analysis. Bring in and directly quote outside sources that address either the theory/socio-politics of your theme, or the historical period in question. You can use sources that were assigned for class, but you should also take from **at least two new book/academic journal sources that deal with the theme or historical period**.

Prompts:

Artistic Critique: Start by choosing a black artist that you feel passionately about. They can work within any medium of your choice: theatre, film, music, dance, visual arts, poetry, literature, etc. Select three works from different points in their career, and examine the trajectory of their artistic voice. How has their style changed or developed, as evidenced by the works you selected? Find a thematic focal point for your critique (e.g. feminism/womanism, queerness/quareness, transnational blackness, masculinity, trans* identity, social justice, sexuality, black identity, childhood, protest, family, Afro-Latinx identity, historical reconstruction), and pay particular attention to the nuances with which your artist has addressed this topic throughout their career. The thesis of your paper should address *what exactly your artist has to say about this topic, as shown by the works you selected*.

Thematic Critique: Start by choosing a thematic focal point that you feel passionately about

(e.g. feminism/womanism, queerness/quareness, transnational blackness, masculinity, trans* identity, social justice, sexuality, black identity, childhood, protest, family, Afro-Latinx identity, historical reconstruction). Then work with the instructor to select three pieces in the same medium that show a trajectory of how this issue has been explored by three different artists. These artists can work in the same time period or different ones, but you should address how their particular circumstances may have influenced their take on this theme. The thesis of your paper should address *what exactly each artist has to say about this topic, as shown by the works you selected*.

Historical Critique: Start by choosing one of the seven developmental eras of African American Theatre that we have covered in class (Plantation/Slavery, Blackface Minstrelsy, Harlem Renaissance, Assimilationist, Black Arts/Black Power, Revolutionary/Afro-Centric, New Age/Post-Revolutionary), alongside a thematic focal point that you feel passionately about (e.g. feminism/womanism, queerness/quareness, transnational blackness, masculinity, trans* identity, social justice, sexuality, black identity, childhood, protest, family, Afro-Latinx identity, historical reconstruction). Then work with the instructor to select three plays in this developmental era that deal with your central theme. In your paper, look at how these artists *collectively* address this topic, as evidenced by the plays. Think of the three artists as a unit working together to dissect the nuances of this issue within Black American life. What do your artists have to say about the issue, and how does the world of their specific historical moment impact the way they see it in a way unlike how we might today? The thesis of your paper should address *what exactly these playwrights have to say about this topic, and the historical situation that influenced their take on the issue*.

Format and Deadlines:

Paper topics due Wednesday, Nov. 15 (via email). Paper outlines due Monday, Dec. 4 (via email). Final paper due Monday, Dec. 18 (via email). If you would like to submit a rough draft to me for review, comments, and edits, it should be emailed to me by Tuesday, December 12

12-point font, Times New Roman, double-spaced pages, 1-inch margins

EMAIL IT TO ME IN A DOCX FILE: rmirsajadi@gmail.com

Grading:

Paper Topic	10%
Paper Outline	15%
Final Paper	75%

Final Paper Breakdown:

Thesis	20%
Support	20%
Organization	20%
Style/Mechanics	15%
Research	15%
Citations	10%

The following will give you a 100% in each of the above categories:

Thesis: Controlling thesis is strong, specific and arguable; it directs the reader precisely toward the argument at hand

Support: Examples and ideas are well chosen, rooted in concrete detail, and well analyzed without being redundant

Organization: The piece is well organized with smooth transitions, paragraphs clearly build on each other to develop the main line of thinking.

Style/Mechanics: The prose is clear, mature, and engaging; sentences use precise word choice, syntax, and grammar.

Research: At least five sources of sound quality, following the rules listed above and excluding the central artistic pieces and anything assigned in class.

Citations: Citations in Bibliography/Works Cited/In-Text citations are all correct according to either MLA or Chicago Style

Note on Written Assignments:

The production critiques, power web response, and final paper should all be 12-point font, Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri, double-spaced, and with one-inch margins all around. You have the option of either handing the assignments to me in class on the day they are due or emailing them to rmirsajadi@gmail.com as a .doc or .docx file by 11:59PM on the day they are due.

GRADING

Participation (attendance, effort, and involvement)	20%
Power Web and Event Critique	10%
Wiki-Scholar Project	20%
Weekly Responses	30%
Final Paper	20%

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

Wednesday, September 6 **Introductions and Overviews**

WEEK 2: WHAT IS BLACK THEATRE?

Monday, September 11

The Problem with Definitions

- PLAY: *Bootycandy* (Robert O'Hara)
- "New Black Math" (Suzan-Lori Parks)
- "What is a Black Play? Tales from My Theoretical Corner" (Sandra Shannon)
- "Why White People Need to Talk About Racism Too" (Zachary R. Wood)

Wednesday, September 13

Performing Blackness

- CHOOSE ONE: *The Bluest Eye* (Lydia Diamond) or *Passing Strange* (Stew)
- “Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom” (Frank B. Wilderson III)
- “Black ‘Plays’” (Anna Deavere Smith)

WEEK 3: BLACKNESS IN THE WHITE IMAGINATION

Monday, September 18

The “Sympathetic” Negro

- PLAY: *The Octoroon* (Dion Boucicault)
- PLAY: *An Octoroon* (Brandon Jacob-Jenkins) (excerpt)
- “Uncle Tom’s Women” (excerpt) (Judith Williams)

Wednesday, September 20

Painting Race

- FILM: *A Natural Born Gambler*
- “Blackface and Blackness: Minstrel Show American Culture” (Eric Lott)
- “‘Mislike Me Not for My Complexion...’: Ira Aldridge in Whiteface” (Bernth Lindfors)

WEEK 4: THEORIZING BLACKNESS

Monday, September 25

Early Narratives

DUE: Power Web Assignment

- PLAY: *The Escape; Or, a Leap for Freedom* (William Wells Brown)
- “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (W. E. B. Du Bois)

Wednesday, September 27

The Mission of Black Arts

- PLAY: *The Star of Ethiopia* (W. E. B. Du Bois)
- “Criteria of Negro Art” (W. E. B. Du Bois)
- “The New Negro” (Alain Locke)
- OPTIONAL ARTICLE: “Art or Propaganda?” (Alain Locke)

WEEK 5: FINDING A VOICE

Monday, October 2

**Women’s Voices
(MEET IN COMPUTER LAB)**

- PLAY: *Rachel* (Angelina Weld Grimké)
- “The Negro as Presented in American Literature” (excerpt) (Anna Julia Cooper)

Wednesday, October 4

The Harlem Renaissance

- PLAY: *Mulatto* (Langston Hughes)
- “Black-Authored Lynching Drama’s Challenge to Theater History” (Koritha Mitchell)

WEEK 6: POPULARIZING BLACK NARRATIVES

Monday, October 9 **NO SCHOOL (Indigenous People's Day)**

Wednesday, October 11 **Reaching White Audiences**

- PLAY: *A Raisin in the Sun* (Lorraine Hansberry)
- TV: "Chapter I" (*Dear White People*)
- "The Negro Writer and His Roots" (Lorraine Hansberry)

WEEK 7: THEATRE OF REVOLT

Monday, October 16 **Black Arts/Black Power**

- PLAY: *Dutchman* (Amiri Baraka)
- "The Revolutionary Theatre" (Amiri Baraka)
- "The Delicate World of Reprobation: A Note on the Black Revolutionary Theatre" (excerpt) (Michael W. Kaufman)
- OPTIONAL FILM: *Get Out* (Jordan Peele)

Wednesday, October 18 **The Unbearable Whiteness of Being**

- PLAY: *A Day of Absence* (Douglas Turner Ward)
- "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" (bell hooks)
- *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (excerpt) (Faedra Chatard Carpenter)
- OPTIONAL TV: "Juneteenth" (*Atlanta*)

WEEK 8: CHANGING THE FORM

Monday, October 23 **Womanism and its New Language**

- CHOOSE ONE: *for color girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (Ntozake Shange) or *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (Adrienne Kennedy)
- "uncovered losses/black theatre traditions" (Ntozake Shange)
- "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (Audre Lorde)

Wednesday, October 25 **Black Audiences and White Critics**

- PLAY: *The Mojo and the Sayso* (Aishah Rahman)
- "Critics, Standards, and Black Theatre" (Margaret B. Wilkerson)
- "'Pass Over' envisions a Godot-like endgame for young black men" (Hedy Weiss)
- "When Critics Don't Like Their Reflection" (Antionette Nwandu)
- "We stand by our critic and a vital Chicago theater scene" (Editorial Board, *Chicago Sun Times*)

WEEK 9: PERFORMING NEW IDENTITIES

Monday, October 30 **Revisiting Black Performance**

- PLAY: *The Colored Museum* (George C. Wolfe)

- “Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre” (James Hatch)
- OPTIONAL ARTICLE: “Performance Method” (George C. Wolfe)

Wednesday, November 1

Afro-Latinx Erasure

- PLAY: *Blue Suite* (UNIVERSES)
- “‘Too Black to Be Latino/a:’ Blackness and Blacks as Foreigners in Latino Studies” (Tanya Katerí Hernández)
- “Triple-Consciousness? Approaches to Afro-Latino Culture in the United States” (Juan Flores & Miriam Jiménez Román)

WEEK 10: WIKIPEDIA SCHOLAR PRESENTATIONS

Monday, November 6

The Wilson/Brustein Debate & Wikipedia Scholar Presentations pt 1

DUE: Wikipedia pages

- “The Ground on Which I Stand” (August Wilson)
- “Subsidized Separatism” (Robert Brustein)
- “The Chitlin Circuit” (Henry Louis Gates, Jr.)

Wednesday, November 8

Wikipedia Scholar Presentations pt 2

DUE: Wikipedia pages

WEEK 11: *The Brother/Sister Plays*

Monday, November 13

Modern Day Orishas

- PLAY: *In the Red and Brown Water* (Tarell Alvin McCraney)
- PLAY: *The Brothers Size* (Tarell Alvin McCraney)
- “Legba and the Politics of Metaphysics: The Trickster in Black Drama” (Femi Euba)

Wednesday, November 15

Quareness

- PLAY: *Marcus; or the Secret of Sweet* (Tarell Alvin McCraney)
- “‘Quare’ Studies, Or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother” (E. Patrick Johnson)
- OPTIONAL FILM: *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins)

WEEK 12: QUEER(Y)ING BLACK IDENTITY

Monday, November 20

Black Sexualities and Histories

- PLAY: *Insurrection: Holding History* (Robert O’Hara)
- TV: “Thanksgivings” (*Master of None*)
- TV: “B.A.N.” (*Atlanta*)

Wednesday, November 22

NO SCHOOL (Thanksgiving)

WEEK 13: BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY

Monday, November 27

Commodifying Black Women

- *Venus* (Suzan-Lori Parks)

- “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace” (bell hooks)
- “From Elements of Style” (Suzan-Lori Parks)
- “An Equation for Black People Onstage” (Suzan-Lori Parks)

Wednesday, November 29

Reclaiming Black Womanhood

- FILM: *Lemonade* (Beyoncé)
- PLAY: *bulrusher* (Eisa Davis)
- “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin” (doris davenport)
- OPTIONAL ARTICLE: “Brownness” (Andrea Canaan)

WEEK 14: BLACK LIVES MATTER

Monday, December 4

Black Incarceration

- PLAY: *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (August Wilson)
- *The New Jim Crow* (Michelle Alexander) (excerpt)
- OPTIONAL FILM: *13th* (Ava DuVernay)

Wednesday, December 6

Police Violence

- FILM: *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (Anna Deavere Smith)
- FILM: *Stay Woke* (Laurens Grant)
- “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” (Alicia Garza)

WEEK 15: POST-RACIAL?

Monday, December 11

Expectations and Exploitations

- CHOOSE ONE: *Neighbors* (Brandon Jacob-Jenkins) or *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee)
- “Are We There Yet? Race, Redemption, and *Black. White.*” (Brandi Wilkins Catanese)
- “The Color of Art” (James Hatch)

Wednesday, December 13

Black Excellence and the Glass Ceiling

- PLAY: *Sweat* (Lynn Nottage)
- “Hope and the Historian” (Ta-Nehisi Coates)
- “Were this year’s Tony Awards a superficial nod to diversity?” (Monica Ndounou)
- “A Collective Call Against Critical Bias” (Collective Mass)

APPENDIX: ON TITLE IX

Please be advised that I am a “Responsible Employee” not a “confidential resource” according to Emerson’s Sexual Misconduct Policy (SMP – for more information please see <http://www.emerson.edu/policy/sexual-misconduct>). As such I am required to report any information that may violate the SMP to Emerson’s Title IX Coordinator. If you would like to have a “confidential” conversation regarding an incident that may violate the SMP please contact one of the following confidential resources: Violence Prevention and Response (VPR) at 617-824- 8857; Emerson Counseling and Psychological Services (ECAPS) at 617- 824-8595; the Center for Health and Wellness at 617-824-8666; or Emerson's Director of Spiritual Life and all College chaplains at 617- 824-8036. If you would like to report an incident directly to the Title IX Coordinator, please contact Pamela White at 8 Park Plaza, Room 230; phone: 617-824-8999; email: titleix@emerson.edu"