

TH 434 - 102: African American Theatre

Autumn 2020; Tu/Th 2:40 – 4:10 PM

Location: Zoom

<https://depaul.zoom.us/j/9571071841>

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Office Hours: M/W 1:00 PM – 2:30 PM by appointment

(Reserve via calendly.com/rmirsajadi)

Course Description

What constitutes 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 how can we as theatre artists engage with Black narratives in our work, regardless of our personal histories and backgrounds?

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 identitarian politics to speak to black lives, cultures, and histories. As Robin Bernstein writes, “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 Blackness and its historical resonances in America. The class is structured to provide a foundation in both African American theatre/history and critical race studies, while also highlighting 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

Required Texts

- *Fairview*, Jackie Sibblies Drury
- *Venus*, Suzan-Lori Parks
- *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, August Wilson
- *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, Ntozake Shange

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. Reading responses, five total.
4. Power web and a response, one page.
5. Midterm paper: 7-8 pages of textual and historical analysis.
6. Wikipedia project: one encyclopedic entry and preparatory assignments.

Participation:

A great deal of the learning in this course takes place in the virtual classroom. To participate effectively, you must be present, on time, and engaged in the discussion. If you are in need of asynchronous options for a particular class session, please reach out to me in advance to discuss how you can receive full participation credit without being present on Zoom.

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. If you are planning on using one of your absences for a session, please email me before class to let me know!
- 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.
- Receiving attendance and participation credit for asynchronous engagement will require prior consultation with the professor.

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 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.

Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussion will remain confidential. To ensure that you receive the most reasonable accommodation based on your needs, contact me as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first week or two of the course) and be sure to contact the following office for support and additional services: Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) #370, Student Center, LPC, 773.325.1677

Academic Integrity:

The DePaul Student Handbook defines plagiarism as follows: "Plagiarism includes but is not limited to the following: (a) The direct copying of any source, such as written and verbal material, computer files, audio disks, video programs or musical scores, whether published or unpublished, in whole or in part, without proper acknowledgement that it is someone else's. (b) Copying of any source in whole or in part with only minor changes in wording or syntax even with acknowledgement. (c) Submitting as one's own work a report, examination paper, computer file, lab report or other assignment which has been prepared by someone else. This includes research papers purchased from any other person or agency. (d) The paraphrasing of another's work or ideas without proper acknowledgement." Plagiarism will result in a failure of the assignment or possibly of the course. If you are unsure of how to cite a source, ask!

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments are due by the start of class on the date stated, unless otherwise specified. If you are in need of an extension, please reach out to me in advance to discuss your options. Unapproved lateness will negatively impact your grade.

Readings:

There will be reading assigned for each class, which may encompass plays, films, critical/historical analyses, or YouTube videos. The reading/viewing must be completed before the start of class, and students must be able to discuss them in depth in order to receive full participation credit.

Reading Responses:

Throughout the semester, you will be required to respond to five of the plays and their accompanying readings for the class session on our D2L 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 the contextual readings speak to the play's themes. Make sure that you cite the readings, use direct quotations, and be specific in your argument.

At the start of the semester, you will sign up for the five class sessions for which you will submit a reading response. You are required to write one response approximately every other week.

Responses should be posted on D2L by 11:59PM the day before that class is to meet. Your responses will inform our class discussions the following day. An acceptable response will be a thoughtful analysis that synthesizes the readings and has a strong thesis in 500-750 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 29 at start of class)**

Midterm Paper:

You will write a 7-8 page paper that explores a significant African American play from the early twentieth century and the historical context needed to better understand how it functions. In part, this paper should provide a close textual analysis, bringing in direct quotations and specific examples from your play to support your argument about the political ideas underlying the text and how this is relayed to audiences. In order to frame the significance of these political arguments, your paper should also bring in outside contextual research that helps elucidate the relevance of this topic for historical and contemporary audiences at/of the time.

You will choose from the following list of plays (or get approval to write on a different piece):

- A Sunday Morning in the South* (Georgia Douglas Smith)
- Color Struck* (Zora Neale Hurston)
- The First One* (Zora Neale Hurston)
- Mule Bone* (Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes)
- Undertow* (Eulalie Spence)
- The Purple Flower* (Marita Bonner)
- For Unborn Children* (Myrtle Smith Livingston)
- The Deacon's Awakening* (Willis Richardson)

'Cruiter (John F. Matheus)
In Dahomey (Paul Laurence Dunbar and Jesse A. Shipp)
Shuffle Along (Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, et. al)

Your paper should include **at least three contextual resources (journal articles, reviews, news coverage, critical writing, etc)**. We will go over a grading rubric for this paper in class, and you are encouraged to meet with me to discuss the progress of your paper before the deadline. The paper should be 12-point font, Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri, double-spaced, and with one-inch margins all around. **You will submit the paper as a .docx file by 11:59PM on Friday, October 16, via D2L.**

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 and complete training through the online portal, which will include critiquing an article and adding a line to an article of your choice. Then, you will work on a new article (or build up a very under-developed existing article) of your choice, which should be on either a black theatre artist or a black theatre company. A timeline for this project, article requirements, and its various due dates will be sent out in advance, as well as a list of potential subjects for new articles. During finals week, we will meet to share our new articles with one another. **(The final article will be due on Wednesday, November 25)**

GRADING

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| Participation (attendance, effort, and involvement) | 30% |
| Reading Responses | 20% |
| Power Web | 5% |
| Midterm Paper | 20% |
| Wiki-Scholar Project | 25% |

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

Thursday, September 10 **Introductions and Overviews**

WEEK 2: WHAT IS BLACK THEATRE & PERFORMANCE?

Tuesday, September 15 **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) (<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/why-white-people-need-to-talk-about-racism-too/>)

Thursday, September 17

Performing Blackness

- PLAY: *The Bluest Eye* (Lydia Diamond)
- “The Black Body” (Harvey Young)
- OPTIONAL: “The Wake” (Christina Sharpe)

WEEK 3: BLACKNESS IN THE WHITE IMAGINATION

Monday, September 21

Attend 7pm Zoom production of *Otto Frank* by Roger Guenveur Smith

Tuesday, September 22

The “Sympathetic” Negro

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

Thursday, September 24

Painting Race, Playing Race

- VIDEO: “Blacks and Vaudeville” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kbnn3E7Gp8>)
- “‘Mislike Me Not for My Complexion...’: Ira Aldridge in *Whiteface*” (Bernth Lindfors)

WEEK 4: THEORIZING BLACKNESS

Tuesday, September 29

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)

Thursday, October 1

The Mission of Black Arts

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

WEEK 5: FINDING A VOICE

Tuesday, October 6

Early Black Female Playwrights and Theorists

- PLAY: *Rachel* (Angelina Weld Grimké)
- “The Negro as Presented in American Literature” (Anna Julia Cooper)
- “Venus in Two Acts” (Saidiya Hartman)

Thursday, October 8

The Harlem Renaissance

- PLAY: *Mulatto* (Langston Hughes)

- “The New Negro” (Alain Locke)

WEEK 6: POPULARIZING BLACK NARRATIVES

Tuesday, October 13

Reaching White Audiences

- PLAY: *A Raisin in the Sun* (Lorraine Hansberry)
- “The Negro Writer and His Roots” (Lorraine Hansberry)

Thursday, October 15

The Canon and Canonicity

- PLAY: *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (August Wilson)
- “The Ground on Which I Stand” (August Wilson)
- “Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre” (James Hatch)

Friday, October 16

DUE: Midterm Paper

WEEK 7: THEATRE OF REVOLT

Tuesday, October 20

Black Arts/Black Power

- PLAY: *Dutchman* (Amiri Baraka)
- “The Revolutionary Theatre” (Amiri Baraka)

Thursday, October 22

Intersectionality and Activism

- PLAY: *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (Adrienne Kennedy)
- “‘Set Your Blackness Free’: Barbara Ann Teer’s Art and Activism During the Black Arts Movement” (La Donna L. Forsgren)

WEEK 8: RADICAL WOMANISM

Tuesday, October 27

Womanism and its New Language

- PLAY: *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (Ntozake Shange)
- “uncovered losses/black theatre traditions” (Ntozake Shange)
- “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (Audre Lorde)

Thursday, October 29

Commodifying Black Female Sexuality

- PLAY: *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)

WEEK 9: REWRITING HISTORIES

Tuesday, November 3

Revisiting Black Performance

- FILM: *The Colored Museum* (George C. Wolfe) (Part 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra09yV_VaTk ; Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pTWa38B53M>)
- “Performance Method” (George C. Wolfe)

Thursday, November 5

Racing Whiteness

- PLAY: *Appropriate* (Branden Jacobs-Jenkins)
- “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination” (bell hooks)

WEEK 10: ERASURES AND #BLACKLIVESMATTER, PART ONE

Tuesday, November 10

Quareness

- PLAYS: *Marcus; or the Secret of Sweet* (Tarell Alvin McCraney)
- “Critical Shade: The Angular Logics of Black Appearance” (Tavia Nyong’o)
- “‘Quare’ Studies, Or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother” (E. Patrick Johnson) (excerpt)

Thursday, November 12

Police Brutality and Protest

GUEST SPEAKER: James Ijames

- FILM: *Kill Move Paradise* (James Ijames)
- “‘Hands Up! Don’t Shoot!’: Gesture, Choreography, and Protest in Ferguson” (Anusha Kedhar) (<https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/protest-in-ferguson/>)

WEEK 11: ERASURES AND #BLACKLIVESMATTER, PART TWO

Tuesday, November 17

Incarceration and Criticism

GUEST SPEAKER: Kristiana Rae Colón

- FILM: *Tilikum* (Kristiana Rae Colón)
- “*Tilikum* tells dark story of a captive orca at Sea World” (Chris Jones) (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/ct-ent-tilikum-sideshow-review-0630-story.html>)
- “Critics, Standards, and Black Theatre” (Margaret B. Wilkerson)

Thursday, November 19

Hip-Hop Theatre and Afro-Latinx Erasure

- FILM: *Ameriville* (UNIVERSES) (<http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/9kd51fgn.html>)
- “Hip-Hop Theatre and Performance” (Nicole Hodges Persley)
- “Triple-Consciousness? Approaches to Afro-Latino Culture in the United States” (Juan Flores & Miriam Jiménez Román)

WEEK 12: POWER AND SPECTATORSHIP

Tuesday, November 24

Whiteness and Gatekeeping

- PLAY: *Fairview* (Jackie Sibblies Drury)

- “Reviewing *Fairview*, a Play That Almost Demands That I Not Do So” (Sara Holdren) (<https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/reviewing-fairview-a-play-that-almost-demands-that-i-dont.html>)
- “Black Folks’s Theatre to Black Lives Matter: The Black Revolution on Campus” (La Donna L. Forsgren)

Wednesday, November 25

[DUE: Wikipedia Projects](#)

APPENDIX: DEPAUL HEALTH AND SAFETY POLICY

The health and safety of everyone at DePaul depends on the cooperation of all who come to campus. By taking care of yourself, you protect the entire community. The following mandatory protocols must be followed by DePaul students, faculty and staff at all times on both campuses. They must also be followed during any DePaul activities outside of individual’s isolation bubble off campus, along with any more stringent requirements that may be in place at other locations.

Face coverings

- Cloth face coverings that cover one’s mouth and nose must be worn at all times on DePaul grounds (inside campus buildings and outdoors). Face shields are not considered a replacement for face coverings.
- Faculty, staff and students are expected to provide their own face coverings.
- Illinois Department of Public Health offers guidance on the use of masks by the general public.
- The university will have a limited supply to share when people occasionally forget theirs.

Physical distancing

- Keep at least 6 feet between you and others, whether you are indoors or outdoors.

Personal hygiene

- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol if soap and water are not available. Up to 700 sanitation stands are available throughout both campuses.

Personal care

- Use the #CampusClear app to self-screen each time you plan to come to campus.
- Stay home if you are sick.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

Online training

- All members of the DePaul community must complete the Health and Safety Guidelines for Returning to Campus training.
- This 20-minute online training is required even if you have already been on campus or do not currently plan to return to campus.
- Contact training@depaul.edu with any questions or issues.