

African American Theatre
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African and African American Studies 120x
Harvard University, Fall 2023
Mondays 3-5:45pm
Barker Hall, room 316

This course explores the development of African American theater and performance from the antebellum era to the present. Its main objectives are to teach you how to analyze plays and to make you familiar with the major debates in the history of African American theatre. The course also makes use of the Harvard Theatre Collection at Houghton to facilitate hands-on skills in archival research. Through reading plays, scholarly analysis, and working directly with historical artifacts, we will develop an understanding of how African Americans have used theatre as a vital tool for Black politics, culture, community, and knowledge.

Assignments and requirements:

Attendance at <i>Fat Ham</i> , October 11-15 or approved alternative evening (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Weekly response papers (graded full credit/no credit)	10%
In-class archive presentation November 13 (GAI statement due Nov. 12)	20%
Proposal for final project, due Nov. 19 (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Status report on final project, due Dec. 3 (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Meeting with professors to discuss final project (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Final Project and GAI statement, due December 14	25%
Thoughtful, engaged, and respectful classroom participation	25%

Useful information:

Each student will receive a **free** ticket to the play *Fat Ham* by James Ijames at the Huntington Theatre between October 11 and October 15 (we will choose dates within this span at the beginning of the semester). **Attendance is required.**

Each week, you will prepare a one-page response paper (graded full credit/no credit). Please bring **three hard copies** of your paper to class. At the beginning of each class, you will hand in two copies to the professors. Then you will pair up with another student (ideally a different one each week). You will read and briefly discuss each other's response papers. These paired conversations will then inform the class's discussion.

As the **final assignment** for this course, each student will engage deeply with EITHER a play from our course (or an approved list of additional plays) OR one or more artifacts of African American theatre held in an archive at Harvard. Students' engagements may take many forms: one could write a traditional paper (10-15 pages for undergraduates, 20-30 pages for graduate students); stage a scene from the play and write an accompanying analysis; create a video, podcast, or live performance that thinks with or responds to the play or artifact; and more. Group projects are permitted. **Every project must be discussed with and pre-approved by the professors.** Throughout the semester, each student will complete smaller assignments that build toward the final project. Graduate students may have a different set of mid-semester

assignments; these will be determined in discussion with the professors at the beginning of the term.

Students are expected to read deeply and prepare notes and thoughts before each class. Most weeks, the professors provide questions to guide students' preparation, but students are always welcome to prepare additional thoughts or questions. Because this class meets once each week (and often meets for a unique, hands-on experience in the Harvard Theatre Collection), attendance is vital. More than one unexcused absence will negatively affect a student's participation grade. Needless to say, practices that disrespect one's colleagues (for example, texting, scrolling on cell phones, interrupting, hogging the floor, or launching personal attacks) obstruct rather than advance our conversation; such practices are therefore unacceptable.

Professor Bernstein holds Student Hours every week, but the times vary. Please reserve time online at <http://wgs.fas.harvard.edu/hours> (you will be prompted for your Harvard Key).

Professor Carpio will hold office hours on Tuesdays 10-12 am in Barker 162 (English Department) or by appointment.

Any student needing academic adjustments or accommodations should present a letter from the Disability Access Office (DAO) and speak with the professors as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential, although the DAO may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation. Students who receive permission to use laptops to accommodate disabilities must restrict that use to note-taking programs and course materials. Any other use of laptops during lecture or section will necessitate a meeting among the professors, the student, and the DAO to reassess and perhaps revise the plan for accommodation.

All students must act in accordance with the Harvard College Honor Code: "Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."

Late assignments are docked one third of a letter grade for each day or part of a day overdue. Failure to complete an assignment can lower the semester grade in excess of the stated percentage.

Students **are permitted** to use generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools such as ChatGPT on all assignments unless otherwise stated. As a required part of each assignment (except the weekly response papers), you will **submit a statement** describing in detail the use, if any, of GAI tools. **Please submit the assignment to Professors Carpio and Bernstein and the statement separately to Staff Assistant Gigi Yun** <yji@fas.harvard.edu>. Ms. Yun will forward the GAI statements to the professors only *after* they have graded and commented on the papers. This process ensures that your use (or non-use) of GAI tools will not affect the assessment of your work. Failure to disclose the use of GAI tools will be considered a violation of the honor code. Each student is of course responsible for the content and accuracy of their work in this course.

Required Reading (available at the Harvard COOP and on reserve at Lamont):

Ira Aldridge, [*The Black Doctor*](#) (1847)

Dion Boucicault, [*The Octoroon or, Life in Louisiana; A Play in Five acts*](#) (1859)

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)
Branden Jacob-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (2014)
Suzan Lori-Parks, *Venus* (1996)
Douglas Turner Ward, *A Day of Absence* (1965)
William Wells Brown, *The Escape* (1858)

SCHEDULE



Please note: In this syllabus, you will sometimes see the symbol . This symbol identifies short reading assignments that provide necessary context and background knowledge. When you see this symbol, you should read the materials for basic “who, what, when, where” information. The purpose of this reading is to support you as you read the week’s main texts. For example, a week’s assignment might include short encyclopedia entries on a play and playwright, as well as the script for the play. By reading the encyclopedia entries first, you will be able to read and analyze the play with greater insight and confidence.

Also note: Most weeks include questions that you should prepare in advance to discuss in class. You should arrive in class with *notes* on your thoughts about *each one* of the questions. It’s a good idea to read the questions *before* you begin the week’s reading, and then do the reading with the questions in mind.

September 11. Introductions.

Before class:

- Read Aristotle, *Poetics*
- Read Suzan-Lori Parks, "[Elements of Style](#)", "[An Equation for Black People Onstage](#)" and "[New Black Math](#)"
- Read Elinor Fuchs' "[Some Questions to Ask of a Play](#)"

In class:

- Introductions, discussion of the reading

September 18. What is Black theatre? What are archives? What can they do, and what should they do?

Before class:

- Read W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 32 (October 1926): pp. 290-297. Online at <http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>
- Read Alain Locke, “Art or Propaganda?” *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life* Vol. I, No. 1 (November 1928). Online at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text10/lockeartorpropaganda.pdf>
- Read William Wells Brown, *The Escape* (1858)
<http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/99154300713103941/catalog>
- Prepare thoughts in response to the following questions: What is the “Du Bois/Locke debate”? According to Locke, Du Bois, what does or should Black theatre accomplish? At face value, *The Escape* would seem to contradict much of what these scholars claim. Can you nevertheless locate any points of intersection between what the play does, as a performance, and what Du Bois/Locke argue? Choose a scene or two in the play and

discuss why and how it strategically seeks to produce discomfort and laughter at the same time.

In class:

- Discuss perspectives on what theatre and archives can do for, with, and to Black people. Discuss *The Escape* in the context of these perspectives.
- We will choose dates to see *FAT HAM*. Please bring access to your calendars.

September 25. Black Performers, Modernity, Archives

Before class:

- Read Koritha Mitchell, “Whose Evidence? Which Account?” excerpt from Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 1-17.
https://holлис.harvard.edu/permalink/f/dlsg20/01HVD_ALMA512227875010003941
- Read Jayna Brown, “Introduction,” *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Duke University Press, 2008), 1-17.
https://holлис.harvard.edu/permalink/f/dlsg20/01HVD_ALMA512226263440003941
- Prepare thoughts in response to the following questions: According to Jayna Brown, what was at stake in Black women’s transnational performances? In other words, why did these women’s travel, dances, and other movements matter? What does Koritha Mitchell think about Du Bois, Locke, and archives?
- View “Handling Harvard’s Special Collections,” a 4-minute video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOv0SOQ8B68&feature=youtu.be>
- Familiarize yourself with “The Harvard Theatre Collection: A Guide for Researchers” at <http://guides.library.harvard.edu/htc>.

In class:

- Meet in Houghton Library for an introduction and welcome by Matthew Wittman, Curator of the Harvard Theatre Collection—plus hands-on engagement with primary materials!
Please note the following rules for the Houghton Library:
 - * No food or drink is permitted in the Library and all bags, knapsacks, folders and other containers must be placed in lockers.
 - * Students and faculty should bring as little as possible to the Seminar Room itself. Laptop computers are welcome; pencils and paper for note-taking are provided. The lobby guard must inspect all items that seminar participants bring in and out of the Seminar Room.
 - * All classes will be introduced briefly to the repository and provided with basic handling instructions.
 - * The material will be arranged on the Seminar Room table or in a display case. Students can circulate around the table to examine the material closely but books and manuscripts may not be passed from hand to hand.

October 2. Ira Aldridge, Shakespeare, and the African Grove Theater

Before class:

- Read/view the following brief materials. Their purpose is simply to orient you to the African Grove Theater and actor Ira Aldridge. You're just reading for basic "who, what, when, where":
 - David Gellman, "The African Grove Theater," Oxford African American Studies Center, <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.44520>
 - Video on African Grove Theatre: <https://www.thecoli.com/threads/new-nyu-theater-to-honor-the-1st-black-theater-in-america.919877/> (3 minutes)
 - Melissa Vickery-Bareford, "Ira Aldridge," Oxford African American Studies Center, <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.34198>
- Read Marvin McAllister, "'Hung Be the Heavens with Black' Bodies: An Analysis of the August 1822 Riot at William Brown's Greenwich Village Theatre," chapter in Kathy A. Perkins et. al, eds., *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 34-38. <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.4324/9781315191225>
- Read Ira Aldridge, *The Black Doctor* (1847). https://holliis.harvard.edu/permalink/f/1s5nto6/01HVD_ALMA512461008150003941
- Prepare thoughts in response to the following questions: What was the African Grove Theater? According to Marvin McAllister, what was the African Grove Theater *doing* that was so powerful that white people rioted? Who was Ira Aldridge? How does *The Black Doctor* resonate—or not—with the goals and practices of the African Grove Theatre? In other words, what ideas do you read in *The Black Doctor*, and how do they intersect with the ideas or claims put forward by the African Grove Theater?
- RECOMMENDED: If you are interested in the relationship between African American theatre and orientalist performances of Asianness (that is, "yellowface"), you may want to read Josephine Lee, "The Lesser Roles of Ira Aldridge," chapter in *Oriental, Black, and White: The Formation of Racial Habits in American Theatre* (Duke University Press, 2022), pp. 44-59. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469669632_lee.7

In class:

- Discuss the African Grove Theater and Ira Aldridge's *The Black Doctor*
- View and discuss digitized archival artifacts pertaining to Ira Aldridge and his colleagues

October 9. NO CLASS. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' DAY

Asynchronous learning for October 11-15:

- Listen to Leticia Ridley and Jordan Ealey, "A Soft Place to Land: James Ijames's *Fat Ham*," Daughters of Lorraine Podcast, <https://howlround.com/soft-place-land-james-ijames-fat-ham>. If you wish, you may read the transcript rather than listen to the podcast.
- Our class will attend *Fat Ham* at the Huntington Theatre during this period.
- Write a two-page response to the performance of *Fat Ham*. You might answer one or more of the following questions: How would you describe your experience of seeing *Fat Ham*? What did James Ijames achieve by re-imagining *Hamlet* through a Black, gay, Southern lens? Did anything about the production surprise you, and if so, what? What

connections or disconnections do you see between IJames' and the African Grove Theater's use of Shakespeare? (Note that these questions are suggestions; you could choose to pose and respond to different questions.)

- Write a brief but specific description of your use, if any, of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools such as ChatGPT in your response to *Fat Ham*.
- Prepare questions to ask James IJames!
- RECOMMENDED: Read the script for *Fat Ham* (on reserve through the Harvard Libraries)

Sunday, October 15, midnight. DUE: a) 2-page response to *Fat Ham* and b) statement on use, if any, of GAI tools. This paper is graded full credit/no credit. Submit the paper to Professors Bernstein and Carpio at rbernst@fas.harvard.edu, carpio@fas.harvard.edu and to Submit your statement on GAI tools *separately* to Staff Assistant Gigi Yun <yji@fas.harvard.edu>. Ms. Yun will send us your statements only *after* we have read and returned your response papers. Please note that both the response paper and the GAI statement are required for you to receive full credit.

October 16. *Fat Ham*

Before class:

- Review your response paper to *Fat Ham*
- Prepare questions to ask James IJames
- Recommended: start reading for next week (next week's reading assignment is heavier than usual)

In class:

- James IJames joins us to discuss *Fat Ham*!

October 23. Jacob-Jenkins and the art of appropriation

Before class:

- Read Branden Jacob-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (2014)
- Read Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon or, Life in Louisiana; A Play in Five acts* (1859). (Also available through Hollis: https://hollis.harvard.edu/permalink/f/bgpsti/01HVD_ALMA512476520840003941)
- Watch [this](#) interview with Jacob-Jenkins
- Watch [this](#) short video.
- Before class, consider these questions: what are the most significant elements from *The Octoroon* that Jacobs-Jenkins repeats but revises to produce *An Octoroon*? Who is the Playwright supposed to represent in the prologue to *An Octoroon*? In what ways does Jenkins-Jacob critique theatre in his creation of it? Is the use of white face in *An Octoroon* minstrelsy? Why or why not? What, for you, are the most challenging scenes to imagine in these plays?

In class:

- Discussion of the two plays and short videos. Aside from discussing the plays as works of written and performed art, we will read parts of the play aloud, with different members of the class taking up roles. We will also discuss the challenges that these plays brings to actors, directors, producers and audience members.

October 30. Douglas Turner Ward and The Negro Ensemble Company



- Read/view the following brief materials. Their purpose is simply to orient you to the Negro Ensemble Company and playwright/performer Douglas Turner Ward. You're just reading for basic "who, what, when, where":
 - Floyd Gaffney, "Douglas Turner Ward," Oxford African American Studies Center, <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47187>
 - Susan Watson Turner, "The Negro Ensemble Company, Inc.: One Moment in Time?" chapter in Kathy A. Perkins et. al, eds., *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 155-160. <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.4324/9781315191225>
 - Lisa Clayton Robinson, "Negro Ensemble Company," Oxford African American Studies Center, <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.42672>
 - Peruse the website of the Negro Ensemble Company, <https://necinc.org/>
 - Watch "The Negro Ensemble Company," 1993 documentary, 55 minutes, https://search.alexanderstreet.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C657751?account_id=11311&usage_group_id=103838
- Read Douglas Ward Turner, "American Theatre: For Whites Only?" originally published in the *New York Times*, 14 August 1966, p. 93. <https://www.americantheatre.org/1986/11/01/american-theatre-for-whites-only/>
- Douglas Turner Ward, *Day of Absence* (1965)

In class:

- Discussion of *Day of Absence* and the Negro Ensemble Company

November 6. Venuses

Before Class:



- Read [the introduction](#) to *Black Venus* (2010).
- Read Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (1996)
- Read Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe: a journal of criticism*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14. https://holliis.harvard.edu/permalink/f/1mdq5o5/TN_cdi_proquest_journals_195789319
- Watch [this production](#) of the play and
- Work on your presentations for next week! See syllabus entry for November 13 (below) on why you cannot leave this assignment until the last minute.
- Questions to consider in preparation for class discussion: What is the role of the chorus in the play? What's the effect of the actors' double roles? How is Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation" useful in discussing Parks' manipulation of the history of Saartjie Baartman? Can Parks get away from the history of exploitation that plagued Baartman? What do you make of the play-within-a-play aspect of *Venus*? What would you have done at the intermission if you had seen the play performed?

In class:

- Aside from discussing the play as a work of written and performed art, we will read parts of the play aloud, with different members of the class taking up roles. We will also discuss the challenges that this play brings to actors, directors, producers and audience members.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12, midnight deadline: Submit to Staff Assistant Gigi Yun <yji@fas.harvard.edu> a statement on your use, if any, of GAI tools in the preparation of your presentation. Ms. Yun will send the professors your statement only *after* they have graded your presentation. Please note that both the presentation and the GAI statement are required for you to receive credit for this presentation.

November 13. A Deep Dive: The Douglas Turner Ward Papers in the Harvard Theatre Collection

Before class:

- Read Finding Aid, Douglas Turner Ward papers, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library <https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/resources/12260>
- Visit Houghton Library to explore the Douglas Turner Ward papers. Your goal is to find something in the Ward papers that you find interesting, exciting, consternating, or otherwise engaging in the context of this class. *Note that you cannot leave this assignment until the last minute! You must first read the finding aid to identify boxes you would like to examine. You then must request the boxes **two days in advance**. Then, you will go to Houghton to examine the boxes and identify the artifact you will present. As a final step, you will prepare your “show and tell” presentation.*

In class:

- We meet in Houghton Library. Each student shares something they found in the Ward papers. You will: a) show the class the artifact you chose, b) explain why you chose it and why it is relevant to our class (beyond the simple fact that it is part of Ward’s papers), c) share your own thoughts about the artifact, and d) raise one question for discussion. Note that this is a formal, graded presentation. You should share your thoughts in an organized, well-prepared manner.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19, MIDNIGHT: PROPOSAL FOR FINAL PROJECT DUE.

Email it to Professor Bernstein at rbernst@fas.harvard.edu AND Professor Carpio at carpio@fas.harvard.edu.

November 20. Acting while Black

Before class:

- Read Monica Ndounou, “I Ain’t Studyin’ Stanislavski: We are the Key To Reimagining 21st Century Actor Training,” chapter in *Stanislavsky and Race: Questioning the ‘System’ in the 21st Century*, ed. Siiri Scott and Jay Paul Skelton (Routledge, 2024)
- Read Monica Ndounou, “Being Black on Stage and Screen: Black Actor Training Before Black Power and the Rise of Stanislavski’s System,” chapter in Kathy A. Perkins et. al, eds., *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 124-128. <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.4324/9781315191225>


- Peruse the website of The CRAFT Institute <https://www.thecraftinstitute.org/>
- Think about each of the plays we've read this semester from the perspective of actors. Imagine what it would have been like to be a Black actor performing a specific role in *The Black Doctor* in the 1840s, *The Escape* in the 1850s, *Day of Absence* in the 1960s, *Venus* in the 1990s, *An Octoroon* in the 2010s, or *Fat Ham* today. What different styles of acting do these plays require? What bodily practices does each role demand? When you re-visit a play from the perspective of an actor, what do you notice?
- Prepare questions to ask Dr. Ndounou. You might, for example, ask questions about the Black history of acting, actor training, or directing.

In class:

- Dr. Monica Ndounou joins our class to discuss acting and directing in Black theatre!

November 27. Naturalism and Realism in African American Theatre

Before class:

-  Read this short review of [Naturalism and Realism](#) in theatre
- Revisit Elinor Fuchs' ["Some Questions to Ask of a Play"](#)
- Read Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)
- Watch this 1989 [television adaptation](#) of the play. Notice that stars Esther Rolle and Danny Glover were involved in the Negro Ensemble Company!
- RECOMMENDED (but not required): watch the 1961 film adaptation of the play <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/99156423172503941/catalog>
- In preparation for class discussion, use the questions Elinor Fuchs provides in her article and apply them to Hansberry's play. Be prepared to discuss them in class and to revise Fuchs: what are some questions to ask of a Black play?

In class:

- We will read sections of the play, with different students taking up roles. We will also explore how Fuchs' article allows us to go beyond reading Hansberry solely in terms of naturalism and realism in theatre and discuss the play's adaptation for television.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, midnight. DUE: status report on final presentation. Email your status report to Professor Bernstein at rbernst@fas.harvard.edu AND Professor Carpio at carpio@fas.harvard.edu.

December 4. Reflections

Before class:

- Assignment TBD.

WEEK OF DECEMBER 4: Each student must meet with Prof. Bernstein and/or Prof. Carpio to discuss the final project.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2pm: FINAL PROJECT AND GAI STATEMENT DUE.