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Diversifying African American Drama

Anita González

African American drama. Is it historical? Contemporary? An oxymoron? Teaching African American drama for over ten years at primarily white institutions has taught me that there are many permutations of each of the course title's component parts: "African," "American," "drama." Sometimes students approach African American drama with trepidation, afraid that studying "black" stuff will prove dangerous or alienating. Three pedagogical approaches have proven successful for me in bringing students to this topic: 1) questioning the definitions of race and drama throughout the course; 2) mixing historical with contemporary dramatic literature; and 3) insisting that *all* students physically embody African American characters within in-class performances. This essay offers an overview of how I teach African American drama at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. My courses cover historical and contemporary literature and combine readings with embodied practice with the aim of helping students learn the vernacular of black performance.

African American drama is a topic that spans a variety of cultures and approaches to crafting art. The "African" part of the term requires familiarity with the theatrical practices of the African continent. These include practices such as acknowledging ancestors through public rites and rituals, maintaining storytelling traditions through *griots*,¹ using performance gestures that originate in the torso and hips, and speaking within rhythmic structures based on percussion patterns. The introduction to the now out-of-print anthology *Kuntu Drama: Plays of the African Continuum*, edited by Paul Carter Harrison, does an excellent job of spotlighting and describing examples of African aesthetics that frequently emerge within the black theatre canon.² My own tendency is to draw from dance-studies scholars like Brenda Dixon Gottschild (*Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*), Thomas DeFrantz (*Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*), and Jacqui Malone (*Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*). Dixon Gottschild's book traces specific elements of African aesthetics—such as the displacement and articulation of the hips, improvisation, energy, attack, off-centeredness, polycentrism, and *ephebism*³—in the choreography of mainstream dance artists, including George Balanchine, Deborah Hay, Bebe Miller, and Doug Elkins. *Dancing Many Drums*, on the other hand, provides useful case studies of specific African American artists who work with movement vocabularies. Learning about the expertise of dancers who execute ring shouts, social dances like the Lindy Hop or the black bottom and club dances contribute to students' understanding of how the African American body can communicate African continuities. *Steppin' on the Blues* describes movement styles that are more familiar to students: black marching bands, step teams, and popular music-step styles (e.g., the moves of the O'Jays and Temptations). These authors collectively describe how African dance-performance styles resonate within US entertainments.

Within my courses, I frame discussions of African continuities as "the vernacular"—the spoken and physical expressions of daily life that originate within African American and other communities. In the opening days of the semester, I encourage students to remember and share vernacular expressions from their own lives: folk expressions ("don't step on a crack"), double-dutch steps, step-dancing routines, spirituals their parents might sing, "the dozens" insults (often "yo' mama" jokes), and hand-game chants. When students remember and/or access these forms, they come to understand just how much sound and gestic language influence their daily interactions. Locating

the vernacular helps students to understand that performance involves more than text—that sound, gesture, and physical actions are a part of cultural communicative practices. When students share and perform their own vernacular, they come to understand how the vernacular can enhance dramatic encounters and situations.

Dialogues about the “African” continuities eventually lead to a discussion of race. To spur conversations, I ask students: “What is the difference between ‘African American’ drama, ‘black’ drama, and ‘Negro’ drama?” With this question, class members are forced to consider the construction of blackness across time. Who are (or were) the blacks? The Negroes? The Africans? Equally important, how did they come to be called this? Often I begin by describing the “wonder cabinets” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which all of the world’s cultural “artifacts” were grouped without order in a single space.⁴ Scientific rationalism coupled with Darwinism encouraged Europeans to develop categories that placed themselves—the Caucasians—at the top of the hierarchy; other groups such as Asians, Africans, and Native Americans were placed lower on the evolutionary ladder. Once students understand the construction of race within European ideologies, then they are able to grapple with the way that racial imaginations have influenced representations of blackness over various historical time-frames. Usually, we end this section of the course with a discussion of current racial imaginations as expressed on the US census form. Students review the form, then consider how the politics of US lifestyles have affected racial categories on it; for example, the most recent form allows citizens to self-identify based on both racial heritage (black/white) and ethnic group (Latino, Asian, and so on).

What is interesting about this discussion of racial construction in the classroom is that students who hail from Jamaica, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Central America, or other nations tend to breath a sigh of relief as they realize they can find a space for their own ethnic histories within this discussion of African American drama. Caribbean and Central American students are often labeled African American though they feel no connection with the histories of the United States. At the same time, students from Euro-American backgrounds become familiar with the shifting grounds of racial identities. By participating in discussions about ethnic and racial categorization, they can appreciate how our national history can embrace an understanding of diversity within blackness. They learn that “black” or “African” performance exists within the mental imagination of observers who seek to codify and explain racial “acts.” This discussion leads easily into engagements with theatre historiography; for example, the first African American institution that we study is the African Grove Theatre. Although the African Grove was founded in 1821 in New York City, its clientele included West Indian residents who settled in the city. William Wells Brown, founder of the theatre, sought to establish a social-gathering place to entertain free blacks.⁵ Learning about the African Grove helps students to understand that old and new immigrants—enslaved and free—contribute to the body of literature that we call “African American drama.”

The historical section of my class is the second unit. For me, the currently out-of-print volume *Black Theater USA*, edited by James Hatch and Ted Shine, continues to be the most useful compilation of historical plays that represent drama between 1821 and 1970. Fortunately, the *Black Drama* database released by Alexander Street Press includes many of these same plays. It grants students access to multiple plays by the same authors and avoids the cost of textbooks. I supplement the African American play compilations and databases with web-page documents (posted on the Blackboard web-delivery system) that describe historical events relevant to the assigned reading. Each “web lecture” includes Internet links for further exploration of historical topics such as Garveyism, the civil rights movement, and abolitionism, among others.

The next unit of the course—the study of contemporary drama—allows students to discuss topical concerns such as race, gender, sexuality, and social class as expressed through drama. My choice of literature shifts as new plays are introduced and/or social circumstances change. During the 1990s, playwrights like Anna Deveare Smith delivered important messages about social issues; today, I find

that students at my institution are more interested in plays about economic lifestyles or intra-racial divisiveness like *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks or *Yellowman* by Dael Orlandersmith, perhaps because as “state school” students, they want to explore their own social and economic identities.

An important component of this unit is a fieldtrip to see an African American play. In some communities like Tallahassee, Florida, students said that they were anxious about this off-campus excursion. Florida State University students, when asked to attend performances at the traditionally black Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), would approach me after class to express their fears about crossing over to the other side of town at night to attend a show. Often, they preferred to travel in groups to the shows, finding safety and solidarity in numbers. FAMU audiences respond vocally to play performances—shouting, clapping, and calling out. White theatre students often say that they had never experienced this type of response to live theatre. The required class assignment of attending an African American play within an African American setting exposed these Southern students to alternative perspectives and approaches to viewing and creating educational drama. At the same time, having Florida State students travel to FAMU provided more diverse audiences for the productions.

Here, in upstate New York, the African American drama class attends commercial productions in New York City. I arrange for institution-sponsored fieldtrips to Manhattan, where students experience professional productions. In this case, the entire class is able to see how working artists—producers, directors, actors, and designers—actually present African American plays. Students’ responses to these fieldtrips are usually positive; they submit reviews in which are described the particular performance, venue, and their own responses to the production. Most students are surprised by the ease with which they were able to connect with the cultural experience they were viewing.

Reading literature and discussing politics in class is a relatively safe way of learning about an “other” cultural experience, but actually traveling to a African American neighborhood and viewing an African American play is quite another. Despite the paucity of commercial African American theatres, communities throughout the country produce African American theatrical events. African American performance venues in more isolated communities might include fashion shows, church-sponsored holiday shows, spoken-word events, hip-hop concerts, and high school plays. Because African American communities are dispersed throughout the country, performance opportunities are plentiful. If definitions of African American drama are expanded to include vernacular as well as scripted performances, then students learn how varied approaches to performances nurture a diversity of performance styles; they are able to make connections between vernacular theatre and scripted literary theatre. Whenever possible, I reference vernacular moments in play texts like August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and Ed Bullin’s *The Taking of Miss Janie*.

Fieldtrips and production experiences also underscore the importance of authorship in defining African American drama. When W. E. B. Du Bois defined African American drama as theatre by, for, near, and about African Americans, the United States was a segregated society. Today, this definition must be reconsidered to embrace multiple production possibilities. At our first class meeting, I post the information indicated in table 1 on the Blackboard web-delivery system. Once students have attended a live performance, they are better able to critically consider how producers, audiences, actors, and playwrights define the genre.

In addition to viewing performances, students enact scenes from African American plays, first for one another, and then for an audience of their peers as a public presentation. Everyone must perform something. Initially, most non-black students are afraid to embody African American characters, perhaps fearing that they will misrepresent them or that their interpretations will reflect negatively upon the African American experience. Once they realize that most performances of blackness are constructed to reflect the social and political expectations of a particular time period, they become more comfortable with the exercise of performing black identity based on the given circumstances

Table 1. African American Theatre: Definitions

W. E. B. Du Bois defined African American theatre in the 1920s as theatre by, for, about, and near African Americans. While many have challenged this definition, it remains an effective starting point for a consideration of what constitutes African American drama. I prefer to use a broad definition of this genre:

- Theatre “by” African Americans refers to authorship and may include playwrights, directors, producers, actors, and others who initiate productions.
- Theatre “for” African Americans refers to the audience. Many African American plays are directed to both black and white audience constituencies.
- Theatre “about” African Americans means that the plays comment on or reflect upon the unique experience of African Americans in the United States.
- Theatre “near” African Americans may be broadly defined as productions that are close to African American communities.

In class, we will discuss these concepts about African American drama. Be prepared to talk about your own experiences with seeing minority plays.

of who, what, where, when, and why. As an African American artist, I frequently draw upon my own performance experiences to provide illustrations for my students. One of my favorite anecdotes is about being hired as an African American for a voiceover though not knowing what version of blackness the producer wanted me to perform. After some tense hedging and circular conversations, we established that the “black voice” the producer was seeking was the voice of Maya Angelou. His expectations about black performance were entirely based on his preconceptions about the sound of an African American voice. In a similar way, black performances couched within the texts of *In Dahomey*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *Big White Fog*, and *for black boys who have considered homicide* reside within a particular cultural understanding of black identity and politics.

Some topics are inherently problematic to teach; slavery, for example, seems a distant historical anomaly to students in the Northern classroom where I currently teach. Usually, I begin the discussion of slavery by asking students to provide contemporary examples of it. They look surprised at first, and then we begin to talk about contemporary African slavery, female slavery, and child slavery within the global context. As I connect the social injustices of the current global slave trade to the trading of Africans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, students begin to understand both the economic and human rights issues involved in systems of human servitude. We discuss the technologies of trade and the importance of transnational transportation routes. By referencing contemporary cases, the class is better able to understand the abolitionist arguments that surrounded historical slavery debates.

In addition, we take time to discuss miscegenation as an important component of the institution of slavery and the systems of rape that existed within plantation cultures. This early racial mixing accounts, in part, for the wide range of skin tones within the African American population—class members can see variations among themselves. The play *The Escape* is a perfect vehicle for discussion of miscegenation because its author, William Wells Brown, alludes to it in his dialogue. In act 2, scene 1, slave-trader Dick Walker recognizes one of Mr. Wildmarsh’s servants as the slave owner’s daughter. He says: “Well, now, Squire, I thought that was your daughter; she looked mightily like you. She was your daughter, wasn’t she? You need not be ashamed to own it to me, for I am mum upon such matters.” Brown portrays such miscegenation as an everyday occurrence; his play demonstrates the frequency of the practice within slave-holding households. Discussing miscegenation

in *The Escape* reminds students of the inhumane, sometimes violent sexual practices that occurred on Southern plantations during the nineteenth century.

When I first introduce the idea of “blacking up”⁶ to students, most tell me they have never seen it. Occasionally there are a few students who have seen or heard of Spike Lee’s movie *Bamboozled*, a satirical film about a group of actors who put on blackface and, to their surprise, enjoy popular success as performers. While I acknowledge the artistry of Lee’s film, I prefer to use historical footage in my classroom. The television documentary *Vaudeville: An American Masters Special* (1997) contains an excellent section on minstrelsy, which describes the derogatory imagery that emerged from the minstrel tradition and chronicles how artists survived the indignities of oppression within the entertainment industry. The documentary culminates with a vintage excerpt of Bert Williams performing his mimed poker-card act. Showing the film allows me to move directly from discussions of minstrelsy into a larger discussion of cultural stereotypes.

By having students identify stereotypical characteristics of blacks, Latinos, Arabs, Italians, and Native Americans, I demonstrate to them that stereotypes are socially and politically determined. They come up with descriptive words like “lazy,” “drunken,” “gangsters,” “smelly,” “terrorist,” and “mobsters.” By creating a chart that lists these so-called characteristics of each ethnic group, students can see that stereotypes of the “other” are similar; for example, mobster, terrorist, and gangster are all stereotypes of violence, while smelly, drunkard, and ignorant are stereotypes of poverty. Another way to demonstrate the shifting nature of African American stereotypes is to compare and contrast the pre-emancipation images of docile Uncle Tom and Aunt Mammy with post-emancipation images of the violent black man. The political climate both before and after the Civil War generates different kinds of stereotypes about African American people, because stereotypes are politically determined.

Once students understand the stereotypical representations of minstrelsy, we then create a minstrel show in class. This exercise focuses on the performance aspects of minstrelsy and usually takes two class periods. During the first class students form groups, with each one choosing an “act” to perform as a part of the show. These acts might be a sentimental song, a dance, a stump speech, a plantation skit, a series of “yo’ mama” jokes, a hand jive, or a tap-/buck-dance number. Two students volunteer to be “Tambo” and “Bones”—the emcees for the show. In this first session, I work closely with the groups to teach them basic “acts” like the Juba or the cakewalk, which I draw from some of the dance textbooks I mentioned earlier. Because the goal is to get the students physically involved in creating the show, loose interpretations of minstrelsy are accepted; contemporary ideas such as step dancing become part of the show in an effort to involve everyone.

Students research songs or steps at home that they can bring to class. Some find minstrelsy routines on YouTube; others turn to written scores that contain the music of composers such as Stephen Foster. Then we create the show the next time the class meets. I teach a simple walk around (the class walks around a circle while singing a simple *vocable* tune),⁷ then Tambo and Bones introduce each of the acts, the class becoming the audience for the individual acts. After everyone has presented his or her slightly rehearsed act, we end by repeating the opening walk around. This in-class minstrelsy performance fulfills several pedagogical goals: 1) students learn basic performance skills through the practice of putting together a short, improvisational revue show; 2) they learn and study the component parts of the historical minstrel show; and 3) they collaborate on an enjoyable, experiential project that keeps them engaged with the classroom material.

The final, and perhaps riskiest, component of my course is a public performance of scenes from African American drama. Students rehearse, memorize, embody, and stage scenes from the literature we read in the class, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. This move toward nontraditional casting has its benefits and detriments. Most students view the exercise as an extension of the classroom pedagogy by which everyone is eligible to read a text in front of the class. They usually

immerse themselves in the given circumstances of the plays without apprehension about gender or racial allegiances. We assign students to groups based on their preferences. All groups develop a detailed production portfolio based on its dramaturgical research, which is afterward submitted and includes a playwright's biography, original production information, a critical analysis of the play-script, and research on the play's historical and social contexts. Because the students study and evaluate the texts before they begin rehearsals, they approach the production process with a better understanding of the plays.

After I review the portfolios, students learn their lines and we begin the rehearsal process in class. I view and critique short excerpts of the scene to see how they are developing their characters. There have been times where white students have developed a broad stereotype of an African American character. This type of portrayal shifts when the novice performers are asked to modify their acting to align the character more with the who, what, where, when, and why of the play. For example, when students approach a prison play like Keith Antar Mason's *for black boys who have considered homicide*, they sometimes adopt a hip-hop persona based on broad cultural perceptions of black "gangstas." I ask them to reexamine the situation of the characters, who are young men in prison without options. When they carefully considered the social conditions of black men within the prison system, they adjusted their portrayals. In a similar way, students may approach Southern characters like Luttibelle in *Purlie Victorious* with preconceptions about how rural woman might behave. When students rehearse this in front of the class I emphasize the given circumstances: What does Luttibelle do for a living, how long has she lived in this county, what is her relationship with Gitlow? Through embodied representation of the characters, students begin to see black performance as a consequence of circumstance rather than as generalized cultural behavior.

After these in-class coaching sessions, students rehearse by themselves. I make myself available to attend these rehearsals if requested. Often there are problems with group dynamics, especially regarding the distribution of the workload; so I negotiate with students to ensure that they are on-track with their projects. They actually present their scenes twice. The first is an in-class performance where they "teach" the play to the rest of the class. In this showing, they use the research they have gathered in their production portfolio. They are required to involve the class in at least one discussion or exercise that complements the play-script, and I encourage them to be imaginative. One recent semester, students presenting *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage—a play about a seamstress during the early 1900s—had the class create a paper corset where the pattern sections could only be assembled if the students understood the evolving themes of the play. With paste and tape, the students assembled the corset while discussing the mood, theme, and setting of the play.

The second scene presentation is a public performance staged in one of the theatre department's spaces. By the time that this final performance night arrives, students from the class are usually proud of their work and anxious to invite their friends. They name the event and create a poster to advertise it. Each year the title changes; it has been called "The Thunder of Black Theatre," "Theatrical Mix-Up," and "Telling It True." We create a program that lists the names of the performers in each scene and invite both faculty and students to attend. The class makes use of whatever furniture and scenic elements are available within the department for the presentation. Each ten-minute scene begins with a two-minute explanation of the plot circumstances. One of my greatest pleasures is to see the students fully engage in creating characters onstage: they relate with one another and, in the more successful presentations, incorporate vernacular, fully expressed movement into their performance work.

My course, "African American Drama," covers many aspects of the title. We theorize what it means to be African American, and we discuss multiple interpretations of drama. Critical analysis of the play-texts is important, though I also emphasize embodied practice. Because the "audience" for the class is diverse, I encourage students to understand the diversity within the title of the course. In many ways, I consider the study of African American drama as a prelude to the study of

other types of ethnic and culturally specific literature. I believe that every ethnic group—Latino, Native American, Asian American, and others—creates theatre to examine and explain the social conditions of their particular cultural experiences. Teaching a class like “African American Drama” allows me to reconsider the scope of the genre. My students join me in this journey. The plays we read serve as springboards for ongoing discussions of race as expressed through physical and verbal performances.

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Notes

1. *Griots* are West African storytellers or praise singers who maintain and interpret cultural histories. They are repositories of oral tradition who also sing and play instruments to communicate their tales.
2. Paul Carter Harrison, “Introduction: Black Theatre in Search of a Source,” in *Kuntu Drama*.
3. Dixon Gottschild describes *ephebism* as “kinesthetic intensity that recognizes feeling as sensation rather than emotion”; see *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, page 15.
4. See Steven Mullaney, “Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance.”
5. See Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies & Gentlemen of Colour*.
6. “Blacking up” is the process of applying black makeup to the face in order to imitate African descendants.
7. A *vocable* is a sounding pattern. I usually use: da – da – da da da de da da.

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