

# African American Theatre and Performance

**Prof. Robin Bernstein**

African and African American Studies 120x

Harvard University, Spring 2017

Mondays and Wednesdays, 1-2pm

Boylston Hall, G07 (ground floor)

Course website: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/20925>

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This course investigates the history of African American theatre and performance from the antebellum era through the mid-twentieth century—with an occasional leap into the present. Our goal is not to complete a comprehensive survey but instead to learn through deep engagement with local resources, particularly archives and live theatrical events. Our class follows an unusual format: in a typical week, we meet on Monday in an ordinary classroom and on Wednesday in Houghton Library to work hands-on with archival materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection. We will dig into original manuscripts, letters, photographs, programs, sheet music, and other rare or unique items. Students will not only gain broad knowledge of the history of African American theatre but will also develop skills and confidence in archival research.



Josephine Baker

Our orientation toward local resources extends beyond our archival work. We will consider performance itself as a resource—one that African Americans have historically used and continue to use to create art and politics and to shape everyday life. 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. Performance has been an especially useful resource to African Americans because of a unique quality of live theatre: it is both supremely local and persistently transnational. Live theatre is local in that it only exists as an immediate, embodied presence (unlike, say, film), but it is also transnational in that actors have historically traveled, often over great distances, to earn their livings. Through these travels, African American performers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became cosmopolitan subjects—sophisticated cultural agents who shaped the modern world.

### **Assignments and requirements:**

Archival presentation (varying dates)	20%
Mid-semester paper, due Friday, March 3, 3pm	10%
Attendance at (or approved alternative participation in) Jewelle Gomez reading and panel, April 6 (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Proposal for final paper, due Monday, April 10 (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Attendance at <i>Barbecue</i> , Thursday, April 13 or approved alternative evening (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Revised proposal for final paper due Monday, April 17 (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Final Paper, due Wednesday, May 3, 3pm	25%
Thoughtful, engaged, and respectful classroom participation	25%

### **Useful information:**

All books are on reserve at Lamont Library and for sale at the Harvard Coop.

Each student will co-lead one archival session with materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection. This assignment entails working in advance with curators to select relevant primary documents for the class to examine, familiarizing yourself with context that is necessary to understand the documents, sharing this knowledge formally with your colleagues, and leading the class's engagement with the materials.

Each student will complete a substantial final paper that relates clearly to the topics, ideas, or materials in this course. Undergraduates' papers should run 15 pages; graduate students' papers should run 20-25 pages.

Late assignments will be docked one third of a letter grade for each day or partial day overdue. Please note that failure to complete any assignment can lower your final grade in excess of the stated percentage.

Each student will receive a free ticket to the play *Barbecue* by Robert O'Hara. Attendance is required. If you know you will be unable to attend with the rest of the class on April 13, please alert the professor as soon as possible and a ticket for the show on an alternative date will be provided for you.

A note on minstrelsy: because this course focuses on theatre by and about African Americans, we will not study blackface performances by non-black people. However, some African Americans did perform in blackface, and we will learn about those practices.

Professor Bernstein holds office hours every week, but the times vary. Please reserve time online at <http://wgs.fas.harvard.edu/hours>.

With a student's consent, meetings during office hours will be "walking meetings." The professor and student will talk while strolling around campus. *Any student may opt for a*

*traditional, “sitting meeting” instead.* If you opt for a sitting meeting, you need not offer any explanation, and no questions will be asked. We will of course stay inside during inclement weather. For more information about the intellectual and health benefits of walking meetings, see Nilofer Merchant, “Sitting is the Smoking of Our Generation,” *Harvard Business Review* 14 January 2013 <[http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/01/sitting\\_is\\_the\\_smoking\\_of\\_our\\_generation.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/01/sitting_is_the_smoking_of_our_generation.html)>.

Any student needing academic adjustments or accommodations should present a letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential, although AEO may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation.

This course adheres to Harvard University policy on permitted collaboration, which reads as follows:

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, etc), you must also acknowledge this assistance.

### **Required Books** (on reserve at Lamont Library and for sale at the Harvard Coop):

James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (any edition)

Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (any edition)

Robert O’Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History* (1996; New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000)

### **What’s Playing in Boston this Semester?**

Many Boston-area theatres regularly stage plays by and about African Americans. Here’s a sample of what’s playing this semester. Consider attending on your own! Student discounts are often available.

January 25-February 12: *Really*, by Jackie Sibblies Drury, at Company One

<https://companyone.org/production/really/>

March 10-April 9. *Topdog/Underdog*, by Suzan-Lori Parks, at the Huntington Theatre

<http://www.huntingtontheatre.org/season/2016-2017/topdog-underdog/>

March 15-19. *Citizen: An American Lyric*, stage adaptation of Claudia Rankine’s book, at ArtsEmerson

<https://artsemerson.org/Online/default.asp?doWork::WScontent::loadArticle=Load&BOP>

[aram::WScontent::loadArticle::article\\_id=058A9416-AAFB-4663-B2DE-371600C22BD9](https://artsemerson.org/Online/default.asp?doWork::WScontent::loadArticle::article_id=058A9416-AAFB-4663-B2DE-371600C22BD9)

March 23-26. *Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower: A Concert Performance* by Toshi Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon, at ArtsEmerson

[https://artsemerson.org/Online/default.asp?doWork::WScontent::loadArticle=Load&BOParam::WScontent::loadArticle::article\\_id=B435C06D-3F30-4C38-A393-2A15CFB97D40](https://artsemerson.org/Online/default.asp?doWork::WScontent::loadArticle=Load&BOParam::WScontent::loadArticle::article_id=B435C06D-3F30-4C38-A393-2A15CFB97D40)

April 6-7. Robbie McCauley 'n' Company: A Celebration + Symposium at Emerson College

<http://usa-eventer.com/event/robbie-mccauley-n-company-a-celebration-symposium>

July 14-August 12: *Leftovers*, by Josh Wilder, at Company One

<https://companyone.org/production/leftovers-world-premiere/>



*Barbecue*, by Robert O'Hara, at the Public Theater in New York. From left: Heather Alicia Simms, Benja Kay Thomas, Marc Damon Johnson and Kim Wayans. Photo credit: Joan Marcus

# SCHEDULE

## Monday, January 23. Introductions

### Wednesday, January 25. Defining Black Theatre

- 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>
- 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>
- **Recommended:** Asli Tekinay, "Theater," *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-first Century*. Ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Oxford UP, 2008). Access through Hollis database, Oxford African American Studies Center.
- **Recommended:** Kathy A. Perkins, "Theater," *Black Women in America, Second Edition*. Ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Oxford UP, 2008). Access through Hollis database, Oxford African American Studies Center.

**Recommended event:** Thursday, January 26, 5-7pm, Barker Center, Kresge Room: Brian Herrera, Drama Colloquium public talk, "The Incoherent Tradition of 'Non-Traditional' Casting."

**Recommended event:** Friday, January 27, 4-5pm: Brian Herrera, pop-up lecture/performance, "A Conversation about the History of Casting," Farkas 203

## Monday, January 30. One Point of Origin: William Wells Brown

- William Wells Brown, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858). Access through Hollis database Black Drama, Second Edition: 1850-Present.
- John Ernest, "The Reconstruction of Whiteness: William Wells Brown's *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*," *PMLA* vol. 113, no. 5 (October 1998): 1108-1121. Access through JSTOR.
- After class, we will visit a Harvard building that contains a secret room that some believe connects to the Underground Railroad. If possible, please arrange so you can spend about half an hour after class ends to participate in this visit.

## Wednesday, February 1. Introduction to the Harvard Theatre Collection!

- 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!
- Before class, please view "Handling Harvard's Special Collections," a 4-minute video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOv0SOQ8B68&feature=youtu.be>



- Before class, please familiarize yourself with “The Harvard Theatre Collection: A Guide for Researchers” at <http://guides.library.harvard.edu/htc>.
- 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. Lockers require quarters to operate, but you will receive your quarter back when leaving.
  - \* 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.
  - \* Equipment (such as scanners or light sources) that rests directly on collection material is not permitted.

**Monday, February 6. Ira Aldridge and His Milieu**

- Ira Aldridge, *The Black Doctor* (1847). Access through Hollis databases Literature Online or Black Drama, Second Edition: 1850-Present.
- Bernth Lindfors, “The Lives of Ira Aldridge,” in Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge, Volume 1: The Early Years, 1807-1833* (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2011): 6-17.
- **Recommended:** Anna Mae Duane, “‘Like a Motherless Child’: Racial Education at the New York African Free School and in *My Bondage and My Freedom*,” *American Literature* vol. 82, no. 3 (2010): 461-488. Access through Academic Search Premier (EBSCOhost).



**Ira Aldridge**

**Wednesday, February 8. Ira Aldridge and His Milieu**

- Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection!



**Monday, February 13. Modernity**

- Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), excerpts.

**Wednesday, February 15. Modernity**

- Meet in Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection!

**Monday, February 20. PRESIDENTS' DAY. NO CLASS.**

**Wednesday, February 22. Living with Lynching**

- Angelina Weld, Grimké, *Rachel* (1915). Access through Hollis database, Black Drama, Second Edition: 1850-Present.
- Koritha Mitchell, Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 (pp. 1-77) in *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (University of Illinois Press, 2011). Access through Hollis.
- **Recommended:** E. Patrick Johnson, "Strange Fruit: A Performance about Identity Politics," *The Drama Review*, 47.2 (Summer 2003): 88-116. Access through Project Muse or JSTOR.

**Monday, February 27. Early Black Broadway: *In Dahomey***

- Paul Laurence Dunbar, *In Dahomey* (1902). Access through Hollis database Black Drama, Second Edition: 1850-Present.
- Daphne Brooks, "Alien/Nation: Re-Imagining the Black Body (Politic) In Williams and Walker's *In Dahomey*," in Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 207-280.

**Wednesday, March 1. Early Black Broadway: *In Dahomey***

- Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection!

**FRIDAY, March 3, 3pm: Mid-semester paper due** to Prof. Bernstein's mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.

**Monday, March 6. Slavery, the Gaze, and Performance**

- Meet at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 11 Divinity Avenue, Collections Viewing Room B 8 (basement), for hands-on engagement with primary

materials. We will work with Ilisa Barbash, Associate Curator of Visual Anthropology, and Pat Kervick, Archivist.

- Harvey Young, “Still Standing: Daguerreotypes, Photography, and the Black Body,” in Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010): 26-75. Access through Hollis.

**Wednesday, March 8. Slavery, the Gaze, and Performance**

- Saidiya Hartman, “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance,” in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 17-48.
- Douglas A. Jones, Jr., “Slavery, Performance, and the Design of African American Theatre,” in Harvey Young, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 15-33. Access through Hollis.

**Monday, March 13. NO CLASS. SPRING BREAK.**

**Wednesday, March 15. NO CLASS. SPRING BREAK.**

**Monday, March 20. Josephine Baker**

- Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- **Recommended website:** <http://vintageblackglamour.tumblr.com/>

**Wednesday, March 22. Josephine Baker**

- Meet in Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection!
- Special Guest: Jennifer DeVere Brody!

**Recommended Event:** Wednesday, March 22, 6pm, Barker Center Room 211. Lecture by Jennifer DeVere Brody, “Animating Affect: Performance, Sculpture, Feeling,” sponsored by the Drama Colloquium and the Race and Ethnicity Colloquium.

**Monday, March 27. Mid-Century Giants: James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry**

- Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)
- James Baldwin, “Sweet Lorraine,” *Esquire*, November 1969; reprinted in Toni Morrison, ed., *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998): 757-761.
- Jewelle Gomez, “Lorraine Hansberry,” in Gomez, *Forty-Three Septembers: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Press, 1993): 151-166. Access online through Hollis.

**Wednesday, March 29. Mid-Century Giants: James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry**

- James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964)
- **Recommended:** E. Patrick Johnson, “Baldwin’s Theatre,” in Michele Elam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 85-99. Access through Hollis.



- **Recommended:** Koritha Mitchell, “James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the Blues for Mister Charlie,” *American Quarterly* 64.1 (2012). Access through Hollis.

**Monday, April 3. A Playwright on a Playwright: Jewelle Gomez on James Baldwin**

- Jewelle Gomez, in collaboration with Harry Waters, Jr. *Waiting for Giovanni: A Dream Play*
- Please peruse <http://www.jewellegomez.com/>

**Wednesday, April 5. James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry**

- Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection!

**Recommended Event:** Wednesday, April 5, 6pm, Kresge Room (Barker 114). Lecture by Tavia Nyong'o, “A Race against Time? On Black Social Practice since the 1960s,” sponsored by the Drama Colloquium and the Race and Ethnicity Colloquium

**Recommended Event:** Thursday, April 6, noon-1:30pm, location TBA: Lunch with Jewelle Gomez!

**REQUIRED EVENT:** Thursday, April 6, 5-8pm, Farkas Hall 203: Public reading of *Waiting for Giovanni: A Dream Play*, by Jewelle Gomez in collaboration with Harry Waters, Jr., plus panel discussion of the play immediately to follow the staged reading.



Jewelle Gomez

**Monday, April 10. NO CLASS, but your proposal for your final paper is due to Professor Bernstein by email <[rbernst@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:rbernst@fas.harvard.edu)> by 1pm.**

**Wednesday, April 12. A Contemporary Playwright Looks to the Past: Robert O’Hara**

- Robert O’Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History*

- Faedra Chatard Carpenter, “Robert O’Hara’s Insurrection: ‘Que(e)rying History,’” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 323-347.

**REQUIRED EVENT: Thursday, April 13, 7:30pm: Robert O’Hara, *Barbecue* at the Lyric Stage, 140 Clarendon Street**

**Please note: Professor Bernstein will hold extra office hours on April 12, 13, and 14 to discuss your final papers. Please sign up to meet with her! See <http://wgs.fas.harvard.edu/hours>.**

**Monday, April 17. Final Paper Workshop**

- REVISED proposals for final papers due at the beginning of class. Please bring FIVE copies of your proposal. You will share your proposal with your colleagues in class.

**Wednesday, April 19. Wrap-Up**

- Final trip to Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection

**Monday, April 24. (Re)Defining Black Theatre**

- August Wilson, “National Black Theater Festival, 1997” and “The Ground on Which I Stand,” published together in *Callaloo* Vol. 20, no. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 483-503. Access through JSTOR or Project Muse.
- “A Forum on Black Theatre: The Questions: What is a Black Play? and/or What is Playing Black?” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 57, no. 4 (December 2005), pp. 570-616 (note that this is a series of 16 short essays by leading scholars and practitioners of black performance). Access through Project Muse.
- **Recommended:** the rest of this issue of *Theatre Journal*.
- **Recommended:** E. Patrick Johnson, “Poor ‘Black’ Theatre: Mid-America Theatre Conference Keynote Address, March 7 2009,” *Theatre History Studies* 30 (June 2010): 1-13. Access through EBSCOHost or Literature Online (Lion).

**Wednesday, April 26. (Re)Defining Black Theatre**

- Aida Overton Walker, “Colored Men and Women on the Stage,” 1905.
- W. E. B. Du Bois, “Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre,” *The Crisis* 32.3 (July 1926): 134-136. Online at <http://isites.harvard.edu/k89609>
- Alain Locke, “Steps Toward the Negro Theatre,” *The Crisis* vol. 25, no. 2 (December 1922), 66-68. Online at <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/repository2/repoman.php?verb=render&id=1307029316296877&view=pageturner&pageno=18>
- bell hooks, "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," in Catherine Ugwu, ed., *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance* (Bay Press, 1995): 210-221.

- REVIEW 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>
- REVIEW 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>
- **Recommended:** Kortha Mitchell, “Redefining ‘Black Theatre,’” in Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (University of Illinois Press, 2011): 43-77. Access through Hollis.
- **Recommended:** Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression: Drama,” from *Negro: An Anthology*, 1934. In *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New York: Library of American, 1995), pp. 830-846. Access through Hollis database Black Thought and Culture.

**WEDNESDAY, May 3, 3pm: Final papers due** to Prof. Bernstein’s mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.



James Baldwin and Doris Jean Castle (not Lorraine Hansberry, as is widely believed)

***Enjoy your summer!***