

African American Theatre and Performance

Prof. Robin Bernstein

African and African American Studies 120x
Harvard University, Fall 2012
Mondays and Wednesdays, 1-2 pm
Sever Hall 205

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Course website: <http://isites.harvard.edu/k89609>

This course investigates the history of African American theatre and performance from the antebellum era through the Depression—with an occasional hop into the present. Our goal is not to complete a comprehensive survey but instead to learn through deep engagement with local resources, particularly archival resources at Harvard. Our class follows an unusual format: in a typical week, we meet on Monday in an ordinary classroom and on Wednesday in the Theatre Collection Seminar Room in Pusey 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 items. Students will not only gain broad knowledge of the history of African American performance but will also develop skills and confidence in archival research.

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.



Josephine Baker

Assignments and requirements:

Archival presentation (varying dates)	25%
Mid-semester paper, due Friday, October 19, 3pm	10%
Proposal for final paper, due Wednesday, Nov. 14 (graded full credit/no credit)	5%
Final Paper, due Wednesday, December 12	35%
Thoughtful, engaged, and respectful classroom participation	25%

General information:

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

Each student will co-lead one session at 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.

If you need reasonable accommodations for a disability, please let Professor Bernstein know as soon as possible.

Professor Bernstein holds office hours from 2-3pm every Wednesday and 3-5pm every Tuesday (except when Harvard holds a faculty meeting, in which case Prof. Bernstein holds office hours from 3-4pm). You are welcome to drop in, but students with appointments receive priority. You may reserve time online at <http://wgs.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k53419&pageid=icb.page449095>. If you have class during office hours, please email Professor Bernstein at <rbernst@fas> to make alternative arrangements.

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.

SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 5. Introductions

Monday, September 10. 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: 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>
- RECOMMENDED: 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>

Wednesday, September 12: Introduction to the Harvard Theatre Collection

- Meet at the Harvard Theatre Collection Seminar Room in Pusey Library! To get to the Seminar Room, go into Lamont, descend to Level B, and head to the Pusey corridor on the west side of Lamont. Follow the Pusey corridor until you get to the Theatre Collection (it will be on the left).
- View "Handling Harvard's Special Collections," 4-minute video online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOv0SOQ8B68&hd=1>
- 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.
- 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.

Monday, September 17. Leap into the Present: Hiphop Performance

- Guided tour of the Hiphop Archive! Meet at the Hiphop Archive in the Du Bois Institute, 104 Mount Auburn Street, 3R

- Peruse <http://hiphoparchive.org/>

Wednesday, September 19 The Queerness of Hip Hop/The Hip Hop of Queerness

- Readings TBD
- Guests: C. Riley Snorton and Scott Poulson Bryant

FRIDAY, September 21: The Queerness of Hip Hop/The Hip Hop of Queerness Symposium!

See <http://qohh.tumblr.com/> for detailed program. Register for free at <http://www.eventzilla.net/web/event?eventID=2138969194>.



Ira Aldridge

Monday, September 24. Back to the Nineteenth Century: Ira Aldridge and His Milieu

- Ira Aldridge, *The Black Doctor* (1847). Access through Hollis databases Literature Online or Black Drama.

- 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.

- 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 online through Academic Search Premier (EBSCOhost).

- Marvin McAllister, “Late-Night Pleasure Garden for People of Color: Noah’s African

Grove,” in McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies & Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown’s African and American Theatre* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 11-38.

Wednesday, September 26. Ira Aldridge and His Milieu

- Meet at the Harvard Theatre Collection Seminar Room for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 1. The Late Nineteenth Century

- Read all of Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) EXCEPT Chapter 4, “Alien/Nation.”

Wednesday, October 3

- Meet at the Harvard Theatre Collection Seminar Room for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 8: NO CLASS, Columbus Day

Wednesday, October 10. Key African American Plays I

- William Wells Brown, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, 1858. Access through Hollis database Black Drama.
- Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad*, 1879. Access through Hollis database Black Drama.
- 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.

Monday, October 15. Photographic Performance

- Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010)

Wednesday, October 17

- 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.
- Guest: Harvey Young

FRIDAY, October 19, 3pm: Mid-semester paper due to Prof. Bernstein's mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.

Monday, October 22. Key African American Plays II

- Paul Laurence Dunbar, *In Dahomey*, 1902. Access through Hollis database Black Drama.
- Daphne Brooks, "Alien/Nation: Re-Imagining the Black Body (Politic) In Williams And Walker's *In Dahomey*," in Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, pp. 207-280.

Wednesday, October 24

- Meet at the Harvard Theatre Collection Seminar Room for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 29. Black Women and Modernism

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

Wednesday, October 31

- Meet at the Harvard Theatre Collection Seminar Room for hands-on engagement with primary materials!
- Guest: Jayna Brown



Monday, November 5. Josephine Baker

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

Wednesday, November 7

- Meet at the Harvard Theatre Collection Seminar Room for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, November 12: Leap to the Present: The Jazz Aesthetic

- Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Lisa L. Moore, and Sharon Bridgforth, *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010)
- Peruse <http://sharonbridgforth.com/s/> (be sure to look at <http://sharonbridgforth.com/s/bookscdsdvds/theatre/theatrical-jazz-aesthetic/theatrical-jazz-aesthetic>)
- Peruse <http://e-tap.org/history.htm>
- Peruse <http://tjainnovators.blogspot.com>
- Guest: Sharon Bridgforth

Wednesday, November 14

- Proposal for final paper due! Please bring FOUR copies of your proposal to class. You will divide into groups to read and discuss each other's proposals.

Monday, November 19. Key African American Plays III

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Spunk*, 1935. Access through Hollis database Black Drama.
- 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 online through Hollis database Black Thought and Culture.

Wednesday, November 21: NO CLASS, Thanksgiving Break

Monday, November 26. Redefining Black Theatre

- "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 online through Project Muse.
- RECOMMENDED: the rest of this issue of *Theatre Journal*.

Wednesday, November 28.

- Aida Overton Walker, "Colored Men and Women on the Stage," 1905. Handout.
- Kortha Mitchell, "Redefining 'Black Theatre,'" in Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (University of Illinois Press, 2011): 43-80. Handout.

Monday, December 3. Wrap-up and discussion of final papers.

WEDNESDAY, December 12, 3pm: Final papers due to Prof. Bernstein's mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.



Enjoy your break!