

Seminar 32: Shakespeare and Race in Popular Culture:
SAA 2023
Abstracts

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“And mar no more our walls with scribble scrabble”: Adaptation as Graffiti in Ronald Wimberly’s *Prince of Cats*

Ron Wimberly’s graphic novel *Prince of Cats* (2012; reissued 2016) reworks the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in multiple ways simultaneously, primarily through a re-focusing of the narrative on Tybalt and by resetting the narrative in a majority-Black neighborhood in 1980s New York. This shift in setting and focus allows Wimberly to create a story whose combination of sex and samurai-style violence recasts the story within genres and locales familiar to comic book readers. Drawing on a range of 1980s cultural references and experiences, Wimberly’s comic weaves Shakespeare’s language into a pseudo hip-hop slang, creating resonances between its early modern source material and Black, urban culture. This essay focuses in particular on one ubiquitous visual motif in the comic – graffiti – and finds in it a model for reading the comic’s relationship with Shakespeare play and cultural status. Like a tagger on a railway bridge, it argues, Wimberly as adapter uses Shakespeare’s institutional mass as a canvas on which to assert his own identity and culture. By covering Shakespeare’s language and story with and incorporating it into his own fantastical narrative about New York in the ascendance of the hip-hop era, Wimberly offers a model of adaptation rooted in Black culture, an appropriative practice that enhances as it defaces and reveals as it obscures.

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Decolonizing *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* in Beyoncé’s *Black is King*

Beyoncé’s positions her 2020 visual album, *Black is King*, as an intertext of Disney’s *The Lion King*, which is itself an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. My critical starting point is the assumption that, whether or not Beyoncé was thinking about *Hamlet* when she positioned her film as a response to *The Lion King*, she still engages in a critique of Shakespeare’s play. Rather than thinking of the Disney film as a point of origin, from which we can work both backwards in time towards *Hamlet* and forwards in time towards *Black is King*, I think we should see all three works in conversation with each other so that the “lessons” in *Black is King* refer equally to both *Hamlet* and *The Lion King*. Namely: the lesson to learn is how black men can be uplifted and supported by intersectional feminism—a surprising take on *Hamlet*, which is not explicitly “about” race in a direct way. Beyoncé rewrites the narrative in both of her intertexts by revising the very concept of the monarchy. As other critics have shown, Disney tweaks the Elizabethan concept of the “Great Chain of Being” as the “Circle of Life.” Despite this revision, Disney maintains the conservative and hierarchical view of power that manifests in *Hamlet*, especially as evidenced in its engagement with the Fisher King Myth. While she does engage this myth, Beyoncé rewrites the idea of “kingship” to be about responsibility instead of domination. In doing so, she both condemns the misogynistic and colonialist mentalities of her source texts and reshapes their plots into tools to combat anti-black racism.

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Depictions of Race in Shakespearean Analog Gaming

Analog gaming (board and card games) continues to increase in popularity. With thousands of new titles released each year and multi-billion-dollar yearly revenues, analog gaming is a quickly growing aspect of popular culture that warrants closer analysis. A review of the most popular analog Shakespeare-related games reveals a clear pattern of traditional race portrayals, with diverse figures used infrequently and even rarer cases of colorblind or open race depictions. Even games based on experimental texts, like *Kill Shakespeare*, which break traditional narrative confines (including creating an amalgamated Shakespearean world) still remain locked into traditional depictions. While *Munchkin Shakespeare* employs a fairly open approach to race portrayal, there is yet to be a clearly colorblind approach to race in any Shakespeare-related analog games. The current age of analog gaming is young (most see it as beginning in the mid-90s), so there is still time for this media to adapt and play with form and expectations. The larger field of analog gaming is seeing a move to more open representation as well as a growing willingness to embrace colorblind or open race approaches in gaming, but this has yet to make inroads into Shakespearean games, perhaps because they remain linked in the popular imagination to specific historical mindsets or a traditional understanding of authenticity. Whatever the reason, there is clearly room to learn to play more openly with Shakespeare.

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Shakespeare and Race in Two Pop Culture Versions of *Station Eleven*

Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* (2014) follows the Travelling Symphony, a group of itinerant actors and musicians who tour settlements performing Shakespeare's plays twenty years after a pandemic has killed 99.99% of the earth's population. Despite widespread acclaim, the novel has also attracted criticism for erasing racial and ethnic cultures and making wealthy white society appear universal. Showrunner Patrick Somerville, in his television series *Station Eleven* (2021-2022), more thoroughly integrates Shakespeare into his adaptation with the expressed intention of overcoming the white, elitist culture that surrounds the playwright's work. Expanding upon the novel's interest in *Star Trek*, Somerville uses the original series (1966-1969) as his model for the creation of a multicultural future, with the Travelling Symphony as a type of integrated Starfleet crew. Despite its bias towards Western civilization and the tokenism of its incorporation of people of color, the original *Star Trek* broke ground through its portrayal of a black woman, Lt. Uhura, in a position of authority working alongside her mostly white male crewmates. Taking his cue from Uhura, Somerville also changes a major female character, Miranda, from a white Canadian in the novel to a black native of the Virgin Islands who survives Hurricane Hugo, connecting her more closely to Shakespeare's Miranda in *The Tempest*. In the television series, a black woman is now the artist/creator of the comic book, *Station Eleven*, that becomes the secular Bible and rival to Shakespeare for two other main characters in the post-pandemic world, Kirsten and the Prophet.

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Chloe Gong's *These Violent Delights* series quickly rose on bestseller lists and took social media by storm. *These Violent Delights* (2020) and its Sequel, *Our Violent Ends* (2021) adapt Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, while a spinoff, *Foul Lady Fortune* (2022), places several characters from the previous novels in the world of *As You Like It*. The story is set in a supernatural Shanghai of the 1920s and 30s, embroiled in conflicts between various gangs and political factions, but perhaps the greatest strength of the series is its diverse and dynamic characters. Gong populates her books with characters that represent many facets of the Asian diaspora, bringing these voices to our collective interpretation of Shakespeare's characters, while simultaneously using the cultural capital of Shakespeare to elevate their experiences. Gong herself effectively uses social media, particularly TikTok, to discuss and promote her books. Gong often creates videos in which she dresses as or otherwise emulates her characters, providing a visual as well as literary representation of Asian women in Shakespeare, and thus expanding diversity within our collective cultural understanding of Shakespeare's works.

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Domestic Shakespeares in Ruiz de Burton's *Who Would Have Thought It* (1872)

This seminar paper will examine how María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's popular novel *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872) talks back to a white-centered, domestic mode of adapting Shakespeare popularized during the antebellum era in bestselling novels, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ruiz de Burton appropriates Shakespeare to satirize the incoherent constructions of race as well as depictions of heroic white abolitionists within early domestic novels. Ruiz de Burton sets her novel during the Civil War when a New England family adopts Lola, a young Mexican girl of "pure Spanish" descent. As the white abolitionists scheme to rob Lola of her immense inheritance, they variously racialize her as black, Mexican, Native American, or some combination of these, causing Lola's racial identity to appear highly mutable and even occasionally contagious. This construction of race appears within an intertextual network that merges classical and Shakespeare precedents that associate Shakespeare with the "cult of Anglo-Saxonism," an imagined ethno-centric national identity in the nineteenth-century United States. Ruiz de Burton's novel reveals how an increasingly diverse group of domestic novelists used Shakespeare to expose the contradictions inherent racist ideology in some ways while replicating the exceptionalism of purity in others. Overall, this paper seeks to intervene in a tendency to ignore how women of color significantly participated in the domestic genre while also recognizing how authors, such as Ruiz de Burton, further developed an ongoing tradition of domestic Shakespeares.

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The Ballad of Tom and Greg: Comic Masculinity, Aspirational Whiteness, and *Succession*

HBO's *Succession* (2018-) is part of a recent surge in popular representations of *King Lear*, which includes Richard Eyre's film adaptation (2018), Lee Daniels' television series, *Empire* (2015-2020), and Preti Taneja's novel, *We That Are Young* (2018). Like Daniels and Taneja, *Succession*'s showrunner, Jesse Armstrong, chronicles a dysfunctional family of billionaires headed by an ageing patriarch, Logan Roy, and the competition between his three children, Kendall, Roman, and Siobhan, to succeed him. The series immerses the audience in a world of white privilege and power as Logan both promises his children access to his media empire and refuses to relinquish his authority to them. Logan's children replicate his narcissistic worldview as they seek to undermine each other in a bid to win their father's grudging approval.

They exist in a rarefied world that is particularly hostile to outsiders like Tom Wambsgans, Siobhan's husband, and Greg Hirsch, Logan's great-nephew who exist on the periphery of the Roy's inner circle. In this appropriation of *King Lear*, Tom and Greg represent nothing so much as the disguised Edgar and the Fool who accompany a bereft and abandoned Lear into the storm. However, in the darkly comic world of *Succession*, Tom and Greg are less loyal companions that remind Lear of the bereft and disempowered multitude than amoral fanboys who aspire to join the billionaires that mock and deride them.

This paper frames Tom and Greg as representatives of aspirational white masculinity who move from the periphery to the center of power over the course of three seasons. Moreover, given the comic nature of their portrayal and the homoerotic bonds between them, I consider whether their presence serves to critique elite white masculinity or invite the audience to empathize with its predatory impulses. Finally, given *Succession*'s place among a host of television shows on a channel that specializes in representing a particular kind of white privilege, I ask what Tom and Greg's portrayal reveals about popular culture's engagement with twenty-first century capitalism.

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This essay explores Shakespeare, race, and color conscious casting in an episode of the Apple TV+ streaming teen drama *Dickinson*, "I am afraid to own a body" (2019), which focuses on the meeting of the local Shakespeare club. With bounty hunters tracking a fugitive slave in Amherst, the Dickinson family's Black servant, Henry, must stay indoors, and Emily insists that he take part in the club's *Othello* reading. *Dickinson* is a costume drama distinguished by its deliberate anachronisms, which it mines for both comic and dramatic effect. In its reanimation of *Othello*, *Dickinson* critiques how Emily deploys Shakespeare to reinforce privileged White womanhood while at the same time trading on Shakespearean allusions and citations, both verbal and visual, to underline its own middlebrow niche within the streaming television ecosystem. There is a perpetual tension in pop culture Shakespeare between challenging Shakespeare and its cultural power and reifying that very power and the status quo it supports. Ultimately, *Dickinson* critiques how Emily deploys Shakespeare to reinforce privileged white womanhood while at the same time trading on Shakespearean allusions and citations, both verbal and visual. These moves—critique and citation—work together to appeal to the post-post-racial, woke white viewer of AppleTV+.

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Shakespeare and *Bridgerton*: the Myths of Race and Gender in Regency Romance

In December 2020, the first season of *Bridgerton* broke viewership records for the streaming giant Netflix, a feat surpassed by the second season in March 2022. The television series, based on novelist Julia Quinn's series of regency romances, has been praised for its colorblind casting, its centering of the female gaze, and, perhaps most famously, for its combination of steamy scenes on screen and a thoughtful attention to workplace environments in employing an intimacy coordinator offscreen. *Bridgerton* is based on a popular fiction genre that has a deceptively simple relationship to both Shakespeare and race. In the case of the former, the sonnets are peppered in as part of courtship rituals, every upper-class library contains a *Complete Works*, and Shakespeare is frequently a marker of the socially undervalued intelligence of heroines otherwise labeled as "bluestockings." For instance, a heroine in Quinn's *Splendid* series takes on the both admired and mocked task of reading the entire Shakespearean corpus. More broadly, these novels employ repeated tropes from Shakespeare's comedies, expunged of any overt misogyny, and repackaged as comfortably familiar narratives where we already know the end. For instance, the second season of *Bridgerton* based on *The Viscount Who Loved Me*, clearly shares plot parallels with both *Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. When it comes to race, the regency romances, set in an era defined by the height of British imperialism and an economy founded on the transatlantic slave trade, presents a utopic historic world where the Caribbean, India, and America are exotic locales for the mysterious pasts of their aristocratic heroes. My paper examines the multiracial and multiethnic quasi-historical world of the Netflix *Bridgerton* and its corresponding monocultural and formulaic fictional source and the ways in which they deploy Shakespeare to construct their respective utopias.

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"Precarious Property": The "essence" of Othello in *Dickinson*

The Apple+ series *Dickinson* (2019-2021) is an anachronism-filled rendering of Emily Dickinson as a young emerging writer. Despite a "charismatic" portrayal of Emily Dickson, the series' "mishmash of tone and slang" leads *Rolling Stone* critic Alan Stepinwall to title his review "A Heroine Out of Time and a Show Out of Whack. I call this precisely for the focus on time and to interrogate what it means to be both *of* and *out of* time, particularly as Season 1, episode 5 "I Am Afraid to Own a Body" enlists Shakespeare's *Othello* to simultaneously reflect nineteenth-century racial politics through the bifocal lenses of Shakespeare's time and our own. Framed by a debate over the legality of the Fugitive Slave Act, the episode's main conflict is Emily's desire to capture the "essence" of Othello by casting a black freedman in the role. When he declines, she impudently suggests the role would keep him indoors during a fugitive slave hunt, as she leverages his precarity for her sense of an ill-informed authenticity. The episode ends with Emily rejecting a marriage proposal and composing the eponymous poem "I Am Afraid to Own a Body" that seems to conflate her precarity as a woman with the black man's tokenized body. In the essay, I want to consider the way Shakespeare is leveraged within a contemporary depiction of an earlier century, amplifying the "then" and "now" dichotomy of constructing Others with which, critics such as Vanessa Corredera remind us, we as early modern race scholars must grapple.

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Shakespeare, Whiteness, and Contemporary Youth Culture

This seminar essay considers the influence of Shakespeare on white, American masculinity in youth culture, particularly children's and YA literature and film appearing during the past 25-30 years. Since Queen Elizabeth, white Europeans and eventually white Americans have turned to Shakespeare in part to create and then preserve their racial identity. Systemic whiteness has heavily relied on Shakespeare to maintain white privilege through education, through art, and as it relates to this project, through popular culture marketed to children and young adults.

Rather than focusing on one or two texts, this essay offers a cultural analysis of texts such as E.L. Konigsburg, *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth* (1967), Sharon M. Draper, *Romiette and Julio* (1999), Tracy Chevalier, *New Boy: Williams Shakespeare's Othello Retold* (2018), Dennis Covington, *Lizard* (1991), Neil Arksey, *MacB* (1999), Michelle Ray, *Falling for Hamlet* (2011), and Ted Williams, *Caliban's Hour* (1994), as well as a few of the teen-Shakespeare films that emerged during the 1990s. This essay engages with how authors and directors use Shakespeare to validate a number of white, American boy tropes, such as the bad-boy (like Tom in *Tom Sawyer*), the feral boy (like Tarzan in *Tarzan of the Apes*), the brooding boy (like Harry in *Harry Potter*), toxic masculinity (like Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*), and others. Often under the guise of *education*, such texts collectively indoctrinate young readers with problematic images of whiteness while centralizing a white perspective of Shakespeare in literature. I hope for much of this essay to be in conversation with Arthur L. Little, Jr's *White People in Shakespeare: Essays on Race, Culture and the Elite*, scheduled to be published in January 2023. I plan to build on the ideas collected in Little by turning the attention to young consumers and better understanding how Shakespeare and popular youth culture has played a part in institutionalized racism.

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“Calling all the Tiger Mom wannabes!” Parenting with and without Shakespeare across Racial Lines

While there have been studies on Asian “music moms,” women who commit time, money, and energy towards helping their children achieve cultural fluency in Western classical music, the “Shakespeare mom” has received less scholarly attention. This is likely because she is a more recent invention, a figurative child, I posit, of the “tiger mom” phenomenon launched by Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. A significant legacy of Chua’s memoir, in addition to popularizing the concept of the “tiger mom”—an overbearing, and usually Asian, maternal figure who prioritizes academic achievement over social and emotional development—is that it fuels and contains a range of anxieties about Asians and Asian Americans as they intersect with concerns regarding the U.S. education system. Though she has the best intentions, the Shakespeare mom participates in the whitewashing and sanitizing of the tiger mom for the middle and upper middle class white Western parents Chua takes aim at in her memoir. Shakespeare becomes a means for Western parents to critique the tiger mom, while also safely appropriating her methodology.

This paper considers the ethos and racial politics of Chua’s memoir alongside Ken Ludwig’s *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, which Random House marketed to “all the Tiger Mom wannabes!” Chua says anyone can be a tiger mom, but is a “tiger mom wannabe” a white parent who is better positioned, due to the linguistic, class, and racial barriers Shakespeare study imposes or embodies, to reap the full benefits of learning and loving Shakespeare?

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Femme Fatales, *Fargo*, and the “Fair is foul” paradox: Frances McDormand’s Coen Collaborations and Deconstructions of Whiteness in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*

Discussions so far of Joel Coen’s *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, briefly released in theaters in late 2021 and available on Apple TV+ since January 2022, have emphasized its black and white German expressionist/noir-inspired aesthetic. This visual style, according to one scholarly reviewer, “seems to represent the desolate moral topography of the play itself” as it also, another writes, “labours to build an abstract world that only exists at the imagined intersection of the written text, the theatre, and the cinema (and by default, the televisual).” In this paper I propose that the film’s exaggerated use of light and shadow, which often all but obliterates differences in skin tone, combines with its much-publicized nontraditional casting choices to underscore the instability of the black/white binary as mediated through the play as text, theater, and cinema/TV(+) alike.

I address in particular Frances McDormand’s performance as Lady Macbeth opposite Denzel Washington as the title character. While Washington brings to his Macbeth a substantial cultural cachet as the first Black actor to appear in a major cinematic Shakespearean role (Branagh’s *Much*

Ado, 1993), McDormand carries a quite different pop cultural legacy as Joel Coen's spouse as well as his frequent collaborator in movies such as *Blood Simple* (1984), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), *Burn after Reading* (2008) and, perhaps most famously, *Fargo* (1996). To an audience familiar with the Coen brothers' oeuvre, McDormand's notably "postmenopausal" Lady Macbeth bears traces of these earlier roles, from various subversions of the morally "black" femme fatale archetype to a pregnant female police officer in one of the whitest places on earth. This legacy intersects in complex ways with constructions of both race and gender in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, especially what Francesca Royster describes as the play's representation of whiteness as "a veil for...the painted hypocrisy of sexually powerful women." Viewed amidst the arc of McDormand's Coen collaborations, her Lady Macbeth complicates a long history of black and white logic in both Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean performance.

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White Femininity in Shakespeare and Reality Television

This essay is something of an experiment in that I'm starting with a question rather than a thesis. More precisely, I'm starting with an embarrassing admission – that I have watched a truly shameful amount of ethically objectionable reality television – and then hoping to explore the implications of connections I keep drawing between early modern and present-day representations of race in both. Basically, I'm interested in thematic parallels between representations of relationships between white women and Black men in early modern drama (Tamora and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, the queen and Eleazar in *Lust's Dominion*) and in reality TV, specifically the *90 Day Fiance* franchise. In both the early modern and contemporary contexts, an older white women's sexual relationship with a younger Black man is framed as a sign not only of her ungovernable sexual appetites but also her desire for power and domination, while the sexual exploitation of a younger Black man is framed as a sign of his cunning and ambition. My question is this: is tracing these parallels useful, and, if so, why? Can they help us to better understand the long history and present-day implications of what Urvashi Chakravarty has described as "a figure of white womanhood that acts as both agent and authorization for the work of English imperialism and enslavement?" Or does emphasizing fleeting thematic points of contact such as this instead flatten historical specificity and impute a stability to ideologies of white supremacy that inadvertently reifies them?