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Abstract

This essay examines the ways in which teachers (specifically pre-service teachers) can approach teaching Shakespeare's work in a culturally responsive manner in order to promote anti-racism and social awareness in the classroom, school community, and the world. This proposal for teaching Shakespeare includes a case study of Othello that is designed according to the principles in the Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (SJPACK) framework created by Jeanne Dyches and Ashley Boyd to prepare pre-service teachers for the discussions about race they will someday facilitate with their students. The framework focuses on teaching the history of racism in the Early Modern era and comparing it to racism today (and to Othello) and teaching other texts, written by authors of color, beside Othello, and asking students to consider the themes and ideas that the two texts share. The last suggestion is that students should be exposed to literary criticism regarding Othello, prompting them to develop their own beliefs and readings of the text, especially in terms of racism. Based on research, I conclude that teaching Shakespeare is critical in contributing to a middle school or high school student's understanding of the history of racism in the western world and offering them the tools and knowledge to combat racism and white supremacy in their own communities.

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Kathryn Kelly

Abstract: *This essay examines the ways in which teachers (specifically pre-service teachers) can approach teaching Shakespeare's work in a culturally responsive manner in order to promote anti-racism and social awareness in the classroom, school community, and the world. This proposal for teaching Shakespeare includes a case study of Othello that is designed according to the principles in the Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (SJPACK) framework created by Jeanne Dyches and Ashley Boyd to prepare pre-service teachers for the discussions about race they will someday facilitate with their students. The framework focuses on teaching the history of racism in the Early Modern era and comparing it to racism today (and to Othello) and teaching other texts, written by authors of color, beside Othello, and asking students to consider the themes and ideas that the two texts share. The last suggestion is that students should be exposed to literary criticism regarding Othello, prompting them to develop their own beliefs and readings of the text, especially in terms of racism. Based on research, I conclude that teaching Shakespeare is critical in contributing to a middle school or high school student's understanding of the history of racism in the western world and offering them the tools and knowledge to combat racism and white supremacy in their own communities.*

In 1822 during a performance of *Othello*, a U.S. soldier shot the actor playing Othello, exclaiming, "It will never be said that in my presence a confounded Negro has killed a white woman!" (qtd in McDonald and Orlin 1106). This event took place roughly forty years before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, so the actor in question was a white man in black-face (McDonald and Orlin 1106). There seems to be a revealing social pattern that centers on Shakespeare's representation of race relations—that revelation being the public disgust exhibited by the racists who encountered his work.

Shakespeare's texts have generated several controversial discussions about racism in America. During John Quincy Adams' presidency, he invited British actress Franny Kemble to dinner, where he relates to her that "*Othello* was disgusting, *King Lear* ludicrous, and *Romeo and Juliet* childish nonsense" (Shapiro 7). In Adams' essay "The Character of Desdemona," which was likely written in response to his dinner conversation with Kemble, he asserts that:

"the passion of Desdemona for Othello is unnatural, solely and exclusively because of his color," and because of this "her elopement to him, and secret marriage with him, indicate a personal character not only very deficient in delicacy, but totally regardless of filial duty, of female modesty, and of indigenous shame." (qtd. in Shapiro 2)

Adams places the blame of miscegenation on Desdemona rather than her husband. He doesn't see Desdemona as a heroine. Instead, he views her as a young woman who has become lost to the beliefs and customs of her family due to her socially and racially blinding relationship with Othello, her husband. Shakespeare's work generated high-profile discussions about race centuries ago, and I believe it's still valuable to have these conversations today, as these texts still have a place among the shelves of high school and middle school English classrooms across the nation. However, these discussions should take an anti-racist approach unlike Adams'.

Before we explore racism in Shakespeare's texts, I want to acknowledge the connection between Black literary criticism and the Black Lives Matter Movement to the playwright's work. In 1992 American author and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison published her first work of literary criticism titled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Through this text Morrison explores ideas such as "Africanism," the notion that Black literature hasn't influenced or been included in the American literary canon, and how Black characters and communities are presented through the perspectives of white authors. The title of the first chapter of her text is "Black Matters," a strange premonition of the state of our country in 2020. We find ourselves again in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, fighting against racist institutions that Black Americans have been struggling against for centuries. Morrison's first chapter title was no accident; "matters" refers to some intangible list of grievances in regard to the United States's treatment of its Black residents and a reminder that Black voices must be heard and uplifted. These two words are strung together to remind us that Black lives are significant, unique, and influential in our modern world and need to be treated as such.

As a pre-service education student, I am concerned about the lack of diverse representation in our history curricula, as it doesn't seem that concerns have changed since Morrison's time. A white supremacist version of history has been taught in secondary schools for centuries, but public memory is still coming into focus. The experiences and histories of people of color are still being excluded from public school curricula. In my eleventh grade AP American History class, my teacher instructed us to not worry about reviewing our summer unit on Native American

history, as only 5% of the exam was predicted to focus on the topic. This was only four years ago. I attended high school in a predominantly white suburban town; it wasn't surprising when no one objected to his comment, although I'm sure I wasn't the only student who felt uncomfortable. What followed this comment was not a discussion regarding the pervasiveness of white-washed history, but rather a grim sense of acceptance and another question about the content of the standardized test. This incident should light a fire under the chairs of pre-service education students. Our curricula need to include the memories of all students, of all Americans, rather than just those that exalt white Americans' achievements. Through the examination of literature, students have the opportunity to experience and empathize with the history they are being taught. I want to ensure that the literature I teach doesn't paint a whitewashed version of that history.

While I agree that some deep-cleaning of our high school curricula needs to be done, I also think that Shakespeare's work needs to remain on the syllabi. Reading his work in tandem with writers of color will only prove beneficial to our students. My intention is not to use Shakespeare as a way to teach about racism in America—that should be discussed all year, especially with texts written by Black authors. However, Shakespeare's representations of race provide an originary perspective on the history of race and white supremacy. Learning about the history of racism allows for students to see that it is indeed a social construct and that perhaps it can be unraveled as quickly as it was created.

In response to my concerns, I propose using the social justice pedagogical and content knowledge (SJPACK) framework developed by Jeanne Dyches and Ashley Boyd to inform the creation of grades 7-12 Shakespeare units in order to promote anti-

racism and social awareness in the classroom, school community, and the world. I will be using *Othello* as a case study to suggest ways in which new educators can achieve this goal.

Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (SJPACK)

Jeanne Dyches and Ashley Boyd developed the SJPACK framework to prepare pre-service teachers for the discussions about race they will someday have and facilitate with their students. This framework should also work well in informing middle and high school English teachers and their curricula. In their essay “Cultivating Critical Content Knowledge: Early Modern Literature, Pre-service Teachers, and New Methodologies for Social Justice,” Ashley Boyd and Todd Butler discuss the model she developed with Dyches. They write, “Building upon a teacher’s expertise in the concepts and terms that traditionally define a field, SJPACK integrates equity theories, current events, and political ideologies to enable teachers to translate their subject matter in ways that simultaneously respond to students’ positionalities and raise their sociopolitical awareness” (227). SJPACK asks students and teachers to not only consider the text, but also its context, history, and reception. This framework encourages students to consider and ask questions about racism, rather than simply admitting to the atrocity and putting those thoughts to rest when the reading is done. SJPACK is composed of three “domains of knowledge”: 1) social justice knowledge, 2) social justice pedagogical knowledge, and 3) social justice content knowledge (Butler and Boyd 227). The authors advise that a socially conscious teacher must have a grasp on these three domains in order to create and maintain that same socially conscious discourse in their classrooms and curriculums. Butler and Boyd define the first domain as “the base of the paradigm, encompass[ing] the ideas of

discourse, theory, history, and agency needed to maintain a critical outlook on the world and to understand the social...injustices that pervade our society” (227-228). Social justice knowledge is the interdisciplinary domain in this triad. This domain suggests that the main text should be viewed through several lenses. Rather than simply discussing literary devices and form, teachers will have their students look at literary criticism, film, old newspapers and new media, and other relevant mediums. Social justice pedagogical knowledge, on the other hand, is defined as, “approaches to teaching that utilize students’ backgrounds as the basis for learning, such as culturally responsive and relevant teaching, critical pedagogies that teach students to question and critique society, and action-inciting methods that prompt students to organize and act on their critical consciousness” (Butler and Boyd 228). Some strategies that fit into this domain are having students read articles (and the Shakespeare text) and discuss ways in which the diction describing the oppressed person or subject is portrayed. Teachers can even introduce rhetorical devices during the Shakespeare unit and show students how they pervade arguments and conflicts in the text, as well as in the media. Lastly, social justice content knowledge is:

a depth of knowledge of both traditional content, “the academic vocabulary and particulars of the content area,” such as a common interpretation of a play, and critical content, which critiques traditional content for its dominant ideological constructions and includes an alternative curriculum that can be paired for study with traditional content to draw parallels to current events and topics. (Butler and Boyd 228)

This domain asserts that mastery of the dominant reading of the text and content area is essential in order to understand the

criticism and build a curriculum that values tackling relevant social issues. In proposing a model for using the SJPACK framework for teaching Shakespeare, I will organize my suggestions into these three domains and, using *Othello*, I will provide examples of how one can best utilize them in order to discuss the literature in a culturally responsive, anti-racist way.

Social Justice Knowledge

Social justice knowledge claims that a reader and learner must have at least a basic understanding of the history and context of whichever dominant text they are reading in order to situate it in today's social and political discourse. In order to achieve this, students must be exposed to texts they otherwise wouldn't see, such as history regarding the text they are reading. I would begin this unit by reviewing the Black Lives Matter Movement with my students, discussing how it began in response to police brutality, and strives to eradicate white supremacy from American society, as well as to end systematic oppression in the justice system. I want my students to discuss the types of racism that they see in our world: casual racism, white supremacy, and hate crimes, and consider why different types of racism exist in the first place. From here, we would move into our *Othello* unit.

To some extent, *Othello*'s plight can be read as a modern version of racism. He marries a woman who loves him—for his color and the content of his character. *Othello* is a venerated soldier and has several lower-rank officers who are loving, respectful, and loyal to him. Desdemona's racist father disapproves of her union with *Othello*, but the soldier isn't shunned by his entire community for the marriage. When I read this text, I was expecting to see more racial violence against *Othello* due to the time period in which it was written, but I

discovered through the essay "Race: Context" by Russ McDonald and Lena Cowen Orlin that attitudes towards race were quite different during the early modern period. The term race was sometimes used to denote family units rather than skin color (1098-1099). In fact, McDonald and Orlin write, "Shakespeare's audiences did not have a political sensibility about difference, so stereotypes could seem to them like truth statements" (1099). While slavery existed, the practice of chattel slavery had not yet begun. According to "Race: Context," "There were not yet apologies for slave-trading, or concerns about miscegenation, or arguments about racial superiorities and inferiorities. In other words, this was not racial thought as we know it. It was another site of origin for what would later develop into racial thought" (McDonald and Orlin 1103). In an effort to ensure students understand the types of racism employed in *Othello*, I would have them read this essay.

Before introducing "Race: Context" with my students it is imperative to review the distinctions between early modern versus modern American racism. In an introduction to my lesson, I would give a short presentation on the history of the slave trade during centuries in which Shakespeare lived and wrote. For example, I could use Joanna Lipking's essay "The New World of Slavery—An Introduction," which discusses how European explorers characterized West Africa and its people. They primarily wrote about these countries and people in fantastical terms, romanticizing their civilizations, their culture, and their dispositions. In 1669, an anonymous French writer describes the people with whom he has come in contact, saying, "they have nothing disagreeable in their countenance, but the blackness of their complexion" (qtd in Lipking 77). While this is most certainly a back-handed compliment, readers must understand that skin color during the

sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries wasn't quite as racialized as it is today. Lipking adds:

If [white explorers] were attentive to skin color, they were much more attentive to the status, wealth, and power of their ruling-class allies. They wrote to prove not how blacks differed from whites, but how blacks differed from blacks, carefully distinguishing among the inhabitants of each region and nation and port, typically favoring some peoples and some leaders said to meet European standards of beauty, intelligence, politeness, and sometimes fair mindedness. (Lipking 76-77)

While it is clear that white explorers favored Black people whose physical features mimicked their own, this wasn't the extent of their preferences. Lipking asserts that they were more concerned with the success of these leaders and the civilizations that they built. While students will see inherent racism in the discussion of comparing the appearances of Black Africans to European beauty standards, they will also see examples of modern day racism in the theme that this quote champions: Black exceptionalism. When we celebrate the victories of Black Americans *without* fighting for justice for those who were wrongly killed at the hands of law enforcement, we are prioritizing our activism based on what seems easiest to accomplish. We are essentially saying it's easier to fight for Black Americans whom we view as successful, rather than those who were successful in their own right but were instead murdered by a system created to protect us. Moving back to early modern racism, Lipking writes, "The English colonies of North America—and all, like England itself, were slave-holding—took in no more than 5 percent of the slaves. The vast majority, as many as 90 percent, were sent into the South Atlantic, chiefly to the

Caribbean and the Guianas, followed by Brazil" (80). Since the transatlantic slave trade didn't pick up in North America until a couple centuries later, students see that this internalized hatred for Black people isn't natural—it came partly as a result of the increase in African slaves being sent to North America, and was nurtured over the next couple of centuries by its normalization in American society. Originally, the European explorers shared well-intentioned views of Black Africans in their writings. They admired the eastern civilizations; they admired the people, but these explorers couldn't see how their romanticization of African cultures and criticism of the peoples' appearances resulted in harmful racial stereotyping.

Before starting this lesson, students will have read most, if not all, of *Othello*. I would read "Race: Context" out loud with them in class, and we'd create a Venn diagram on the board, labelling one side sixteenth-century racism. The other side would be modern American racism, and the intersecting middle section would be racism in *Othello*. Focusing on Othello's career, I think students would be able to point to the discrepancies between racism today versus during Shakespeare's time. Othello's skin color doesn't hold him back in terms of his rank as a soldier. Cassio, his lieutenant, professes his love and respect for Othello on multiple occasions. He never disrespects Othello on the basis of race; he never disrespects Othello at all, and neither do his other soldiers or the people of Cyprus.

However, I will point students to the racial-stereotyping that McDonald and Orlin discuss. When Brabantio discovers that Othello and his daughter Desdemona have married secretly, he says:

She is abused, stol'n from me, and
corrupted/ By spells and medicines
bought of mountebanks;/ For nature so

prepost'rously to err,/Being not deficient,
blind, or lame of sense,/Sans witchcraft
could not. (1.3. 60-65)

Here, Othello is accused of bewitching his wife not only because her father doesn't believe she could ever fall in love with a Moor, but also because stereotypes suggest that Black people take part in pagan rituals and traditions rather than subscribing to Christianity.

Readers also see examples of a more modern stereotype: the exotic lover. While explaining how his marriage came to be to the Duke, he discusses how he would tell tales of cannibalism and slavery to Brabantio and Desdemona. He tells the Duke, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (Shakespeare 1.3.166-167). While Desdemona certainly loves Othello, she fetishizes his culture and his experiences. Othello admits that she loves him because of "the dangers I had passed," suggesting that she is intrigued by a life she will never live to experience herself.

While it's certainly important to explore the different types of racism presented in this text, this exercise also teaches students about that same history—a perspective they might not see in their history classes. Understanding the evolution of racist beliefs will help promote anti-racism in the classroom, as students may realize that discriminatory views are rarely based in fact. The potential for students to challenge their own biases begins with their understanding and willingness to see the world from different perspectives, and we as educators must nurture that curiosity.

Social Justice Pedagogical Knowledge

While the topic of teaching Shakespeare in twenty-first century public schools is a highly contended debate, I argue that it should maintain its place on the shelves. I

believe that students should be challenged with texts that they may never encounter outside of the secondary English classroom. However, it is equally important to ensure space for works by writers of color featuring diverse characters in secondary English curricula. The only text that I read in high school with a Black protagonist was the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, which I felt, from the perspective of a student who hadn't been exposed to Black American literature until this point, was a heady choice. This selection posed complex questions and ideas about race that we were deeply unprepared to discuss. I think if teachers take care in selecting texts from authors of color, *Beloved* would be a fantastic choice for a 12th grade AP English class, but avoiding discussions of race for years prior sets low expectations and little positive feedback. A culturally responsive, anti-racist educator must be sure to have an equal ratio between white authors and authors of color on their syllabi and be willing to talk about race.

Pairing *Othello* and the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe would create a lesson informed by social justice pedagogical knowledge. The Black protagonists in both texts are leaders in their communities, but only one of these tragic heroes was created by a Black author. While Othello lives in Venice, a community populated primarily by white Europeans, Okonkwo resides in an Ibo Village in Nigeria to which white missionaries have come to reside and "help" the Ibo people. For my lesson, I'll have students discuss Othello and Okonkwo's suicides in relation to the pressures placed on them, and by those they've placed on themselves. I will also ask students to consider the role of white presence in these characters' stories. After reading both of these texts, I will have students take notes on these topics and suggest talking points that they will hand in

after our Socratic Seminar, though they will be allowed to use their assignment during the discussion. At the beginning of the seminar, I will pose the questions: what do you think of the ways in which Othello and Okonkwo's suicides were presented? What is the significance of Othello's lengthy and eloquent soliloquy before he stabs himself compared to the brief line given to describe Okonkwo's suicide, "Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead" (Achebe 207)? Both of these suicides are ripe for discussion, and I think it's necessary for students to move from a text about a Black man written by a white playwright to a novel about a Black man written by a Black author. This way, students will be able to point out several cultural differences in the way the texts are written, as well as how the protagonists are presented.

Jason M. Demeter's essay "African-American Shakespeares: Loving Blackness as Political Resistance" warns against the work I'm doing in this paper. In his essay, he details his course titled "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," which "endeavored to create a syllabus that put Shakespeare and African-American literature on an equal footing, questioning whether a Shakespeare class that embraced blackness could prove dangerous to white supremacist culture" (72). Demeter goes on to discuss how he feels that part of his failure was teaching Shakespeare and Black authors together, explaining that:

Rather than placing Shakespeare and African-American literature on an equal footing, the initially surprising juxtaposition of Shakespeare and blackness worked to dichotomize each as a separate and incommensurable sphere in the minds of many students, inadvertently reifying residual notions of Shakespeare as white property. (74)

However, I think the problem here lies in the way Demeter chose to structure his course. He pairs texts like "reflections by James Baldwin and August Wilson; ... plays by Carlyle Brown, Toni Morrison, and Djanet Sears; and ...filmic adaptations of Shakespeare created by African-American artists and performed primarily by actors of color" (73). Demeter centers his course with Shakespeare at the focal point—not the Black writers. He even refers to "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance" as a Shakespeare class.

While I certainly agree that there's value in teaching Shakespeare and Black authors in tandem, the Black authors should never be represented *only* through their thoughts on Shakespeare. In fact, I'm not sure it's fair to attempt to place Shakespeare and Black authors on equal footing. Shakespeare's work has been included in the literary canon for centuries, so it's only natural that students will compare them. However, I do believe a discussion of the canon in a class like this is warranted, especially if I'm discussing Black literature with my students that isn't as well-recognized. Demeter writes, "Rather than showcasing a host of prescient ideological critiques of Shakespeare's racial signification, the course instead replicated the tired notion that minority validation comes from a mastery of Western culture" (74). While I'm discussing materials for a once-a-year Shakespeare unit, Demeter appears to be discussing his curriculum for a college course. I think it's probably easier for me to avoid this issue of "minority validation" in my future classroom because Shakespeare will likely be taught only once and I'll have more time to teach the work of writers of color that is separate from Shakespeare because I'll have a whole year with my students instead of one semester. However, I do think it's imperative to discuss Black writers'

responses to Shakespeare, as learning about racism is a necessary step in eradicating it.

Social Justice Content Knowledge

While it's incredibly important for students to understand the dominant reading of an assigned text, teachers should view it as a spring-board off which students can bounce their own ideas. While high school and middle school students shouldn't be sitting around reading literary criticism muddled with disciplinary jargon that they'll likely never need to understand, it is valuable for students to know that their teacher's opinion is not the extent of scholarship completed on the text. The teacher's opinion is exactly that: an opinion, and it's healthy for students to study scholarly reports that oppose what their teacher is telling them, as this should generate fruitful conversations in the classroom. I think students should be required to do some research on how a Shakespeare scholar of their choice reads the text (*Othello* in this case). Exposing students to literary criticism as adolescents will show them that the dominant reading isn't necessarily the only way.

Social justice content knowledge encompasses the dominant reading of a text but also advocates the use of critical content in students' reading of the text, which is why I will supplement my *Othello* lesson with the essay "Othello's Alienation" by Edward Barry. Because this essay isn't designed for an audience of high school students, I will select pages and ideas that I want my students to consider. Realistically, I will only be using the first two pages of this essay because Barry outlines several critiques of *Othello* before discussing his

own. I will break students into groups and assign them one of the scholars mentioned in the first two pages, such as Albert Gerard, G.K. Hunter, Eldred Jones, and Laurence Lerner. Then, I will have each of the four groups of students present their scholar's reading of the text. After this presentation, the groups will decide whether they want to agree with, dispute, or modify the claims made by their Shakespeare scholar. I will ask them to use evidence from the dominant text to support their arguments, and they will present them to the class. All of these critics focus on themes of identity and/or stereotyping in *Othello*, so I believe that exploring these claims will help my students develop their own understanding of the text, regardless of whether that opinion looks like mine. Since these critics focus on the same themes, reading these short summaries will ask students what *they* think of the racist content in the play and how it should be approached.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, a change in the way secondary school English teachers approach Shakespeare, as well as their English curricula in general, is absolutely necessary. Students and educators alike have been pointing out flaws in our white-washed curricula for years, yet only now are these curricula becoming more culturally responsive to our diverse student populations. In response to this civil rights movement, I propose that the SJPACK framework be used when creating future Shakespeare units and grades 7-12 English curricula in order to promote and explore anti-racism in the classroom

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