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**Who are you, and how is that a part of you engaging with this play?**

I love Shakespeare, and I'm passionate about teaching his works to my high school English students. For me, the Folger Method is gospel.

<https://www.folger.edu/the-folger-method>

(If I'm honest with myself, I probably get a little too excited when I find that there is a new email update from Peggy O'Brien in my work inbox.) I love the Folger Method because it is transformative and inclusive. Its principles put into words what I have always believed about Shakespeare: his works can be an "engine for educational equity." As a teacher of literature, I live by and educate with the principles outlined in the method.

My students love Shakespeare, too. They have enough interest to take Shakespeare class - it just started running two years ago. We even have a student-run Shakespeare Club that runs an annual monologue contest, as well as an annual production of one of his works. I don't want to take credit, but I'd like to think it's a result of teaching the Folger Method.

Also:

I'm white. I teach at a Predominantly White Institution. Most of my students are white, including the students in my class and club.

You are probably not surprised by that. Maybe it is the inevitable outcome of racism acting on the institution of public education in America. Maybe it's the subject of Shakespeare specifically. Or maybe it's me.

In truth, it's all of these things.

I believe that if I really want my teaching to shape educational equity, I need to name and look at whiteness - my whiteness - critically. And I need to do that explicitly, in the context of the work I love the most.

This realization is a direct result of studying *American Moor* with my students.

### **How did you come to study *American Moor* with your students?**

My study of Cobb's work began with my Shakespeare course during the 2019-2020 academic year. This course is usually full of seniors and some juniors, but a few sophomore were also in the course in 19-20. My class reads different texts every time the class runs, depending on what nearby theatres and festivals are producing. This semester, our first text was *Othello*. As I began to teach the text for the first time, I was mostly happy with the architecture of my instruction. With a few simple cuts on my part, we read about a scene per class hour or two, together. Students were on their feet, reading with partners, engaging in the work. They understood the plot, setting, characters, and even started to understand the subtleties in Shakespeare's language. They asked questions and made their own meaning and conclusions. Students naturally noticed the degrading terms that other characters used to disparage and demean Othello, and we discussed the racial and religious discrimination at play. In addition, I brought in videos and readings from other texts to help students understand the history of the play's production - they even brought in their own research. Students looked forward to watching the recording of the Globe Theatre's production in class. They were enjoying themselves and really digging into the text. In many ways, it was an English teacher's dream.

But something just didn't seem right. As I worked with my students, I was certain that I was not doing the work justice. Ostensibly, this is a play that should hold a mirror up to the racist, xenophobic tendencies in our own contemporary world, in our nation, in ourselves. But I wasn't effectively helping my students look in this mirror. The resources I'd brought into the classroom weren't helping, either, or at least to the extent that I wanted them to. I wanted my students to see themselves in the text and understand where they fit into it, but I was not succeeding in this. By the time we got to Act IV, I knew that I had to make a radical change. I emailed Keith Hamilton Cobb, and after some discussion, he offered me and my students the opportunity to watch *American Moor*.

### **What did you do to prepare yourself to teach the play? What would you recommend for other teachers preparing to teach the play?**

Our viewing of this play was one of the most potent learning experiences I have facilitated in my nine years of teaching, for myself and for my students. Of course, 99% of that was the play itself. My teaching and leading of discussion was imperfect.

In retrospect, I see that I recognized this going into the experience, and I think it was important for me to anticipate it. I recognized the fact that I might make mistakes - in fact, I knew that I probably would.

Beyond recognizing this in myself, I knew that I had to be vulnerable enough to clearly articulate my own questions, anxieties, and gaps of knowledge to my students. I believe that is the most crucial component in teaching this play to students - at least if that teacher is a white teacher teaching to a predominantly white population of students. The teacher has to want to listen, to learn, to grow - to make mistakes and to have honest and frank conversation.

I often ask my students this question when studying texts: Where are *you* in the text? Before asking that question of students though, I must ask that question of myself. Prior to teaching this work in particular, I think it's necessary for a teacher to be able to answer this question honestly for themselves.

One book that helped me with my ability to see myself in Cobb's text was [Layla F. Saad's \*Me and White Supremacy\*](#). Cobb's work requires the viewer to confront themselves. Saad's work supports this, as it provides white readers with specific, accessible questions that allow for deep introspection and a nuanced confrontation with their own racial identity. These questions were incredibly helpful for me in analyzing my own whiteness, and I believe that they ultimately led me to interact with Cobb's text in a meaningful way. It is worth noting that the book is a workbook that requires time and commitment from readers - it is not something to be digested quickly, as a reader must interact with it. I've completed the workbook twice over the course of the last two years, and the book has helped me to examine my own identity in ways that have been both difficult and transformative. If it is possible for you to work through the book with other people, preferably teachers, I would recommend that, as well.

From a more purely pedagogical perspective, I also recommend [Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides' \*Letting Go of Literary Whiteness: Antiracist Literature Instruction for White Students\*](#) when preparing to teach *American Moor*. The book offers helpful and specific frameworks for setting up lessons and units that will be helpful even beyond teaching this play. I would recommend the book to any teacher of white students who is looking for resources that make CRT approachable for *any* text that they might be teaching - the resources help to make discussions with students richer and more productive. The book also helps teachers to think through possible areas of friction that may arise in the classroom when teaching and discussing race - and how to work through that friction to foster authentic learning.

**How did you prepare students for watching the play? Is there anything you'd do differently or anything that you'd recommend?**

Line A. Marshall (teacher of English, Columbia High School, Maplewood, NJ) has prepared a student guide to *American Moor* that is absolutely fantastic. Any teacher wanting to teach the

play should review this guide before moving forward – it is a masterful and engaging piece of scaffolding. I'll refer to it throughout this section.

The first thing that I think is important for understanding *American Moor* is some foundation in Shakespeare's works. I really think that a mere familiarity with any Shakespeare text would be adequate. Even if students read *Romeo and Juliet* as freshmen and haven't had any direct instruction since, it could work, as long as an instructor does some review before the viewing of Cobb's play.

As far as what students should know about *Othello* before the text: As I mentioned, my class read *Othello* before viewing *American Moor*. Since much of *American Moor* revolves around *Othello* itself, it will certainly be helpful if your students know the text well - it was helpful for mine. If there's not time to cover *Othello*, taking a class hour or two to review the plot, themes, and history of production would be helpful. In addition, reading and analyzing key passages from the text is important. Line Marshall's guide offers a look at a few things that I think are crucial. She asks students to consider the casting of Othello on the first page of the packet, and then has students consider some critical thoughts about the play on page 3. She then has students consider Othello's monologues and inner thoughts throughout the play. If you don't have time to touch on any other text from the play, this is what to look at. It will give students a close reading of Othello's words that will work as beneficial prior knowledge, as the "Actor" interacts intimately with these words throughout *American Moor*.

It will also help students to have some prior knowledge of *American Moor* itself before they start. Line's guide has a great overview that would work brilliantly.

Next, I'd recommend a frank discussion of how you came to Cobb's *American Moor* as an instructor. For most teachers reading this, this will probably be a logical progression from discussing Shakespeare's text. I was honest with my students: I told them that I felt my instruction of *Othello* was inadequate, and I told them how I found *American Moor*. I showed them the website attached to the production (<https://americanmoor.com/>), and told them about the correspondence I had with Keith Hamilton Cobb. I also told them about my experience playing Desdemona in a production of *Othello*. Even if you, as an instructor, have not acted in *Othello*, you certainly have a unique relationship with the play that you can draw from in discussing with students. I would imagine that it's part of what led you to want to study *American Moor* with your students in the first place. Sharing this with students gives them more prior knowledge on both plays, and it also opens up an opportunity to model being open and vulnerable, even before directly encountering Cobb's text.

Lastly, I think that students in white educational contexts should have some knowledge of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which was “developed out of the civil rights movement and critical legal studies as a way to name and explain how racism works systemically” (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides). Many students do not yet have the conceptual framework to name some of what they will see in *American Moor*. Being intentional about giving students the language and a productive lens through which to watch Cobb’s work will lead to richer discussions. *Letting Go of Literary Whiteness* walks teachers through the process of leading students in CRT. Although it’s difficult to pick only a few places in that text to point to, I would recommend introducing a racialized reader response (described throughout chapter 3). I’ve included a particularly helpful chart below:

Table 3.2 Racialized Reader Response

Context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the racial context in which you are reading this text - either in terms of social climate or the classroom context? What social issues or current events are pertinent? What are the racial dynamics of your classroom environment?</li> <li>• What are your purposes for reading this text? How do those purposes inform your experience with this text? How is a critical race analysis relevant to your purpose?</li> </ul>

Text	Reader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are major plot points? In what ways does the plot reinforce or interrupt dominant or stereotypical ways of thinking about race or racism?</li> <li>• What are major themes? In what ways do the themes reinforce or interrupt dominant ways of thinking about race or racism?</li> <li>• How are characters developed? Are characters of color round and dynamic or flat and static? What roles do characters of color play in the plot? Are characters represented in stereotypical ways?</li> <li>• How does the form or style of the book reflect the racial perspective of the text (or not)?</li> <li>• What is the racial identity of the author? How does the author’s racial or cultural background contribute to or take away from the text’s authenticity?</li> <li>• What is the racial identity of the intended audience of this text? How do you know?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your racial identity? How does your racial identity shape your reading of this text?</li> <li>• Does the text position you as a racial insider or an outsider? How do you know? How does this positioning influence your reading experience?</li> <li>• What are aspects of the text to which you can relate? How might <i>not</i> relating to a character in a novel in terms of race or power be important for you as a reader - or important for learning about your racial identity?</li> <li>• Are there aspects of the text that you find unfamiliar, uncertain, or challenging? What might those aspects reveal to you about your own racial assumptions and perspectives?</li> <li>• Are there aspects of the text that cause feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, or resistance? What might these aspects of the text reveal to you about your own experiences or assumptions?</li> </ul>

Table: Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides

I’ll mention here that I did not use this chart before watching *American Moor* with my students, and this was to our detriment. I’d had most of them the year before, and we’d spent a significant portion of the year covering authors of color and issues of race in AP Lang – I

assumed they would be able to speak about Cobb's text fluently. I also thought I just didn't have enough time in my curriculum. Were I to do this work again, I would definitely be more explicit in my CRT instruction, regardless of time constraints. Yes, my students had read James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Ta-Nehisi Coates the previous year. Sure, their knowledge of these authors made a discussion of Cobb's work *better*. But their discussion of Cobb's work in this context laid bare for me the fact that exposing my mostly white students to the works of Black authors is not enough. I have come to realize, through my own shortcomings in instruction, that direct and mindful instruction in CRT is crucial. Later in the 19-20 school year, I used a modified version of the chart with my new class of AP students. This activity led those students to a depth of discussion and thought that the students in my Shakespeare class just did not reach.

**How did your students watch the play? What would you recommend to help students view and reflect on the play?**

We watched the play over two days in class (I have 50-minute class periods). I gave students a fairly open-ended prompt:

*Our class has been given the extraordinary opportunity to see Keith Hamilton Cobb's American Moor. For this assignment, you will watch the play and respond to it. How does it make you feel? What does it make you think about the play (Othello)? Theatre? Art in general? Living in America?*

Students also had to refer to specific evidence from Cobb's text, along with specific evidence from *Othello*. As we watched, I told students to take notes that they could use on their responses.

Looking back on this prompt, I'm honestly surprised that my students were able to craft the cogent responses that they did – I wish I had provided them with more direction. If I were to teach the play again in the same context, I'd change the following:

First, I would give more time to study and view the play. My recommendation for any teacher with the text is to spend as much time on it as possible. The play is so incredibly rich, and the week I spent with it is not nearly enough. Line Marshall's viewing guide makes clear that a class could spend weeks taking the text apart. Were I to teach it again, I would love to have the text for students to read at home before they come to watch it in class

[\(https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/american-moor-9781350165304/\)](https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/american-moor-9781350165304/).

I'd probably allow class time for students to individually answer the questions in Marshall's guide, and I'd also find time between viewings to discuss their answers. This would encourage specific discussion, closely connected to Cobb's text.

I would also give students the "Racialized Reader Response" chart I've included above before beginning the play. I would spend a day of instruction establishing the context of our class watching *American Moor* and modeling how to use the chart. After each viewing session of the play itself, I would give them time to respond using the chart. My white students had a difficult time articulating how their racial identities intersected with the text. Now that I have used this chart elsewhere in my teaching, I see that I missed an opportunity to help students give words to their experiences and their own place in the text.

I think that with the aforementioned scaffolding, I could potentially give the same prompt I had before and lead students to more success. One change to my prompt that I found helpful was giving students the option of writing the response as a letter to Cobb. This helped give students a focus and audience. Depending on the class, I might also help students to organize the response with more specific questions or even a template. My (mostly) senior class was a group of fairly independent and savvy writers, but I could see this helping in many other scenarios.

I'll also mention that I particularly like Line Marshall's second Writing and Performance-Based Assessment: "Work with a partner to develop and perform a follow up dialogue between the Actor and Director, initiated by the Director." After the aforementioned scaffolding, I think this particular prompt could be very powerful for students, as it encourages collaboration, deep engagement with the text, and personal discovery. Pairing students up strategically based on the assessed work they've already done in class could be especially helpful in bringing together divergent ideas and building community in the classroom - something that's really important in discussing this text successfully.

Regardless of the type or format of response, I would recommend having students write on their own before coming to any sort of larger discussion - whether a teacher has one of them or ten discussions over the course of teaching the play. The chance to write gives students much-needed time for independent thought and reflection.

**How did your discussion go? What would you do differently if you were to have the discussion again?**

My class had one large discussion about the text that lasted approximately three class hours. Every hour, we sat in a circle, and I began class by checking in and having each student share either three words to describe their response to the text (on the first day) or what they'd been thinking about since the last day of discussion (on subsequent days). This encouraged every student to speak at least once during the class hour, and these words also provided an organic starting place for the discussion. It allowed students an opportunity to ask each other about their opinion, and it also allowed me to use student response to guide the discussion when necessary.

The greatest strength of the discussion was students' engagement with the text and willingness to openly share. After finishing the play, several students left the classroom talking about how they couldn't wait to discuss it. When they walked into the classroom on discussion days, they were eager to move their chairs into our discussion circle and talk more. Even by day three of the discussion, they did not feel that our dialogue was over in any way. Despite the fact that I didn't ask them specific CRT questions like the ones in the "Racialized Reader Response" chart I mentioned above, a majority of students felt compelled to talk about their place in the text. Some even discussed how they saw themselves in some of the Director's words and actions. Though they might not have had the language to explain everything they saw (and this is a fault of mine), the majority of the class was authentic and sincere in their response.

The greatest weakness of the discussion as a whole is that some students monopolized conversation time in a way that was not productive. I actually think this is a very big problem. After all, Cobb's text asks us to pay attention to who gets to speak and who gets to tell their story. If a decent chunk of class time devoted to Cobb's work ends up being diverted to white students' thoughts that seem tangentially related at best, am I not just exacerbating this issue?

The way I addressed this was reactive. After leaving class and taking time to sit and think on it, I talked to students about it the following class hour. Though I think this was a better option than never addressing it - which is something that I've done in the past when student comments have left me feeling frustrated or uneasy- I do think that being proactive about this would have been a more effective approach.



One way to confront this would be to read students' written responses before discussing. This would give me an opportunity to ask specific questions of specific students and elevate ideas that might lead to more productive discussions. At the very least, it would help to anticipate possible problem areas in discussion. Another way would be to better use the "check-in" idea and expand it out to include more turn-taking in the discussion as a whole. After reading students' responses, it would be helpful to structure some simple, open-ended questions that all students could answer in a few words. This would greatly reduce the possibility of some students taking the floor for too long. It would also help students focus on the most important ideas and, depending on the questions and a teacher's objective, could also help students remain close to the text in their responses. Turn-taking is something that Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides endorse heartily in their text, for the reasons I have outlined, as well as the fact that turn-taking can make it much easier for students of color in predominantly white classrooms to participate comfortably.

Ultimately, I think the idea of devoting more time to *American Moor* overall in a curricular framework can help to create a more productive dialogue. The three days of discussion that my class had was simply not enough. It was challenging, engaging, and meaningful, but with more time, we could have done more, and I also have designed the discussion more effectively. Though we are all pressed for time as teachers, we do get to make choices in terms of where we place our attention. With the opportunity to teach this again, I would spend less time on Shakespeare's text and more on Cobb's. Frankly, I believe that time will build a better understanding of Shakespeare. As the Actor says in the play, "there's stuff there to make a play worthy of four hundred years, but that ain't the story they've been tellin'...and you can't tell it any better in three weeks, you can only tell it again." My instruction of the play was merely telling *Othello* again to my students. It's Cobb's play that tells it better. I think that we, as teachers are guilty of the equivalent of cramming a play into three weeks, too. Personally, I see the pressing need to change this. As I edit this work a full year after my experience teaching this play, from the middle of a pandemic, my ideas of "not having enough time" to devote to worthwhile endeavors in class seem absurd. Under duress, I believe teachers are starting to make better decisions about committing time to what is *worthwhile* and *necessary*. I think we would do well to continue this into the future.

**What are your biggest take-aways from your work with *American Moor* in your classroom?**

- 1. My Shakespeare class is the perfect place to talk about racism as it exists *today*.**

One of the reasons I've always given for teaching Shakespeare in the classroom is his work can be accessed and owned by anyone. If I am honest with myself, however, I only professed that as an ideal. I did not do any specific work to ensure that my Black and brown students did, in fact, own Shakespeare in the way I envisioned.

Part of that was the fact that, besides the inadequate work I did with *Othello*, I never explicitly addressed the contemporary intersection of Shakespeare and race. Some part of me knew that I *should* address it in my instruction in a meaningful way. I just didn't know how. *American Moor* opened that door for me. It has shown me that Shakespeare class is the exact right place to discuss issues of race. Frankly, so is every other class.

I realize now that if I cannot personally fathom how to adequately connect contemporary racism with Shakespeare or with any given topic that I might encounter in the classroom, it's because my own privilege has resulted in that gap in knowledge. If I want to be antiracist, and if I want my classroom to be antiracist, I have to do the work to fill in that gap.

## **2. It's about me.**

It is easy to criticize the character of the Director in *American Moor*. Of course, to criticize the Director, as a white teacher, is also to deflect. I realized very early on in viewing the play that I had played the part of the Director many times in my life. Students walk in and out of my classroom on my terms, following my rules, just as actors do in the Director's theatre. Just as the Director assumes that he understands the Actor's experiences, I have assumed what my students of color are thinking. Just as he presents his version of Othello as canon, so have I presented my own knowledge as infallible. Just as he cuts the Actor off, claiming that this is not the time or place for a discussion, so have I shut down the questions, ideas, and concerns of students of color, and most shamefully, not *believed* them when they most desperately needed me to.

I say this not to wallow in guilt. As Audre Lorde said, guilt "is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness." However, "if [guilt] leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge." The truth is that I am beginning to *know* and *change*. I do have power in my relationships with students in the classroom. To wield that power in an equitable way means to name and recognize

discriminatory patterns of behavior in myself; only then can I unlearn them and transform.

### 3. **Teacher's choices are more than choices – they're policy.**

In [\*How to be an Antiracist\*, Ibram X. Kendi](#) argues that ideas, actions, and policies are either racist or antiracist – and these lead to inequitable and equitable outcomes, respectively. As I was reading, I kept asking myself: how do I change policy? “Policy” seemed like such a large, powerful concept that’s beyond me and my classroom.

The truth is that my everyday choices as a teacher become policy for my students. I might not have the power to dictate “educational policy” in the way I typically think of it: after all, I am not a legislator or even a school administrator. I don’t get to decide, for example, whether or not students take standardized tests. But I do determine, to a great extent, what they read and whose voices they hear - even if I don’t have full control over the curriculum. I also determine the ways in which we will discuss those works and those voices. This has a significant bearing on their educational outcomes.

My textual policies have results that are either equitable or inequitable regarding race. Was my teaching of Shakespeare, pre-*American Moor*, creating an outcome in which Black students and white students saw themselves equally easily in that “world” of theatre and literature? Would my Black and white students be equally as likely to pursue a dialogue with Shakespeare? To feel like they could push back, and forward, on Shakespeare? Was my teaching of Shakespeare, pre-*American Moor*, creating an outcome where all of my students saw and recognized the presence and value of actors, writers, and other theatre professionals of color? I don’t have the numbers or data to back this up, but I really think the answer to those questions are all “no.” Although my updated textual policies have not created perfect equity, I think that they have set in motion a move toward closing that gap. *American Moor* has helped me take concrete steps to put racial equity on the front of my mind when teaching Shakespeare, and, really, when teaching everything else, too. There is power in what we teach and how we teach it, and I think it’s important for us to let that fact guide our actions and our practices.