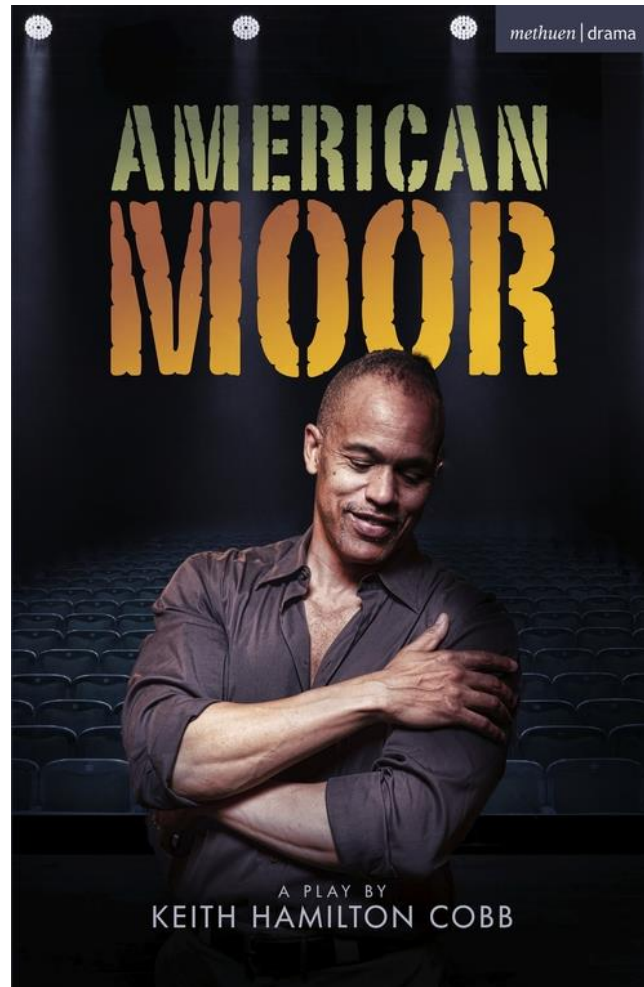


Embodying Othello:

A Guide to Teaching

American Moor

A Play by Keith Hamilton Cobb



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RATIONALE

The purpose of this guide is to introduce students to the characters, situation, and themes of *American Moor*, and to foster deep engagement with the play both as a literary text and as a performance piece. While some prior knowledge of Shakespeare's *Othello* is helpful, the guide is designed to work with or without it. Teachers are free to use their discretion, however the activities, questions, and assessments in the guide are most suitable for 11th and 12th grade students.

TIME ALLOCATION

Teachers should be prepared to spend at least four lessons teaching the play, not counting assessments. Certain groups of students may require more time, especially with the pre-reading phase, which should not be rushed.

MATERIALS NEEDED

1. A class set of *American Moor* texts.
2. Computer and Internet access, along with audio-visual equipment for viewing relevant clips on AmericanMoor.com.

ABOUT THE PLAY

American Moor is an 85 minute solo play written and performed by Keith Hamilton Cobb, examining the experience and perspective of black men in America through the metaphor of William Shakespeare's character, Othello.

American Moor is not an "angry black man play." Rather, the widely diverse audiences that have experienced it echo the piece's awareness that we see only what we want to see of one another, and that we all long to be wholly noticed and wholly embraced. It is a play about race in America, but it is also a play about who gets to make art, who gets to play Shakespeare, about the qualitative decline of the American theatre, about actors and acting, and about the nature of unadulterated love. It is an often funny, often heartbreaking examination of the pall of privileged perspective that is ultimately so injurious to us all.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Keith Hamilton Cobb is a graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in acting, and most widely known for the roles he has created for television, among those: Noah Keefer for ABC's *All My Children*; the galactic mercenary, Tyr Anasazi, for Gene Roddenberry's *Andromeda*; Damon Porter for CBS's *The Young and the Restless*; and Quincy Abrams for the Logo network series, *Noah's Arc*. He has also appeared at The Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Denver Theatre Center, The Huntington Theatre Company, The Orlando Shakespeare Festival, The Geva Theatre Center, The Pioneer Theatre, The Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, and on many other regional stages, performing both

classical and contemporary roles. His life-long love of Shakespeare has seen him cast as Laertes, Tybalt, Tullus Aufidius, Theseus, Oberon, Julius Caesar, and other staples of the bard’s canon. The span of his career includes twelve years in Los Angeles where he guest-starred on multiple television half-hours and dramas, including *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Boston Common*, *Suddenly Susan*, *One on One*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *CSI Miami*. For the past several years, he has taken his play, *American Moor*, to audiences throughout the country as well as to Shakespeare’s Globe in London, where it has been received with universal acclaim. *American Moor* debuted off-Broadway in the fall of 2019.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1) How does *American Moor* reinterpret and redefine Shakespeare’s *Othello*?
- 2) What is (and was) a Moor? What does it mean to be an “American Moor”?
- 2) How do White privilege and the dominance of the White perspective contribute to mediocrity in the arts, and ultimately to ongoing societal barriers and racial misunderstanding?
- 3) Who has rights to Shakespeare, and are these rights predicated on race or identity?

ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

- 1) Students will be able to draw meaningful parallels between *American Moor* and *Othello*, as well as to other supplementary sources.
- 2) Students will become familiar with the terms: **Moor, double consciousness, White privilege, and microaggression.**
- 3) Students will be able to view and analyze excerpted video performances of the play and engage in close readings of the text to contribute to various modes of analysis and discussion.
- 4) Students will be able to produce both written and oral/theatrical performance based assessments to demonstrate their learning.

APPLICABLE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

READING LITERATURE:

Key Ideas and Details

11-12.RL.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

11-12.RL.2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

11-12.RL.3: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Craft and Structure

11-12.RL.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

11-12.RL.5: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

11-12.RL.6: Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

11-12.RL.7: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or

poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

11-12.RL.9: Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

11-12.RL.10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

WRITING:

11-12.W.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

- a. Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
- b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
- c. Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).
- d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
- e. Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

11-12.SL.2: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

- a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- b. Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.
- c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

BEFORE STUDENTS READ

[Introduce students who have not studied Shakespeare's *Othello* to the play by using the following synopsis from The Folger Library, or to go a bit more in-depth, [this series of interactive summaries from the Royal Shakespeare Company.](#)]

In Venice, at the start of *Othello*, the soldier Iago announces his hatred for his commander, Othello, a Moor. Othello has promoted Cassio, not Iago, to be his lieutenant.

Iago crudely informs Brabantio that Othello has eloped with Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona. Before the Venetian Senate, Brabantio accuses Othello, who besides being a Moor is also decades older than Desdemona, of bewitching her. The Senators wish to send Othello to Cyprus, which is under threat from Turkey. They bring Desdemona before them. She tells of her love for Othello, and the marriage stands. The Senate agrees to let her join Othello in Cyprus.

In Cyprus, Iago continues to plot against Othello and Cassio. He lures Cassio into a drunken fight, for which Cassio loses his new rank; Cassio, at Iago's urging, then begs Desdemona to intervene. Iago uses this and other ploys—misinterpreted conversations, insinuations, and a lost handkerchief—to convince Othello that Desdemona and Cassio are lovers. Othello goes mad with jealousy and later smothers Desdemona on their marriage bed, only to learn of Iago's treachery. He then kills himself.

-- Adapted from <https://www.folger.edu/othello>

Shakespeare's Moor vs. American Moor

[Explain to students:]

Today, the role of Othello is customarily cast with actors of Black African descent, which gives weight to the conflict and themes of *American Moor*, but what was a Moor in Shakespeare's time? Writer and director, Isaac Butler, explains this succinctly in his article, "[Why is Othello Black](#)":

When Shakespeare used the word "black" he was not exactly describing a race the way we would. He meant instead someone with darker skin than an Englishman at a time when Englishmen were very, very pale. Although Othello is a Moor, and although we often assume he is from Africa, he never names his birthplace in the play. In Shakespeare's time, Moors could be from Africa, but they could also be from the Middle East, or even Spain

The conclusion one can draw then is that Shakespeare appears to have been at least as interested in exploiting Othello's status as the exotic foreigner, or other, as he was in highlighting his darker skin.

[Ask students:]

With this in mind, what does the title *American Moor* suggest?

OR

How is the title, *American Moor*, oxymoronic?

[Responses should reflect that one cannot be an "American" and an "exotic foreigner" at the same time, which means that the title speaks to the alienation experienced by the protagonist, both as an actor and as an African-American man.]

NOTES:

Pre-reading Activity 1: Embodying Othello



The painting above depicts 19th Century African-American actor, Ira Aldridge, in character as Othello in London, at age 19.

1. As you examine it, consider what a director's primary goal should be in casting a play.
2. Based on what you know (or just learned) about Othello as a character, comment on whether you think Aldridge, as pictured above, was an appropriate choice to play this part. If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Aldridge became a celebrated actor in England, but is best remembered today for his depictions of Othello and Aaron (from *Titus Andronicus*), Shakespeare's prominent Moors, or dark-skinned North Africans. What conclusion(s) can you draw from this?

[Tell students:]

As you read the play, make particular note of the protagonist's attitude towards and relationship with playing Othello.

Pre-reading Activity 2: The Double-Consciousness

1. Have students watch selected clips from [“The First Time I Realized I Was Black,”](#) as an introduction to W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of double consciousness. Be mindful that the content can be emotionally triggering for some students, so begin by soliciting immediate responses via voluntary [two-word check-ins](#).

2. Provide students with the following terms and their definitions, and ask them to expand on their initial reactions in writing with these terms in mind.

A. **double-consciousness** - a term coined by W.E.B DuBois that names the internal conflict felt by African-Americans who are forced to see and define themselves in two ways: through their own points of view, and through that of a judgmental White society at large.

B. **microaggression**-a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority

C. **White privilege**- advantages possessed by a White person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice.

Allow students time to share written responses with one or two self-selected partners before opening up a broader class discussion. The potentially emotional and/or volatile nature of this class discussion suggests that teachers may want to conduct this part of the lesson as a restorative circle. This brief [introduction to restorative circles](#) might be helpful to you, if they are not already part of your classroom or school culture. A [fishbowl](#) circle, with carefully established community norms would lend itself particularly well to this type of discussion.

REFLECTION: HOW DID THINGS GO?

INTRODUCING THE CHARACTERS

The Actor

American Moor gives the audience unbridled access to its African-American protagonist's deepest thoughts and emotions, as he faces the microaggressions of a director steeped in White privilege, which consequently highlights his broader struggles as a Black man in America. The seasoned actor's tense interaction with his young, white director (and potential boss) exemplifies W.E.B. DuBois's concept of the double-consciousness, a mentality which has historically dictated and defined relationships between African-Americans and the contemptuous, often hostile White world in which they live:

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self."

—from "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois

For the most part however, The Actor is not engaging with The Director, but with us, the audience. He is ours alone, revealing his hopes, his fears, and most notably, his frustrations in contending with a theatrical world that would limit or stifle his talent, and a broader one that would discount or thwart his humanity. Thus, *American Moor* is almost all soliloquy, one lone character channeling the complex inner voices of Black men and boys (Othello included), along with anyone else who has ever felt unheard.

The Director

Seated in the audience throughout *American Moor* is a young, white director whose disembodied voice and affable demeanor belie the weight of his power.

AS STUDENTS READ

Use any or all of the following to prompt students to read closely and to engage with the language of the text. While there are suggested formative and summative assessment ideas that follow, feel free to adapt any question or prompt for your individual assessment needs.

A few questions below also reference certain performance or other clips from the [videos](#) page that might be useful for support or illustration:

- Performance videos are referenced 1, 2, 3, or 4 in order of appearance on the site.

- "HARVARD TALK" refers to Cobb's talk with Professor Stephen Greenblatt which, in some cases, may be more useful to you as the instructor.

Responding To the Play:

1. What is the significance of starting the play with the Actor alone and waiting? How do **solitude and time** work symbolically throughout the play?

Other themes or motifs to keep in mind:

-**power and perspective**

-**what's learned (intrinsically) vs. what's taught (indoctrinated) [VIDEO 2]**

-**The value of age and experience**

-**voice and speech (as they relate to power and agency)**

2. Consider what the description of the Actor's physique suggests. Specifically, what is meant by characterizing him as "imposing only if you see him that way"?

3. How does his clothing reflect part of his story? (i.e. juxtaposition of fitted "militaristic" dress and hi-top sneakers)

4. Cobb casts the audience, the central "amorphous entity" addressed by the Actor, as fellow travelers on the Actor's figurative journey. He emphasizes the need for the audience to trust the Actor, while noting cryptically that "most of them" in being part of the audience have implicitly agreed to do so. Consider who might not be included (or might not include themselves) in "most of them."

5. What do elements of the "empty" yet littered set evoke? Pay close attention also to the worn paperback copy of Othello, and the way the Actor uses it throughout the play.

6. Explain what the Actor means when he says he learned Shakespeare, but "the method, I was taught." [VIDEO 2]

7. Reflect on the contrast between Shakespeare's language and Actor's liberal use of profanity. [VIDEO 3]

8. How does Titania's "forgeries of jealousy" speech function as a framing device in the play (i.e. "Because we are afraid...we fight.")?

9. Why is the Actor attracted to Titania's speech?

10. Reflect on what he says about finding, in Shakespeare's language, a vehicle to express his Black male "adamance" in a way that is deemed less threatening. What insight does this offer into the experience of being a Black man in America? [VIDEOS 2 and 3; HARVARD TALK @ 20:30]
11. Consider how the Actor's remembered experience with his first acting teacher foreshadows his interaction with the Director. [VIDEO 4]
12. Explain the symbolism here: "A disembodied voice interrupts from out of the house. He is actually there somewhere, about two thirds back and center perhaps. But to the actor he will remain, for all he can see of him, a voice throughout the play. It is omnipresent, answerable to, and impossible to ignore. It always has been." [HARVARD TALK @ 1:13:55-1:16:25]
13. What does the Director say when he begins to address the Actor? What does the Actor *hear*? [VIDEO 1]
14. The Actor asserts, in reference to one of his competitors for the role, that "no cute little 19-20somethin'-year-old without major daddy issues is gonna want that dude..." What can you infer from this statement about how he envisions Othello (at least physically)? What commentary is the play making here about the myriad "types" who've been invited to audition for the role?
15. What does the Actor most want from the Director? How can he tell from the start (and from prior professional experience) that he's unlikely to get it?
16. Why do you think so much of this play hinges on Othello's speech to the Venetian senate?
17. At the start of the audition, the Actor offers an Othello with a "self-determined sense of restraint"; the Director wants to see his "obeisance" and "obsession." What latent prejudices seem to underlie the Director's interpretation of this character here?
18. At what point in the Actor's internal monologue does the line begin to blur between him and the character he's auditioning to play?
19. Discuss how, in its allusions to Colin Powell, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice, *American Moor* establishes kinship between Othello and real African-American boys and men?
20. Reflect on the thematic and dramatic effects of: the "Allah" Freudian slip, speaking Italian, references to ancestral lineage, and the maternal ancestral voice the Actor hears.
21. Evaluate the Actor's assertion that any American Black man playing the role of Othello must also be in touch with his anger.
22. Discuss the Actor's ambivalence towards Othello. How is his relationship with this character different from his relationship with Shakespeare?

23. In remembering his first theatrical agent, Martin Hoffman, the Actor suggests that he didn't seem to understand the Actor's point of view or life experiences any more than the Director, however they had a far more positive relationship. Why do you think this is so?

24. What seems to precipitate the emotional meltdown that ensues? What seems to assuage it?

25. Why does the Actor ascribe to Desdemona a deeper understanding of Othello than the rest of Venetian society? Do you agree with this characterization of her? **[HARVARD TALK @ 41:00-48:00]**

26. The Actor laments to the Director that "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." What is suggested here about the difference between perpetuating the story (and stereotype) of Othello vs. enriching it? How does the play suggest that socially and artistically conscious theater-makers can tell it better? **[HARVARD TALK @ 1:11:00]**

27. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, W.E.B. DuBois introduces the concept of African-American double-consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

How is this concept reflected in the Actor's commentary about Othello's reference to "the tyrant custom"?

28. How do you feel about the final exchange between the Actor and Director? Does it suggest that the Director's attitudes, whether conscious or unconscious, have been affected in any way?

29. *American Moor* aims to examine the experience and perspective of black men in America through the metaphor of William Shakespeare's character, Othello. To what extent do you think the play achieves this objective? If yours is not an African-American male perspective, how did it impact your awareness of this perspective?

30. Respond to the point made in the opening stage directions that "it is not intended that this process leave [the audience] in comfort." React to *American Moor* on a personal level. What, if anything, did you find uncomfortable, relatable, or otherwise remarkable about the play?

Suggested Writing and Performance-Based Formative Assessments:

1. Work with a partner to develop and perform a follow up dialogue between the Actor and Director, initiated by the Director.

2. Imagine how the Director might react, in an internal monologue of his own, to the Actor in front of him. Create and perform it.

[While students will produce individual monologues, the process of developing them can be collaborative. Utilizing this option can provide excellent scaffolding for students who need it, while also functioning as “checks and balances” to ensure that finished products remain true to the text.]

3. Develop your own internal monologue based on personal life experiences by replacing the Director with an alternate authority figure or power broker in your life. How will you make your case to him/her? To your audience?

[It might help to work with students to establish clear ground rules for this option as a means of encouraging substantive and appropriate responses.]

Suggested Distance Learning Adaptation

**[Flipgrid](#) is an accessible way for students to actively engage with their teachers, each other, and even with invited guests virtually. For the above activities, consider asking online learners to post their dialogues, monologues, or share their otherwise reimagined versions of *American Moor* on this or a similar platform. Classmates can then be invited to post reactions or responses to one another’s work. Flipgrid makes it possible for students to do so both asynchronously and in real time, and allows teachers, other students, or the broader learning community to respond in kind. Read more [here](#).*

Suggested Summative Assessment:

The following statements are taken from “A Letter from a Region in My Mind” by James Baldwin. Published in 1962, it is one of two essays that make up Baldwin’s book, *The Fire Next Time*. Write an essay, with close textual reference to *American Moor*, discussing how they reflect one or more of the current issues addressed in the play.

A) *And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy...and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder. The white man’s unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable—private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro. The only way he can be released from the Negro’s tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and...visits surreptitiously after dark.*

B) *That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows...something about himself and human life that no school on earth...can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save*

his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. **[“I Am Not What You Think”](#)**: This poem by Antwon Rose who, at age 17, was killed in a police-involved shooting in Pittsburgh in 2018, was published posthumously, and is a poignant example of the ongoing relevance of Du Bois’s double-consciousness .
2. **[“What Antwon Rose’s Poetry Tells Us about Being Black in America”](#)** by A. T. McWilliams (in *The New Yorker*)-This article discusses the significance of Antwon Rose’s poem and contemplates the historically vital role of art-- poetry especially--in providing an avenue for black male self-expression.
3. **[“I Fit the Description”](#)** - This blog post by college professor, Steve Locke, recounts his experience with the police while on his lunch break in 2015.
4. **[“Baldwin-Buckley Race Debate Still Resonates 55 Years On”](#)** – Aired on February 16, 2020, this video from PBS News Hour revisits the historic debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley at Cambridge University in 1965.
5. **[The Foreigner’s Home: Toni Morrison at The Louvre](#)** – “Who is the foreigner? Am I the foreigner in my own home?” These questions are posed by Toni Morrison in this 2016 film, whose title purposely exploits its dual meaning (i.e. “the home of the foreigner” or “the foreigner is home”). In so doing, *The Foreigner’s Home*, documents Morrison’s 2006 guest-curated exhibit at The Louvre, which addressed the experience of cultural and social displacement. The film expands that conversation, combining exclusive and unreleased footage of the Nobel Laureate in dialogue with artists —first, in Paris in 2006 and then, in 2015, at her home in New York state—with extensive archival film footage, music, and still images to present a series of candid and incisive exchanges about race, identity, “foreignness,” and art’s redemptive power. **[EXCERPTS AVAILABLE ONLINE, HOWEVER COMPLETE FILM CAN BE RENTED OR PURCHASED VIA AMAZON VIDEO FOR A NOMINAL FEE.]**

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The following is a sampling of other prominent re-imaginings of Shakespeare by writers from the African Diaspora:

1. **[A Tempest by Aimé Césaire \(Martinique\)](#)** - This is a modern, post-colonial version of *The Tempest*, set on an unnamed Caribbean island.
2. **[Desdemona by Toni Morrison \(U.S.\) and Rokia Traore \(Mali\)](#)** - Told in speech and in song, *Desdemona* re-visits the characters of Shakespeare’s Othello in the after-life, with a focus on Othello’s doomed wife.
3. **[Harlem Duet by Djanet Sears \(Canada\)](#)** - This blues prelude to *Othello* is set in Harlem and recounts the story of Othello and his first wife, Billie.

FINAL REFLECTION ON YOUR OVERALL EXPERIENCE TEACHING *AMERICAN MOOR*: