

Introduction: Why an Anti-Racist Shakespeare?

Anti-Racist Shakespeare emerges from our individual and collective experiences as instructors of Shakespeare and Premodern Critical Race Studies (PCRS), and we see our Element intervening in these existing discussions by emphasizing the profound race-work that happens through race-attentive pedagogy. The classroom is where transformative discussions about premodern texts and their relation to contemporary racial hierarchies occur; therefore, we argue that pedagogy is central to how teachers, students, practitioners, and scholars can investigate the importance of race in Shakespeare's works. As instructors with critical investments in anti-racist and inclusive teaching methodologies, we aim to create spaces where students are exposed to theories of racial power and are equipped to develop strategies for resistance to hegemonic racial regimes. Our anti-racist pedagogy is rooted in helping students cultivate a critical vocabulary, a robust understanding of historical precedent, and a platform to share their ideas in an intellectually rigorous and supportive environment. The theoretical foundations and practical strategies we offer in *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* utilize Shakespeare and his works to convey how race and racial relations of power are present in every classroom whether instructors realize it or not. Therefore, we contend that the concepts and lessons in *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* are transferable to any discipline.

Our emphasis on race in Shakespeare pedagogy is spurred by what Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall (2016) described as a “pathological averseness to thinking about race” in Shakespeare studies (2). In response to critics who claim that such an inquiry is anachronistic and incongruent with the field, Erickson and Hall argue that institutional and everyday resistance to scholarship on premodern constructions of race willfully ignores the evidence of racial formation in these works. This phenomenon masquerades as a desire to protect the integrity of Shakespeare by suggesting that the early modern period was void of racial distinction and by eliding the concrete ways in which European mercantile and imperial expansion led to the emergence of racial categories that would have damaging material effects on non-white, non-European peoples. Erickson and Hall offer a genealogy of scholarship that chronicles the ongoing antagonism to this method of

inquiry in Shakespeare studies. As they argue, race is not external to Shakespeare: it is internally constructed within his works and, therefore, integral to disclosing the contours of Shakespeare's canon and his world. Shakespeare's works perform vital race-work, articulating a premodern grammar of race well in advance of the systematized vocabulary used today to describe the process of racial formation. Their manifesto challenges Shakespeare scholars and instructors to reconsider scholarly practices while also advocating for a material change to the field through the development of new scholarly, pedagogical, and social frameworks.

We take seriously Erickson and Hall's (2016) contention that "ignoring or disparaging race will not make it go away as a question for our – or Shakespeare's – time" (3), and in *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* we answer their call for robust change by deliberately extending the scholarship on premodern race into the arena of pedagogy. *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* suggests pedagogical practices that demonstrate how Shakespeare can be employed to develop a critical orientation toward the *longue durée* of racial thinking. This Element makes the case for teaching Shakespeare through race in order to expose students to the unequal structures of power and domination that are systemically reproduced within societies, cultures, academic disciplines, and classrooms. We argue that this critical approach to teaching Shakespeare and race empowers students not only to see these paradigms but also to challenge and overturn them.

Interrogating race in Shakespeare and disrupting racial projects in their own contemporary spheres requires that students understand how race emerges as an important knowledge and classificatory system (Hall, 2021b). Our framework follows race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2014) concept of "racial formation," which exposes the historically contingent and unstable ways that human difference is transformed into race to support social and material systems, regimes, and hierarchies (105). Although their study focuses on contemporary racial formation in the United States, they trace its roots to European encounters with Indigenous peoples of the so-called new world, identifying race as an important "master category" of human difference in the early modern period (106). As decades of premodern race scholarship similarly argues, race was a central category in early modern social and cultural formation.

From plays like George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1591) to Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1624), early modern English dramatists represented the foreign on their domestic stages, exposing the allure of the so-called Other while also limning the boundaries of the self. Racial difference was key to how the Other and self were made legible, yet race was not then – as it is not now – a stable category or descriptor; it was in the process of being formed. Race as somatic and cultural difference signaled power and domination and was negotiated through these texts even as it was being discursively produced in official cultural documents, such as Elizabeth I's edicts calling for the deportation of “blackamoors” from her realm (Dadabhoy, 2021: 30–32). Early modern English racial thinking emphasized difference and Otherness, often locating those qualities in human biological or somatic variation – such as skin color – and in culture, religion, and custom, in order to stake claims of knowledge, power, and authority, which were rooted in England's nascent imperial ambitions. Within this political and social context, Shakespeare's texts perform ideological work by authorizing knowledge about race through the construction and representation of who is and is not human via forms of somatic difference.

Exposing students to the historical foundation of how race emerges as an important category of human organization gives them the tools to see how these processes operate within society. In the last several years, there have been widespread protests of police brutality and the tearing down of monuments to enslavers in what has become a global movement for racial reckoning (Gunia et al., 2021). The response has been a deep entrenchment of white anger and resentment. Popular depictions of this renewed culture war lack the critical framing and engagement to expose the long-standing social inequities historically rooted in racist ideology still affecting communities today. *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* is motivated by the world we and our students inhabit. Our study points to the centrality of race in society and the discourses that simultaneously challenge and support systemic inequity within societies founded on white supremacy.

Addressing a culturally fraught moment in the United States and the United Kingdom, where the necessity to attend to race, racial formation, and systemic racism is urgent, *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* engages with the discipline of critical race theory (CRT) as a hermeneutic. A field of legal

studies, CRT centers an awareness of how racialization, particularly non-whiteness, results in social and legal outcomes that belie the abstract justness of the law. Recently, however, CRT has become a cultural flashpoint, weaponized by conservative movements to guard against critiques of historical and systemic racism. The Trump administration deemed it a “destructive ideology” (Exec. Order No. 13,950, 85 Fed. Reg. 188 [Sept. 28, 2020]) while the UK equalities minister censured it as “promoting partisan political views . . . without balance” (Turner, 2021). These ongoing attacks on CRT are not isolated; such official language reflects the prevailing Anglo-American belief in a race-neutral society, and continues to regulate whether, when, why, and how the history of racism can be taught in schools. According to this meritocratic framework, societal structures are inherently fair to all who strive for success within their domains, so long as they play by their rules. Similarly, they argue that all citizens of the United States and United Kingdom have the same rights and are therefore treated equally in society and under the law. However, CRT posits that the foundation of ideas like “human,” “natural rights,” and “liberalism” are flawed because race and other interlocking systems of oppression make possessing inherent rights within these systems impossible for everyone. As Derrick Bell (1995) observed, disguising racial power within the language of unracialized humanity is an “abstraction, put forth as ‘rational’ or ‘objective’ truth, smuggling the privileged choice of the privileged to depersonify their claims and then pass them off as the universal authority and the universal good” (901). Attempts to critique inequities within this supposedly meritocratic system are “oppressed, distorted, ignored, silenced, destroyed, appropriated, commodified, and marginalized – and all of this, not accidentally” to preserve the status quo (901). As Bell predicted, *de facto* and *de jure* policies in the United States and United Kingdom have sought to discipline investigations into the historic and current manner that race and racism affect social and political beings.

Anti-Racist Shakespeare argues for a pedagogy that centers racial literacy as a necessary framework for instructors and students to critically engage with issues of race, racism, and racial formation. We have observed in our classrooms that students are eager for this instruction; their questions and comments alert us to their desire to learn how to negotiate the deep divisions

that inform their lived experiences. In her groundbreaking sociological study examining families with white mothers and Black fathers, *A White Side of Black Britain*, France Winddance Twine (2010) uses the term racial literacy “to provide a theoretically grounded analysis of the ways *white* members of transracial families negotiate race, racism, and racialization and acquire racial literacy” (4). She defines racial literacy as “an analytical orientation and a set of practices that reflect shifts in perceptions of race, racism and whiteness. It is a way of perceiving and responding to racism that generates a repertoire of discursive and material practices” (92). Twine’s framework uncovers how race informs every aspect of daily life, which leads to greater comprehension of the “racial codes” that circulate in society in order to develop tools to decipher and challenge them (92).

We turn to Twine in *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* because her concept of racial literacy aligns with the close reading practices of literary studies. She outlines a set of “components” that encompass what it means to be literate in race, racism, and racial formation, which include: clearly defining key-words; understanding the operations of race and racism intersectionally; recognizing the social power of whiteness; and “possess[ing] a racial grammar and vocabulary to discuss race, racism, and antiracism, and the ability to interpret racial codes and racialized practices” (Twine 2010: 92). Taken together, these “components” describe an understanding of the historical and contemporary foundations of race and offer guidance in the coded language under which racism often lurks. Twine’s racial literacy framework has extended into scholarly discourse on educational practice, particularly in how racial literacy can inform methods of teaching. These studies demonstrate how becoming racially literate must begin with educating faculty in this framework so that they can instruct students on how to identify, analyze, and examine issues concerning race (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Twine’s racial literacy framework and its extension into education studies has likewise permeated conversations about teaching Shakespeare. For example, Ian Smith has pointed out how a lack of racial literacy facilitates the construction of white identity and subjectivity through reading practices that leave the racial character of whiteness “unmarked” (Sanchez Castillo, 2019). According to Smith, racial literacy decodes whiteness, “mak[ing] it visible, and therefore subject to

reflection and critique and change” (Sanchez Castillo, 2019). In his video “Whiteness: A Primer for Understanding Shakespeare,” he further notes that “white invisibility . . . becomes something one has protected for a long period of time in Shakespeare studies and it prevents one from being seen. It’s a strategic move, then, to somehow dismiss race from Shakespeare whether it’s Blackness or whiteness because it’s a way to not hav[e] to account for one’s role in whiteness itself” (Smith, 2020). As long as whiteness remains invisible, discussions about race remain limited. Instructors and students need to develop a complex and sophisticated approach to race and racism as a historical and contemporary phenomenon with material power in order to apprehend its overt and covert operations and learn to decipher the codes through which it functions.

To have these rigorous conversations about race and whiteness, instructors and students must fully understand the terminology used to interrogate the complex systems of power under review. While there are several ways to define these terms, it is equally important to emphasize the asymmetrical relations of power that inform how racial hierarchies and racist systems function. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields’s (2014) definition of race in *Racecraft* articulates its seemingly naturalized quality despite it being a social, rather than a biological construct: “the term *race* stands for the conception or the doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from members of other groups of the same kind but on unequal rank” (16). Commonplace understandings of race are rooted in the physical, embodied, and phenotypic characteristics of groups, rather than in the power, domination, and subordination of those who are racialized in racist regimes (Hall, 2021b). Most people understand race as a natural, biological phenomenon when what they are really perceiving is somatic difference to which racial projects have assigned moral and cultural meaning. Therefore, while race is a social construct, which attains its power discursively, it has very real, material effects on the lives of those who are found to possess race (non-white, non-European people) and those who are perceived as not having race (white people).

Because most people possess a commonplace idea about race and racism, guiding students through a more critically robust engagement

with the terminology and methodology in race studies, and its nuanced meanings, leads to better student analyses and interventions. This process begins at the level of language, ensuring that students understand that race is a system of individual and collective power. Beverley Daniel Tatum (2017) offers clear definitions and vocabulary to help readers grasp the special quality of race. She argues that, for most people, racism is used interchangeably with prejudice, which obscures the relation of unequal power that inheres in racist or race-based systems. Racism is a system of race-based advantage that benefits those with the most privilege: white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, upper-middle class, able-bodied men. Tatum's definition of racism "allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (87). Likewise, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva stresses the systemic power of race, arguing that racism emerges because of the unequal distribution of power and resources resulting in different outcomes for different people. He explains that

actors in super-ordinate positions (dominant race) develop a set of social practices (a racial praxis if you will) and an ideology to maintain the advantages they receive based on their racial classification, that is, they develop a *structure* to reproduce their systemic advantages. Therefore, the foundation of racism is not the ideas that individuals may have about others, but the social edifice erected over racial inequality. (Bonilla-Silva, 2006: 24)

These explications of race and racism offer students the necessary vocabulary that moves them toward a practice of precision in language when discussing race and situates their discussions within a framework of structural inequity. Consequently, this critical engagement guides them away from reproducing analyses that are untethered to the material realities of how these systems operate.

Because so much of the focus in a certain mode of “race studies” has been to look at those identities and groups labeled non-white, the representation and racialized power of whiteness often goes unquestioned. Richard Dyer (2017) examines this seeming undetectability of whiteness, wherein he insists that the dominant culture must question the “racial imagery of white people” in their own cultural productions to understand how whiteness has come to signify “the human norm” (1). Dyer argues that whiteness is an unmentioned, unacknowledged, and unracialized position; in short, white people are just people, while non-white people are raced and therefore represent the specificity and particularly of their race. Whiteness is invisible and individuated. Non-whiteness is visible and collective (2). Consequently, whiteness occupies the “powerful” (3) position of the universal, deracinated, subject. These processes enable whiteness to mask and even erase its own racial position, power, and privilege.

While Dyer asks readers to confront racial formation through the representation of whiteness in cinema, his larger argument that “there is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery” (1) could be applied to the academy itself, which obfuscates its own racial whiteness while continuing to deploy racial power and knowledge. In “Coloring the Past, Rewriting Our Future: RaceB4Race,” Margo Hendricks reminds those new to the field of the importance of its genealogy and its critical and ethical interdisciplinary commitments. She argues,

In this body of work, all evidence (or nearly all of the evidence) of the work done to nurture and make productive the land is ignored or briefly alluded to. In other words, the ancestry is erased. No articulation of the complex genealogy that produced Premodern Critical Race Studies exists, which in turn, drew these academic “settlers,” and I am calling them “settlers,” to premodern race. And just like capitalist “White settler colonialism,” [this uncritical version of premodern race studies] fails to acknowledge the

scholarly ancestry – the genealogy – that continues to inhabit and nurture the critical process for the study of premodern race. (Hendricks, 2019)

Rather than discouraging interest in PCRS, Hendricks urges scholars to be wary of how academia functions, which rewards the logics of discovery. The process she identifies here is not unique to premodern studies; it is the foundation upon which the academy is established. As an institution, the academy has a mission to cultivate “excellence,” and often, this idea of excellence is coded language for whiteness: a predominantly white professoriate teaches predominantly white authors in classrooms that prioritize the needs of predominantly white students. The settler-scholars who Hendricks argues have colonized scholarship on race in early modern studies – and by extension the academy – can dip in and out of stories and scholarship by and about non-white peoples because they signify authority, objectivity, and universality. This process allows the academy to continue functioning within a white imperialist framework.

As a white, European author with an imperialist fantasy of his own, Shakespeare and his works reproduce those white, European, imperialist agendas. Each of his plays enacts the consolidation of white privilege in multiple ways, including the positioning of whiteness as the ideal, as that which is most pure, as that which is most human, as that which is most familiar and recognizable to an early modern audience. The non-white racialized Others in Shakespeare’s plays are purposefully made strange: they become the object of study for Shakespeare’s white, European characters who are afforded the authority to classify their theatrical counterparts according not only to their physical features but also to their behavioral patterns. If teachers, students, practitioners, and scholars study Shakespeare without attending to this process, then they rehearse his imperial fantasies and legitimize this white supremacist framework by leaving it unchecked. Shakespeare’s white projections of racial difference remain unquestioned as do the white desires they serve. When faculty reiterate and reinforce these positions with each Shakespeare course they teach, they cement his role as a facilitator of such fantasies within the academy. As the author assigned most frequently in literature courses, Shakespeare stands as the

unquestioned authority on the human experience, which, in turn, teaches students that the idea of the human experience that he has shaped is *the* universal to which all should aspire. Teaching Shakespeare in this way is in service to white supremacy and a disservice to students.

We purposefully use the term *white supremacy* in *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* because it cuts through the abstraction of universality to the larger structure underpinning it. We follow political philosopher Charles W. Mills (1998), who pinpoints the term's "semantic virtue of clearly signaling reference to a system, a particular kind of polity, so structured as to advantage whites" (100). While neither we nor Mills claim that all political systems are white supremacist – he even specifies that the term is intended to "focus attention on the dimension of racial oppression" – early modern England and Europe did develop a race consciousness that led to the construction of race-based systems of subordination and labor. Indeed, Mills argues that "white supremacy as a *system*, or set of systems, clearly comes into existence through European expansionism and the imposition of European rule through settlement and colonialism on aboriginal and imported slave populations" (Mills, 2003: 38). We use this term to signal the larger social and political systems rooted in hierarchies that position white identities as superior to non-white identities, which justified harmful and oppressive systemic devaluation and subordination of non-white peoples, the occupation of their lands, and theft of their resources. Mobilizing the term *white supremacy* in the context of Shakespeare, then, is far from anachronistic; rather, it offers instructors and students precise language through which to excavate the historical sediments of race-based systems of power that persist today.

Attempting an anti-racist Shakespeare pedagogy requires familiarity with contemporary as well as historical understandings of race, racial formation, racial thinking, and white supremacy. Our deliberate naming of white supremacy registers the "resistant knowledge project" (Collins, 2019: 88) of anti-racist pedagogy, which mandates that we confront the root cause of racial difference and racial power. When instructors focus on the effects of non-white racialization without considering the benefits that accrue to white racialization, they are tacitly endorsing the project of white supremacy, which is invested in the obscure and elusive material construction of white racial power. The theoretical methodologies