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Diversity in a Twenty-First Century: College Classroom and Engaging Pedagogy

Brenda Henry-Offor¹

¹ Ph.D., Mentor, Department of Education & Humanities, SUNY Empire State College, New York, E-mail: bboffor@gmail.com

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Abstract

This essay will examine the term diversity in three aspects of the college classroom—class room racial makeup, teaching methodology and the course content. I am using my experiences with low and medium income white, non-white, and black traditional students, eighteen to twenty-five-year olds, in a public college classroom and how I teach British literature in a traditional face-to-face classroom.

Keywords: Renaissance period, Self-explanatory, Assigned materials, Customs Enforcement

Student Demographic

On average, my class is typically made up of 60% whites and 40% non-whites for combined total of 20 to 30 students. I would have in any given semester about three or four African American students along with two or three *Latin-X* and a mixture of perhaps Middle Eastern and Asians among other groups. The average age in my course is twenty years old but, there may be in any given course that I teach two to four senior citizens who attend the course as auditors. Everyone in the course is allowed to speak in the classroom so auditors are invited, when they feel the need, to make comments on the readings. To many students in my course, the racial make-up of students in the classroom is considered diversity. They define diversity as multiple ethnic representations of people in one place. However, diversity goes beyond the racial make-up of a group. During the first week of classes we discuss what diversity means and our definition includes, race, class, gender, all of the inclusive renditions of gender, religion, physically and mentally challenged individuals among others. It is very important that we establish this definition at the onset of the course so that students develop a nascent understanding of the wide parameters of our discussions about diversity in the classroom as well as allow students understanding of the term to develop throughout the semester. I explain to students that class as we know it today—upper, middle and lower class—did not exist. The Renaissance period saw the growth mercantilism that brought about a middleclass that is replicated today throughout society and across nations.

I have been teaching as an adjunct Assistant Professor at a New York City college since 2000. My courses are always well attended. Students have said, in their words that “I am a fun teacher who delivers the course content with a difference.” I teach the Overview of British Literature from 1400 to 19th century. I also teach a Shakespeare Survey course. My focus in this essay is about teaching Shakespeare’s plays to traditional college age students. In every course that I teach I adhere to the rules and guidelines of the college, but I teach, like many other college faculty members, my way. Of course, as an African American faculty, my experiences will influence how I teach my courses. It

should be noted that I began teaching at the elementary school level before I moved on to teaching at the college level.

Over the years, students of all races, class and gender have given me a plethora of ideas and comments about my courses, my teaching in particular, some of it solicited but for the most part, unsolicited. I do not complicate my courses because I believe being straightforward with my students has always been the best approach and yielded the most fulfilling classroom environment as students feel comfortable being themselves. My grading rubric is also very simple and self-explanatory. No matter what course I teach, I grade students on their attendance, classroom participation, a group presentation and three five page papers. I may also add quizzes to the course if I find that students appear to be lax in their assigned readings. I may throw in a quiz here and there if I find that students are not reading the assigned materials. Students are told of these random quizzes on the first day of class if they are found to be lacking in reading knowledge as the course moves along. Seldom have I ever had to give a quiz for this reason.

Methodology

Each semester that I teach a Shakespeare Survey course, I choose at least two new plays that I did not teach the semester before. I select one or two Shakespeare plays that are racially provocative to ensure that students have a fair and clear understanding of different kinds of plays including history, comedy and tragedy. In this essay my focus is on Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, where I will explain my method of teaching diversity in a college classroom today. As I said earlier in the essay, diversity to many people, in this case, college students, is mainly about different ethnic representations in a group. Many of my students explain the meaning of diversity as race and the number of different races or ethnic groups within a group, classroom or social space. My students would, therefore, see diversity in their classroom if there was at least one African American and or Latin-X student present along with a majority of white students. Occasionally, a student would openly self-identify as a gay or lesbian individual. Such self-identification has not been a problem in any of my classrooms. Students get along very well, in fact, they are respectful of each individual's space, race and identity. That has always been a requirement on the first day of class in any of my courses. This allows both students and I to speak freely about any topic as it relates to the readings in the course. Students also do not consider religion as diversity. We must keep in mind that understanding difference in terms of diversity is complex and requires open-mindedness accepting the facts as they are and a commitment to conscious thinking.

In our discussions about *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, the Jew, is persecuted and ostracized by his fellow countrymen because he is a usurer or what we call today, a money lender and most importantly, he is a Jew. Venetians are denied Jews full citizenship in their own country. In fact, Jews and Venetian co-existing as equal citizens can create long lasting diversity but, Venetians reject that notion in the play. These two identities are at the heart of the play and drive its actions. I use this play to engage my students in discussions about race, religion, the law, equality, citizenship, class, wealth and other relevant, important topics that creates diversity and topics that we should all be engaging with as we struggle to build just societies. At no time in history can we say that society has been fair and equal for all citizens. Many of us are aware of socialism and communism as counter-political governments to democracy, so all of the above themes in the play are very relevant to our lives in contemporary United States of America.

On the matter of race, I posit to students that what the nation state of Venice, personified by Antonio, does to Shylock and the other Jewish citizens of Venice has strong parallels to what is done to Blacks and other minorities, by the legal system in the United States of America today. As Shylock reminds Antonio when the latter comes to him for a loan:

What should I say to you? Should I not say
"Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" Or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondsman key,
With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,

Say this: "Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday Last;
 You spurned me such a day; another time
 You called me 'dog'; and for these courtesies
 I'll lend you this much moneys"? (1.3.131-139)

This paragraph is a replica of my classroom discussion with my students. Shylock elucidates for Antonio the latter's attack on his person calling him a "cur" or dog which makes Shylock less than human. He points to his profession as a usurer asking Antonio if a dog has money that he could lend to others and he points out to Antonio that he "spet" [spat] on him. All of these acts of disrespect meted out Shylock by Antonio are actions that the latter commits against another citizen who has every right to perform his profession and walk the streets of Venice as freely as Antonio does.

However, Antonio does not consider Shylock as a fellow Venetian. In fact, Antonio sees Shylock as a permanent outsider within. When Antonio spits on Shylock's gabardine coat, pushes him off the sidewalk, ridicules and humiliates him daily in public it is his way of keeping Shylock in "his place." Antonio reaffirms Venetians attitude and custom of ostracizing and dehumanizing Jews. To Venetians of the early modern period Jewishness is race and being a userer/money-lender relegates him to the groundling class. The hatred that Venetians feel for Jews in their midst, as demonstrated in the play, *The Merchant of Venice*, is imbricated in Venetian culture and practices. I compare that hatred to that of Whites in the United States of America and their overt, implicit bias against non-Whites in the country. These two groups display no desire for diversity as a way of life. As I explain to my students, as a parallel to Venetian's acceptance of diversity, the biggest obstacle to diversity in the United States of America is the lack of discussions about inclusion and the exclusion of others from main-stream society by white people.

At this point in my deconstruction of the play, I point out to my students that we can look no further than to contemporary practices of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as they corral and imprison undocumented individuals in our midst with limited or no clear path towards a fair hearing and possible refugee status that leads to a green card and citizenship. Instead, these immigrants are tagged for deportation at the Mexican border with little to no sense of compassion for their perceived plight. Such behavior does not lend itself to diversity in our nation but fosters a culture of dislike as displayed by Venetians in *The Merchant of Venice*. Students' responses to these discussions sometimes includes references to Antonio's friend, Gratiano, who displays systemic Venetian anti-Semitism and race bating when he scolds Shylock who is demanding his pound of flesh from Antonio who forfeits his bond. He shouts at Shylock:

Not on thy soul, harsh Jew,
 Thou mak'st thy knife keen. But no metal can,
 No, not the hangman's axe, bear half the keenness
 Of thy sharp envy. Can no prayers pierce thee? (4.1.125-128)

My reaction to such a comment would be to ask students to think of a contemporary incident in the news that bears resemblance to Antonio and Gratiano's behavior towards Shylock. Antonio and Gratiano's behavior are overt displays of Venetian power. Such pedagogy in a twenty-first century college classroom is necessary in nurturing diversity. Students should be able to understand what diversity means in a relevant matter as we make meaning of our readings and connect that meaning to contemporary issues.

In any response that I would give to a student's question about Antonio's request for forgiveness from Shylock I would pose the question: "Does Antonio deserve it or, has he earned it?" The real question is, why is Antonio's behavior and prayers better than Shylock's? Is the God of the Jews not the same God of Venetian's Christians? Using his Christian God to justify his anti-Semitism against Shylock is just another weapon in Antonio's deceptive arsenal to subjugate Shylock and his people. M. Lindsay Kaplan, editor of *The Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts*, writes:

Hence, Christians seem to judge Jewish observance of the law as, at best, ignorance or, at worst, a stubborn rejection of God's will and mercy. Pauls' juxtaposition of Jewish law and Christian mercy is taken up by the play's association of Shylock with justice and Portia with mercy (244).

For Antonio and other Venetians in the play, Shylock's Jewishness is his essence and it stink to high heaven which propelled them to dislike and disdain him. Antonio's spitting on Shylock and kicking him off the sidewalk are manifestations of Venetians disdain for Jews. As a member of the upper-class, Antonio finds Shylock's presence in Venice as a usurer frustrating as it is in direct opposition to Venetian's whiteness and Christianity.

Under the current state of social awareness in our country I feel this course is more timely than ever. Today, here in the United States of America, police brutality and disdain for black Americans and other marginalized groups is as overt as Venetians dislike and maltreatment of Jews in Venice during the early modern period. What's more, the Catholic Church promoted this practice of othering and anti-Semitism.

Early Modern Venetians felt obligated to perpetuate anti-Semitic practices against Jewish citizens who lived there for centuries. Unequal citizenship in Venice was considered normal since Jews were seen as less than human. Charles B. Mabon explains:

It is therefore not surprising to find the references to the Jew should abound throughout every section of English literature. Nor, is it surprising that the greater number of these references should embody the popular conception entertained of the Jew in the dark Middle Ages—a conception inspired by intense religious fanaticism and a singularly deep racial antipathy to which was superadded a profound ignorance of his personality (Mabon 411).

In the play, Venetians are interested in converting Jews to Christianity but had no interest in understanding what makes a Jew a Jew. This othering of the Jew is not unlike what we see and experience in a contemporary American college classroom. In my experiences both as a student and teacher, white students who are the majority in the classroom are rarely interested in learning about minorities in their midst. Jessica abandoned her father, Shylock, in his time of need as she eloped with her lover, Gratiano, to Belmont where she consents to convert and marry him so that she would become a "true" Venetian. Her presence among Antonio, Gratiano and their wealthy friends has no space for Jews or diversity. Jessica's conversion to Christianity makes her a Venetian and she is accepted by the group. It is representative of present day America where Jews and Muslims are considered to be unlike Christians and are therefore to be tolerated but not embraced. Men like Shylock who practice the trade of usury are seen as unsavory characters and undeserving of Venetian citizenship.

Interestingly, a white professor in the American classroom today, enjoys a good measure of respect when compared with the African American professor who is often challenged by white students in his/her classroom because of the color of their skin. Many students are uncomfortable taking a literature course with a faculty of color other than African American literature. These same students would take a course on African American literature with a white faculty member without questioning that faculty member's credibility. As I stated earlier, students agree that one or two students of color or of a different race such as Asian and/or Middle Eastern represents diversity in the classroom. This is a complex issue because the group of students who are questioning the capabilities/scholarship of the African-American professor to teach Shakespeare's plays would profess that there is diversity at the college he attends and that s/he embraces it. The student would not question the white professor's abilities to teach an African American course. College campuses typically do not have large numbers of black faculty except, perhaps, in African American Studies departments. The August 2, 2019 Inside Higher Ed published an article titled *Professors Still More Likely Than Students to Be White* by Colleen Flaherty that describes this issue:

A new analysis from Pew Research Center says that while racial and ethnic diversity has increased among U.S. college faculty over the past two decades, professors are still much more likely than their students to be white. In 2017, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics and looked at by Pew, 76 percent of all college and university faculty members were white, compared to 55 percent of undergraduates. By ethnic group, just 5 percent of faculty members were Hispanic, compared to 20 percent of students. Six percent of professors were black, compared to 14 percent of their students. Asians were the exception, making up 11 percent of professors and 7 percent of students. (Flaherty)

If there was a fair representation of minority faculty on campuses then students would have greater exposure to faculty of all races and allow this may help them be more accepting of diversity. What, then, does diversity mean to our students if their instructor must be of a certain hue if s/he is to be acknowledged as a *bona fide* scholar on the topic at hand? The answer lies in the inherent bias against racialized people that limits Whites from embracing diversity in all of its forms. By allowing diversity to be the norm means a relinquishing of power by the white establishment.

The answer to the question lies in the underlying internecine embodiment of White students' value and premising of White bodies over all other bodies. The answer also lies in Portia's valuing of Antonio's pound of flesh over Shylock's right to his bond. Student already know that Portia is an imposter, who is passing her female body off as that of a male while impersonating the personality of a judge to serve purloined "justice" upon Shylock. Similarly, the law in the United States devalues black and brown, male bodies just as Portia, the judge, devalues Shylock's body and students do not deny this fact. But, my students, as if on cue, will point out to me that we should not be surprised by Portia's impersonation of the law because earlier in the play we can recall how she breathes a sigh of relief when a suitor for her hand in marriage, the Prince of Morocco, chooses the wrong casket, thus making him ineligible to be her husband. She makes a racist remark: "A gentle riddance! Draw the curtains, go./Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.8.86-87). Nothing is lost on students when they read these two lines and they argue that Portia is a racist. What they do not recognize as overt racism is that Venetians are racists, anti-Semites and it is not only Shylock and the other Jews that they dislike but that anyone who is not Venetian is other and therefore an outsider. White, Christian blood holds value in Venetian society but, all other non-white bodies are valueless and doomed to hell.

Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, is premised on Early Modern racism. When I think of diversity in institutions of higher learning in the United States of America I recall a line by the pig, Napoleon, in George Orwell's novella, *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (1.06.45). I point this out to my students and ask them to discuss their thoughts and ideas on Portia's sense of justice in Shylock's litigation against Antonio and his failure to repay Shylock the money that the latter loaned to him. I ask students to discuss Venetian's behavior towards Shylock and other Jews in Venice as represented in the play. I believe that such discussions help to clarify for our students the necessity for diversity in every area of our lives.

Equating Portia in the play to contemporary, rogue prosecutors in the United States is not lost on students in my classroom. They concur that it is an accurate approximation. Portia peddles a false narrative about the law in connivance with the Duke of Venice who looks on and approves of her misinterpretation of Venetian law. Portia views Shylock, who is a Venetian, as an outsider because he is a Jew and a usurer. There is no room for diversity in Early Modern Venice and unless he becomes a Christian, Shylock will never be an accepted member of Venetian society. As a Jew,

Shylock cannot find justice in Venice as Portia dissembles with him about the practicalities of his claim of one pound of Antonio's flesh. The economics of Shylock's body is symptomatic of white Venetian's fealty to money, religion and class. Portia displays these practices when she assures Shylock that:

It must not be. There is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established;
'Twill be recorded for a precedent
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state. It cannot be. (4.1.226-230)

Indeed the assurance that Portia gives to Shylock is a mere recitation of deceit inherent in a Venetian justice system that Portia claims to embody and uphold giving Shylock a false sense of justice and fair-play. Her Lordship's practice of the law is flawed even as she assumes the role of man and legal scholar. Portia assures Shylock that no one is above the law—except the rich, white, privileged Venetian citizenry, herself included, because she is an imposter. One can question whether her impersonation of a male judge is a form of diversity in itself. To keep the classroom lively, I may point out that Portia is, after all, a gender bender. Her successful machinations as a man and a judge are to be applauded but for the fact that she is an anti-Semite and a bigot. Students have argued that Portia should be condemned for her role as a usurping judge because she is a disgrace to womankind for her maltreatment of Shylock and her encouragement of Jessica's traitorous behavior towards her widowed father. Portia knowingly encouraged Jessica to leave her father's house as she entertained Jessica in her Belmont mansion.

In terms of religion, the Catholic Church, during the early modern period, embraced Antonio's behavior towards Shylock and other Jews. The Church hoped to convert as many non-Catholics as possible and Jews were seen as a group in need of conversion. Antonio suggests to Portia that she require Shylock to convert from Judaism to Catholicism as a part of punishment for a crime he did not commit. He states: "Two things provided more: that for this favor/He presently become a Christian;" (4.1.402-403). Even as a judge, she brings her Roman Catholic religion to bear on the court. According to M. Lindsay Kaplan: "In the early modern period, the Jew as a religious other and opponent of God's will becomes a figure by which Christian religious opponents can denigrate and delegitimize each other" (244). But, as I am won't to point out to my students, diversity has no boundaries. All of the boundaries that Venetians place around Shylock and his fellow Jews, based on Catholicism vs Judaism, are imaginary. Both religions pray to the same God. The fact that Jews are a part of the economic fabric of Venice makes them important to that society because they serve an important purpose. Even Antonio needs the services of Shylock which he refuses to acknowledge as a legal, respectable profession. In response to Shylock's reminder to his tormentor, Antonio, that he called him a "dog" and yet he wants to borrow money from him, Antonio taunts him:

I am like to call thee so again,
To spet on thee again, to spurn thee, too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
A breed for barren mental of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty. (1.3.140-147)

Antonio demonstrates his use of Venetian, nationalistic power to bend Shylock to his will. He knows that Shylock wants his patronage because this is his livelihood and so he doubles down by insulting Shylock while asking him a favor. In response, to Antonio's bad behavior, Shylock uses his miniscule agency to draw up a bond that requires Antonio to forfeit a pound of his flesh to Shylock if cannot repay the loan on its due date.

In my experience and that of other minority students in the class understanding Shakespeare's approach to the play is sometimes very different from that of White students in the course. Minority students' responses to the required papers for the course often focus on themes of race and often compare portions of the play to contemporary and historical racism in the United States rather than on diversity. Sometimes, this group of students fails to make any mention of the word diversity in their essays although we spend each class period trying to understand what diversity

means. Disparate practices in the treatment of Shylock and other Jews in the play align so closely to implicit bias in the United States of America that black students often make that comparison in their essays about the play instead of discussions about diversity. While it is apparent to white students that these comparisons about race do exist in the play and in our society, this group of students tends to exclude those facts in their essays but choose to highlight them in other ways.

One important point I must highlight in this essay is a noticeable practice by many minority students in the course. Each semester, as I try to engage students in classroom discussions, I observe that minority students tend to be less vocal on issues of race. While many white students engage in this discourse, minority students participate in something that I call a “Culture of Minimizing.” My investigation into their silence revealed that minority students choose to remain silent, very often, because they hope to minimize their stress by not engaging in what they fear would be “uninformed arguments” with their white classmates that would further, unwittingly, traumatize them. Minority students, therefore, make conscious decisions to minimize their trauma during discussions about race. It takes an act of persuasion to convince this group of students to lend their voices to the classroom debate. Black students, when asked, would explain to me that they experienced “push back” by white students in other classes when they explain their experiences about race. Black students use the following phrases when they express their reason for silence during discussions about race: “I don’t want to spend my time trying to explain my experiences to people whose minds are made up.” or “I don’t need that frustration or aggravation.” There are students who consider it a burden when they are stereotyped as homogenous and are expected to speak for the race. These students, therefore, choose to minimize any further trauma resulting from discourses about race. However, Not all minority or black students feel this way. There are students who believe that it is important for them to participate in discussions about race and are very collaborative with their peers on the topic. The decision that these black students make repeatedly is attributed to what William Julius Wilson explains in his book, *More Than Just Race*, as a reflection of informal rules shaped by life in the inner city. He writes:

We have seen that some cultural patterns in the inner-city ghetto reflect informal rules that shape how people interact or engage one another and make decisions. The decision making is often related to perceptions about how the world works—what we call meaning making (Wilson 133).

It is not, therefore, unusual for black students to dismiss any call for engagement in the classroom about race as it refers to diversity. Let me recall Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem *We Wear the Mask* of 1895 to support my theory of a *Culture of Minimizing*:

We wear the mask that grins and lies
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask. (Dubar)

In my attempt to teach diversity in the classroom I highlight unequal practices that are normalized in Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice* such as religious bias, racial differences, racist practices, class malevolence and hatred. In the end, there is neither legal nor economic justice for Shylock. He is a social outcast and is bankrupted for seeking justice. Antonio, the aggressor in the case, is rewarded for his bad behavior and failure to pay his debt to Shylock. He is the victor while Shylock is vanquished and punished. True diversity is about a just society and should always end with equality and justice. Likewise, teaching should not be mechanized. It should be engaging,

open and offer pedagogy that enriches each student's experience in the college classroom. It is also important, to me, that I "hook" ideas that I present in my deconstruction of the play to contemporary issues and sentiments so that students can retain details of class discussions. Outcomes for my students at the end of the semester is knowledge that is applicable to their daily lives and enrichment that goes beyond the classroom and the mandated tests for semester grades. For me, the fact that my students leave my classroom at the end of the semester knowing a lot more about diversity than when they began the course is a meaningful outcome and it satisfies my teaching objective. My students get what they come for when they signed up for my literature course.

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