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Journal of American Studies, **54** (2020), 1, 1–104
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doi:10.1017/S0021875819000902 First published online 11 October 2019

Forum: Shakespeare and Black America

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This introduction both models how one might read race, blackness, activism and Shakespeare and contextualizes the many "Shakespeares" that might be at work in the essays in this cluster, which emerge from the Shakespeare Association of America seminar Shakespeare and Black America. It suggests that scholars in this Shakespearean subfield have political, pedagogical and personal investments that both overlap with and diverge from Shakespeare study as traditionally understood. It addresses some of the complexities of performing, teaching and reading Shakespeare not as an agent of cultural dominion, but as part of resistance and activism in black America.

These days, part of what it means to speak about art and activism together is to speak about a collective impatience with the monuments of white supremacy that masquerade as public art. Many recent protests throughout the US reflect an ardent desire to confront both the historic acts of racial terror to which these monuments attest and their affective force in the present. Listening to public appeals variously to demolish, uproot, relocate, and recontextualize the statutes of the Confederacy, we were reminded that in the midst of Reconstruction the political caricaturist Thomas Nast turned the question of monuments on its head by turning to Shakespeare (Figure 1). In his 1868 wood engraving entitled "Patience on a Monument," which takes its title from *Twelfth Night* and appeared in both the *Cincinnati Gazette* and *Harper's Weekly*, Patience is a black man enthroned on a monument, with the broken chains of slavery at his feet along with the rifle that marks him as a Union soldier. Upending the usual iconography of war memorials, Nast's soldier does not stand upright, however, on the inscribed stone pillar, but rather sits in a mournful pose, with lifeless bodies, presumably his murdered wife and children, at the statue's base. On either side of the monument are horrific scenes of Reconstruction-era violence – the lynching of a black man, a masked Ku Klux Klan campaign of arson against a freedman's school, the burning of the Colored Orphan Asylum during the New York

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875819000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 1. Thomas Nast, "Patience on a Monument," *Harper's Weekly*, 10 October 1868, 648.

Draft Riots – acts identified in the monument's inscription, which also reports the racist assertions of politicians.

What may be most striking now is how this image – for all its desire to monumentalize white atrocities against black people – finds it easy to envision black patience and impossible to envision black protest: thus the soldier sits, with his gun at his feet, rapt in sorrow. And his passivity stands out against the frenzied action on either side of him. In fact, there is deep irony in this Shakespearean allusion, for Nast's figure of pathos is utterly unlike Shakespeare's Viola, who, finding herself shipwrecked and suddenly bereft of her beloved brother, immediately wills herself into a new identity and seeks adventure. Viola evokes "patience on a monument" only after she has

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disguised herself as the male servant Cesario and fallen in love with her new master, Orsino. Significantly, the phrase is part of a fiction – a sad story of a lovelorn sister – that she mobilizes while actively wooing Orsino. When Shakespeare depicts Orsino's curiosity about the ultimate fate of this made-up sister, we hear Viola claim that because the anonymous woman never spoke her desire, the narrative of her life is a void, a space of emptiness:

> ORSINO: And what's her history?
> VIOLA: A blank, my lord. She never told her love,
> But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
> Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,
> And with a green and yellow melancholy
> She sat like patience on a monument,
> Smiling at grief.[1]

Our topic, "Shakespeare in Black America," produces similarly affecting stories of patience and anonymity, of things unspoken and unknowable. We seek to fill in the blanks of overlooked and concealed histories and to trace the at times indirect alliances of Shakespeare and black activism. We start from the premise that since 1821 when William Brown established the African Grove, the first known black theater in the US, Shakespeare's plays have been a key weapon in the ongoing struggle for full participation in American public life.[2] Above all, we wish to underscore and elaborate on the many ways that black people, in turning toward Shakespeare, have not in fact been patient with injustice.[3]

Indeed, these turns to Shakespeare have been frequently misunderstood. In the wake of the black arts movement's rejection of Shakespeare as a monument to and facilitator of white cultural dominance, many assume or read back into African American culture two primary modes of engagement: embracing Shakespeare to borrow his cultural capital or rejecting Shakespeare as a mechanism of discipline and white supremacy – a colonialist, white supremacist specter who must be exorcized before the cultural work of

[1] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1997), 2.4.108–14.

[2] Marvin Edward McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies & Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African & American Theater* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 14. The definitive history of Shakespeare and African American performance remains Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

[3] The authors would like to thank the contributors to the SAA seminar, not just for their papers, but also for the generative discussion. Several of the points raised in the essay came from questions and concerns raised in Atlanta by participants and auditors, including respondent Emily M. N. Kugler.

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black freedom can begin. But as Peter Erickson notes, "Black writers' approaches to Shakespeare have never been monolithic," moving between poles of easy inclusion and exclusion.[4] Even within a single author, one can see multiple reactions. For example, in 1953 James Baldwin wrote that whites experienced a Shakespeare who, like Dante, Rembrandt, the cathedral at Chartres and other monuments of Western culture, "says something to them which it cannot say to me,"[5] but in 1979 he wrote that his early anger at Shakespeare was the product of "a loveless education" and that Shakespeare's authority lies less in his accrued monumentality than in his language: "its candor, its irony, its density, and its beat: this was the authority of the language which produced me, and it was also the authority of Shakespeare" (Figure 2).[6] But while Shakespeare has almost always been part of cultural currency, that high-culture authority is of comparatively recent vintage. It is this monumentalization of Shakespeare, known as "bardolatry," that presents a problem. Historically, African Americans have fought for the right to perform Shakespeare on their own terms longer than they have struggled against him. Thus as "Shakespeare and Black America" has changed over time, blacks have found in Shakespeare a source of joy, inspiration and innovation even as they resist his use as an agent of dominion. The relationship between Shakespeare and black America is complex, changing, multilingual, historically contingent and transnational.

This cluster comprises twelve essays that originated as papers circulated for a Shakespeare Association Seminar, Shakespeare in Black America, held in Atlanta, Georgia in April 2017. For decades now, scholars in the Shakespeare world have been offering new histories of race told through the lens of the early modern. Our seminar's focus is part of this longer project, but we sought to expand what we know of black Shakespeare beyond such landmark dates as 1807 when Ira Aldridge, the pioneering black Shakespearean, was born in Manhattan; 1821, when James Hewlett played the title role in *Richard III*, the first Shakespearean drama staged by the country's first black theatre troupe; 1943, when *Othello*, starring Paul Robeson, opened on Broadway; and 1994, when the African American Shakespeare Company was founded in San Francisco. Moving beyond this important performance history, we called for analysis of Shakespeare as an object of study and enjoyment in sites beyond the professional theater. The seminar insisted that the history of Shakespeare in African American culture unfurled – and

[4] Peter Erickson, *Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 21.
[5] James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Harper's Magazine*, 1 Oct. 1953, 42–48, 44.
[6] James Baldwin, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," in Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 53–56, 55.

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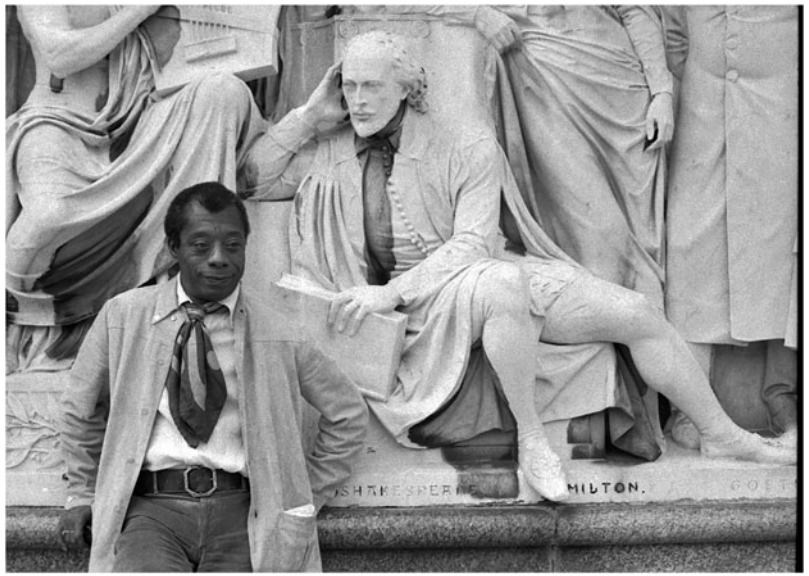


Figure 2. James Baldwin at the Albert Memorial in London, 1969. Photograph: Allan Warren, Wikimedia Commons.

continues to unfurl – not only on the professional stage but also in a range of other racially marked spaces, such as college classrooms, private homes, public schools, local libraries, church basements, summer camps, music halls, and amateur theaters. We assigned a small group of readings addressing performance history, pedagogy, and American racial politics.[7] What emerged in response to our call was a lively and urgent discussion that covered topics from the politics of adaptation and appropriation, to methodology, to the dismantling of public education and the arts.

[7] Readings circulated were Amy E. Earhart and Toniesha L. Taylor, "Pedagogies of Race: Digital Humanities in the Age of Ferguson," at http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/72; Errol Hill, "From Artist to Activist," in Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 64–78; Joyce E. King. "In Search of a Method for Liberating Education and Research: The Half (That) Has Not Been Told," in *Dysconscious Racism, Afrocentric Praxis, and Education for Human Freedom: Through the Years I Keep on Toiling, The Selected Works of Joyce E. King* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 30–53; Marvin McAllister, "Shakespeare Visits the Hilltop: Classical Drama and the Howard College Dramatic Club," in Mimi Godfrey, Coppélia Kahn, and Heather Nathans, eds., *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance* (Wilmington: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 219–46; Ayanna Thompson, "Reform: Redefining Authenticity in Shakespeare Reform Programs," in Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 119–44; Barbara Bogaev, *American Moor*, Shakespeare Unlimited, at www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/american-moor, accessed 9 Aug. 2016.

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Shakespeare continues to be part of American racial politics, a prominent lightning rod for anxieties about cultural change. For example, in 2015, Dana Dusbiber, a veteran teacher in California public schools, drew widespread opprobrium for a *Washington Post* op-ed (originally published as a blogpost) that argued for taking Shakespeare out of the Common Core curriculum. Confessing that she personally dislikes Shakespeare and doesn't see the struggle with his language worth the effort, she argued that her ethnically diverse students would be better served if the Common Core dropped the Shakespeare requirement in favor of a piece of world literature that speaks equally vividly – and more accessibly – to the human condition.[8] As Shakespeareans committed to a just world, the elevation of unheard voices, and the study of Shakespeare simultaneously, we believe these moments pose a profound challenge: what is the place of Shakespeare in contemporary calls for pedagogical and cultural transformation? Can we develop what Joyce E. King calls an "emancipatory pedagogy" around a figure frequently used as a tool of imperialism and subjugation, especially in modern education?

In this regard, our challenge has been to peel Shakespeare from the powerful apparatus of white supremacy that has been built around his works, not simply in our classrooms, but in our scholarly interactions. Indeed, our seminar began with Laura Lehua Yim honoring the Muskogee and Creek peoples who first inhabited the land now known as Atlanta and ended with Kim F. Hall leading us in a collective reading of Pauli Murray's "Dark Testament: Verse 8." Yim's words spoke to the need for us to reconfigure our sense of history, to remember colonization and genocide in our research rather than use Shakespeare as an escape from it, and to work towards a "decolonizing" scholarship. The incantatory power of Murray's final lines,

> Give me a song of kindliness
> And a country where I can live it.
> Give me a song of hope and love
> And a brown girl's heart to hear it,

read in the first year of Donald Trump's presidency,[9] spoke powerfully of the need of art of various kinds for our own survival and served as a reminder that Shakespeare's "survival" can't rest on a false forgetting of indigenous, enslaved and colonized peoples or the elevation of scholarship that showcases Shakespeare as a neo-civilizing force in prisons and underperforming schools.

[8] Valerie Strauss and Dana Dusbiber, "Teacher: Why I Don't Want to Assign Shakespeare Anymore (Even Though He's in the Common Core)," *Washington Post*, 13 June 2015, sec. Answer Sheet, at www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/06/13/teacher-why-i-dont-want-to-assign-shakespeare-anymore-even-though-hes-in-the-common-core.

[9] Pauli Murray, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (Norwalk, CT: Silvermine, 1970), 22.

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These essays put into dialogue terms – "black," "America" and "Shakespeare" – that are deceptively wide-ranging. Given that readers of this journal likely have some insight into the complications of the first two, it might help to elucidate the third. When writers and their sources reference "Shakespeare," they are referring to the many different ways Shakespeare is and was understood in black culture over time, although not consistently or chronologically. For many blacks, as in Langston Hughes's *Shakespeare in Harlem*, "Shakespeare" is a poet of the people who strolled the London streets transforming its multilayered vernaculars into a poetry that would be admired for centuries. Like Baldwin, Hughes flags a kinship between "this last bawdy poet in the English language" and African American artists "who created an entirely new idiom in an overwhelmingly hostile place."[10] For black actors like Henrietta Vinton Davis and Ira Aldridge in the nineteenth century, "Shakespeare" was the accessible scripts that provided a space for black actors to display talent and mastery – especially when white supremacy confined their talents to either the musical or minstrel stages. When Du Bois famously imagines that he "sits with Shakespeare" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Shakespeare is a shorthand for the power of humanist learning and the liberal arts – a recognized and lasting genius that could stand through the ages.[11] For Ntozake Shange, Shakespeare is a cultural monolith, a parasite that keeps black writers from attaining genius on their own terms ("I owe not one more moment of thought to the status of European masters. I don't have to worry that Ira Aldridge thinks poorly of me for not accepting a challenge / the battle is over."[12]) In contrast, Alice Childress, the playwright who emerged from and contributed so profoundly to Harlem's theater scene, argues that the real problem is the value attributed to Shakespeare's monumentality. Terms like "genius" and "universality" are too often codes for white dominance: "The Marketplace is white and there we are daily reminded that our writing is not considered universal. We are told that the 'best,' is that subject matter applicable to the whites of the world."[13]

Like Childress, playwright Djanet Sears, whose *Harlem Duet* is the focus of Nedda Mehdizadeh's essay, articulates the challenge of dealing with a racist theater industry. As Mehdizadeh explains, however, Sears's tragic reimagining

[10] Baldwin, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," 55.
[11] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 76.
[12] Ntozake Shange, *lost in language & sound or how i found my way to the arts: essays* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011), 43.
[13] Alice Childress, "A Candle in a Gale Wind," in Mari Evans, ed., *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1984), 111–16, 113.

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of *Othello*, which juxtaposes the contending cultural traditions of the Harlem Renaissance and the black minstrel theater of the 1920s, uses Shakespeare to transform racial injustice into art. Significantly, too, writers of color working outside the frame of elite culture have also taken on this painful past as well as the attendant claims about Shakespearean universality. For example, Elizabeth Rivlin details that in the female-centric so-called middlebrow literature of Elizabeth Nunez and Terry McMillan, Shakespearean allusions allow for the emergence of a community of readers who take pleasure in their claiming of Shakespeare. In addition, as Vanessa I. Corredera suggests in her analysis of universality in Key & Peele's brilliant comic sketch about *Othello*, pleasure may also be at stake when black masculinity intersects with Shakespeare in decidedly hilarious fashion. In this regard, it is important to remember that Shakespeare's status as a high-culture marker of civilization and (false) universality is a product of the nineteenth century.[14] For most of theater history, Shakespeare was popular culture, a popular culture that provided a common language. The modern monumentalization of Shakespeare – the use of his genius to hierarchize and deny other genius – conceals the Shakespeare used for resistance and pleasure.

To study Shakespeare in black America is to uncover different languages of black freedom and multiple forms of resistance that can be overlooked in the rejection of Shakespeare. In stressing the need for young writers to "read everything" and practice their craft, poet/activist Amiri Baraka celebrates the "treasure chest" that is writing in the African diaspora ("In English there is no literature at no higher level than Fred Douglas[s]. Not Shakespeare, not, not, not, not. Not the Bible") and notes that Frederick Douglass's greatness lies in part in his wide influences: "Fred takes the Bible, he takes Shakespeare, when you read Fred's writing, he already copped the Bible, and he copped Shakespeare, and then he put the Black thing in there just to make it sweet. Read that."[15] Once made property himself, Frederick Douglass's brilliance lies in his agile ability both to "cop" or steal/appropriate the alleged properties of Western culture, and to transform them into something uniquely African American. This seminar asked, "what does it mean to 'read that'?" "What does it mean to read Shakespeare with that sweet, black thing?" Baraka's own language suggests that informality and attention to vernacular are key to this project, an insight Kim F. Hall echoes in her reflections on reading itinerant Shakespeare performance.

[14] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 11–81.

[15] Kalamu ya Salaam, "A Conversation with Amiri Baraka," *Modern American Poetry*, at www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/baraka/salaam.htm, accessed 30 March 2018.

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Even as we pondered whether the study of Shakespeare, race and black America required a new methodology and a more coherently articulated ethics in relation to this work than is offered in our traditional early modern training, that training gave us some common ground for uncovering the vast world of Shakespeare allusion, citation, and play lurking in the black performances, historical records, and artworks brought to the table. As Yim illuminates, for example, nineteenth-century Shakespeare allusions in Hawaii's English- and Hawaiian-language press are multivalent, attesting as much to the entangled histories of Native and African American resistance to oppression as they do to the preferred reading matter of white settler colonialists. In more recent times, as Jessica Walker underscores when she juxtaposes Shylock and professional athlete Colin Kaepernick, Shakespearean drama can help us make sense of the ways in which black protest of injustice has been heard and silenced. As Patricia A. Cahill elucidates in her account of Shakespearean actor and teacher Adrienne McNeil Herndon (1869–1910), to read black history and black cultural productions through the lens of Shakespeare study is to unsettle terms that many now use with surety – racial uplift, domesticity, respectability, etc. – terms that, like Shakespeare's scripts, might have more radical meanings and implications once placed in historical context. Indeed, Emily Weissbourd suggests in her discussion of the legacy of Juan Latino, a black African who became a published poet and the subject of a popular play in Renaissance Spain, that to read black history and black cultural productions through the lens of Shakespeare sometimes requires that we, like the black intellectuals of the early twentieth century whom Weissbourd studies, recognize the need to move *beyond* Shakespeare in order to recognize the powerful alternatives to *Othello* offered by early modern Spanish dramatists. The seminar also asked whether the topic of Shakespeare in black America would permit, or even demand, modes of scholarship undervalued or suspect in the Shakespeare world, particularly coming from scholars often marginalized in the academy. Participants experimented, some for the first time, with genres – like personal experience and memoir – authorized by critical race theory/ethnic studies.

Questions of pedagogy and performance were central to our seminar discussion, which at times squarely focussed on how and why Shakespeare's language serves as a source of authority associated with upper-class elitism. Eric De Barros movingly connects the mobilization of race and authority in both *The Merchant of Venice* and his predominantly white college (PWI) classroom, while Lynn Maxwell suggests that the accumulated cultural authority of Shakespeare is precisely why he remains a powerful presence in a historically black college (HBCU). In contemporary college classrooms, the task of placing him in his vernacular context increasingly becomes more challenging: more work needs to be done about and with teachers engaging with multiple

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Englishes in the classroom, particularly in unpacking the racist/classist assumptions that scholars bring to African American vernacular English (AAVE) and approaching Shakespeare's language with students who already face challenges in the classroom due to a lack of fluency in standard American English. As some papers suggest, an emancipatory pedagogy might involve reimagining the traditional work of performance/theater history as well as the closer collaborations with performers, artists of color, and community members that Patricia Akhimie describes in her work with director José Esquea.

Yet even as innovative teachers embrace new forms of performance and theater history, the distinction between reading Shakespeare and performing Shakespeare remains important. Ambereen Dadabhoy stresses in her account of Keith Hamilton Cobb's one-man play *American Moor* that performance may make extraordinary psychic demands upon Shakespeareans of color, especially when they are required to contend with the gaze of white directors and audience members. Yet, as Dadabhoy urges us to see in Cobb's art, love for Shakespeare's language may help to fuel the most powerful performances and may help actors of color to author and authorize new Shakespearean scripts. Indeed, some recognition of the prodigious quality of that love is suggested by a recurring theme in this collection of essays: people of color repeatedly responding to the racist conditions of the theater industry not by ignoring Shakespeare but by a kind of hyper-engagement. This can be seen in Akhimie's account of José Esquea's 2007 casting of not one but two black actors, one male and one female, as Othello. It can be seen as well in *American Moor*'s joyous declaration, noted by Dadabhoy, that Cobb contains within him not only Othello but also Titania, Hotspur, and Troilus. This wholesale embrace of Shakespeare in fact has a long history in black communities: witness Cahill's reference to Herndon's having played twenty-two characters in her one-woman performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* in Boston in 1904 and Hall's account of a conversation between Frederick Douglass and Harrison, which shows the former finding a sense of freedom in Shakespeare and the latter's determination to be his own one-man Shakespeare show. These performance histories reveal the many ways that black artists, intellectuals and performers, impatient with justice, have created Shakespeares with that sweet "black thing," Shakespeares that speak to their times and their needs.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875819000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Kim F. Hall is the Lucyle Hook Professor of English and Professor of Africana Studies at Barnard College/Columbia University. Her writings include *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (1995) and *Sweet Taste of Empire: Race and Material Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (in production with UPenn Press). Her research for the current project, *Othello Was My Grandfather*: *Shakespeare and Race in the African Diaspora*, is supported by grants from Barnard College, the National Humanities Center, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

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