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Chapter 3

Teaching Shakespeare at an Urban Public Community College: An Equity-Driven Approach

Victoria M. Muñoz

The City University of New York (CUNY) has long been a driver of equity in higher education. Nevertheless, many students fall through the cracks in New York's funding systems. Nearly fifty years have passed since the 1976 financial crisis that eliminated CUNY's free tuition program, in place in various forms since 1847. The state's current, full-tuition Excelsior Scholarship does not grant eligibility to everyone. For instance, it excludes students "who began an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree who had a break in attendance."¹ This policy affects many college students who experience life events that interrupt their schooling. In practice, diversity and inclusion programs designed to recruit minoritized students often fail to adequately address their financial needs.² For example, in a recent interview with David Letterman, American rapper Cardi B recalled that her education at Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY was plagued by financial burdens she carried even as the recipient of a need-based scholarship. The New York State Higher Education Services Corporation, which coordinates need-based financial aid programs, advises students of a number of such "variable costs" that are excluded from financial aid: textbooks, housing, meals, transportation, personal and living expenses.³ In order to shoulder these variable costs, Cardi B found work as a cashier, but

¹ New York State Higher Education Services Corporation (NYS HESC), "Excelsior Scholarship FAQs," <https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/nys-grants-scholarships-awards/the-excelsior-scholarship/excelsior-scholarship-faqs.html> (accessed June 2, 2022).

² See Erin Castro, "Addressing the Conceptual Challenges of Equity Work: A Blueprint for Getting Started," in *Understanding Equity in Community College Practice*, ed. Castro (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 1–10.

³ NYS HESC, "Before You Borrow," <https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/smart-borrowing/before-you-borrow.html> (accessed June 3, 2022). Many CUNY students deal with food and housing insecurity.

her earnings were insufficient. She dropped out of college after a couple of semesters. She concluded that in New York City, “to go to college here, just because they’re giving you financial aid, you still need money.”⁴

Cardi B’s experience points to a largely unacknowledged disconnect between many college students’ experiences of financial precarity, which subsumes all aspects of academic life, and the privileged assumptions that guide American higher education. As a field traditionally aligned to privilege, Shakespeare studies has been especially historically susceptible to enacting policies and practices that tacitly ignore the inequitable lived conditions that students bring to the classroom. This essay contributes to the evolving conversation around inclusive Shakespeare pedagogy and social justice by presenting an equity-centered approach inspired by my own experiences as an assistant professor at Eugenio María de Hostos Community College (hereafter Hostos), an urban public community college within CUNY. Hostos is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with strong ties to Latin American colonial liberation and education movements in the revolutionary tradition of its namesake, the Puerto Rican intellectual, abolitionist, and activist Eugenio María de Hostos (1839–1903).⁵ It is the first college in the United States to be named after a Puerto Rican. As Inmaculada Lara-Bonilla observes, since its founding in 1968, Hostos has embodied “the most long-lasting educational rights gain that Puerto Ricans and other Latinas/os have ever attained on the US mainland.”⁶ As I describe in this essay, it is in this radical educational tradition pioneered by Hostos that my approach to teaching Shakespeare is anchored.

By way of addressing the multi-situational struggles that many students carry with them into the classroom, a familiar mantra at Hostos is *meet students where they are*.⁷ The philosophy outlines

⁴ David Letterman, “Cardi B,” *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman* (Netflix Corporation, 2022).

⁵ Born in Puerto Rico, Eugenio María de Hostos devoted his life to abolishing Spanish colonial rule. A vocal advocate for the Antillean Confederation and slavery’s abolition, he further condemned the abuse of Chinese indentured servants in Perú and promoted women’s educational rights. He founded normal schools for both sexes, a women’s teaching school, a kindergarten, and a laborers’ night school. Currently buried in Santo Domingo, he instructed prior to his death that his remains be removed to Puerto Rico upon its independence.

⁶ Inmaculada Lara-Bonilla, “Crafting a Latina/o Higher Education Rights Discourse in New York: The Founding and ‘Saving’ of Eugenio María de Hostos Community College,” *New York History* 97, no. 2 (2016): 187.

⁷ Professors learn it during their first week of New Faculty Orientation led by Professor Cynthia Jones.

Hostos's institutional mission "to meet the higher educational needs of people from this and similar communities who historically have been excluded from higher education."⁸ Hostos's proud history of student-centered educational activism well embodies CUNY's historic strides in equitable public education at the apogee of late-1960s social justice movements onward. Amid New York's financial crisis of 1976, in fact, Hostos was nearly shut down, but in a historic feat, students and community leaders organized a series of campus occupations to keep its doors open. "Save Hostos" brought together "local grassroots organizing, intense struggle, and a network of complex, multi-directional discourses and alliances," and the college endured.⁹ Today, Hostos continues its equity mission in service to the college's majority-global-majority, predominantly Black and Latinx/e student population, rooted in the multilingual, multicultural, and multinational identities of New York's South Bronx.¹⁰

Erin Castro defines higher education equity as "the idea that students from historically and contemporarily marginalized and minoritized communities have access to what they need in order to be successful."¹¹ Each section of this essay accordingly expresses ways that I meet Hostos students where they are in situations cultural/ideological, financial, and technical so that they may excel in their study of Shakespeare. In reflecting upon my own classroom instruction, this essay also confronts larger institutional forces that disadvantage lower-income students of color in higher education, and it offers practiced pedagogical tools for scholar-educators to negate such exertions of privilege and power. By tackling the unspoken assumptions that inform practices in the traditional Shakespeare classroom and course design, this essay thus proposes edifying changes to higher education.

Teaching and Interrogating at a Distance

There is perhaps no more mentally distressing situation than cultural or ideological alienation from one's subject of study. Shakespeare's

⁸ Hostos Community College, "Our Mission," <https://hostos.cuny.edu/About-Hostos/Our-Mission> (accessed October 20, 2022).

⁹ Lara-Bonilla, "Crafting," 3.

¹⁰ The college began under a dual-language transitional curricular model. Today, classes are taught in English, but lingual *Hispanidad* pervades college life.

¹¹ Castro, "Addressing," 6.

language is especially alienating for students who have not been acquainted with his works or who have otherwise rejected prior impositions of his presumed universality. When that general alienation is further aggravated by forces of social and economic oppression, the challenge of reading Shakespeare can be so personally devastating as to provoke feelings of inadequacy. Systemic factors stemming from an elitist academic monoculture reinforce the idea that Shakespeare is not meant for minoritized students—that college itself is not meant for them. This messaging evinces what Paulo Freire describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) as the “myth of the industriousness of the oppressors and the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed.”¹² Higher education already holds students to inherently racist assessment standards.¹³ Shakespeare’s dominance in the curriculum further reinforces that prejudicial standard by suggesting that implements of academic expression and analysis, which are predicated on content mastery, are only available to the elites.

This is precisely what happens in Shakespeare classrooms where minoritized students are expected to demonstrate mastery of literary content that has historically excluded them and, furthermore, are judged when they fail to meet prejudicial norms. Castro describes this phenomenon as “educational deficit thinking,” which occurs when “institutions, through their policies, practices, language, and thinking, blame individual students for what they perceivably lack.”¹⁴ Orator and writing center pedagogue Neisha-Anne Green offers one remedy for educational deficit thinking in her recollection of an incident from her early days as a tutor working with students at Bronx-based Lehman College, CUNY:

And one day, this student walks in. [. . .] I look at the text the student was reading, and honest to God, I don’t remember what the text was, but I do remember her and the braids she wore, I remember her complexion, and I do remember what I said to her. So, I looked at the text and I asked her to read this paragraph and to “tell me about it in your own words, what you think the author is saying?” and again she’s got nothing. [. . .] I said, “Now look, when this stuff was written, as is most stuff, we weren’t ever in the intended audience, especially this piece. [. . .] We were never expected to learn how to

¹² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 140.

¹³ See Alexandra L. Milsom, “Assessing and Transgressing: On the Racist Origins of Academic Standardization,” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 17, no. 1 (2021): n.p., <http://ncgsjournal.com/issue171/milsom.html>.

¹⁴ Castro, “Addressing,” 9.

read, much less go to college, but you're here. And so even though shit isn't written for you, what you need to do is to take what you know, take what makes you you, take all that stuff and apply it to this work and make it yours."¹⁵

Imagine for a moment that Green's student were reading Shakespeare. How might this student feel if, instead of learning that this standard college reading material was never meant for her, she were told that her struggles resulted from a personal deficit in her college preparation? Might she subsequently conclude that students like her weren't meant for college?

What does it mean for teacher-scholars of Shakespeare that some students must reckon with the fact that this material wasn't written for them, and that, even still, they must struggle to understand it? This is a question that Shakespeare practitioners must themselves reckon with in the classroom, where the goal of all activities and assessments should be to give students equitable footing for success. In order to combat educational deficit thinking, instructors must first acknowledge that minoritized students' struggles with Shakespeare result not from a personal deficit in their preparation, but from the fact that this "shit [wasn't] written" for them, and then to advocate, as Green does, for students to find an entry point to the material in their own experiences. Instructors must meet these students where they are, at an ideological distance from the material, and then structure activities and assessments accordingly.

In my own research, I have personally grappled with Shakespeare's serviceability to myths of British imperial exceptionalism and white saviorism.¹⁶ Trailblazing work by scholars of early modern race such as Kim F. Hall, Ania Loomba, Jonathan Burton, Peter Erickson, Imtiaz Habib, Urvashi Chakravarty, Ayanna Thompson, and Margo Hendricks, representing decades of archival and public-facing scholarship, has uncovered Shakespeare studies' complicity in that racial-imperial project.¹⁷ Such scholars as David Sterling Brown

¹⁵ Neisha-Anne Green, "Moving beyond Alright: And the Emotional Toll of This, My Life Matters Too, in the Writing Center Work," *The Writing Center Journal* 37, no. 1 (2018): 21–22.

¹⁶ See Victoria M. Muñoz, *Spanish Romance in the Battle for Global Supremacy: Tudor and Stuart Black Legends*, Anthem World Epic and Romance (London: Anthem, 2021), esp. 191–201.

¹⁷ Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton, eds., *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall, "A New Scholarly Song': Rereading Early Modern Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (2016): 1–13; Imtiaz

and Arthur L. Little, Jr. have also brought conversations about (early) modern race to bear on Shakespeare's contemporary public standing.¹⁸ In light of this pivotal work, I cannot divorce my own sense of Shakespeare as an adopted idol of Britain's colonial empire from my personal instruction to students who have been directly and indirectly impacted by colonialism's exploitative legacies. Atrocities past and present compel me to reject claims to Shakespeare's universality, a term that has often implied Shakespeare's presumed civilizing effect on students.

In this vein, one of the first issues students and I tackle is the proverbial inescapability of Shakespeare as an uncanny spirit of British imperialism haunting the literary and cultural present. Perhaps no play better encompasses this phenomenon than *Hamlet*. ("Enter ghost."¹⁹) *Hamlet's* outsized influence as an imperial monument erected worldwide reinforces the idea that the professor acquainting students with the play is depositing civilization in them. This phenomenon evinces what Freire describes as the "banking concept of education, which serves the interests of oppression."²⁰ Freire advocates replacing this concept with a collaborative and dialogic one, in which students become knowledge co-creators, critiquing culture through collective discourse taking place against the ideological center. As collaborative dialogists, my students model Green's dictum to take what makes them them—their personal responses to the content—and use that as their entry point to grappling with Shakespeare.²¹

Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Urvashi Chakravarty, "The Renaissance of Race and the Future of Early Modern Race Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 50, no. 1 (2020): 17–24; Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Ayanna Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Margo Hendricks, "Coloring the Past, Considerations on Our Future: RaceB4Race," *New Literary History* 52, no. 3/4 (2021): 365–84.

¹⁸ David Sterling Brown and Arthur L. Little, Jr., "To Teach Shakespeare for Survival: Talking with David Sterling Brown and Arthur L. Little Jr.," *Public Books*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.publicbooks.org/to-teach-shakespeare-for-survival-talking-with-david-sterling-brown-and-arthur-l-little-jr/>; Arthur L. Little, Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ All quotations from Shakespeare derive from the Folger Digital Texts edition. Barbara Mowat et al., *Shakespeare's Plays, Sonnets and Poems* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> (accessed October 25, 2022).

²⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 77.

²¹ Their assessed work comprises low-stakes, participatory, and drafted writing using a process- and growth-based course design.

Students also collaboratively dialogue with other first-person voices that model this kind of resistant interpretation of Shakespeare. One of these is Eugenio María de Hostos, who regarded *Hamlet* not as an episteme of imperial culture, but as an allegory for the anticolonial revolutionary's journey of conscience:

Hamlet [. . .] ponders, in the most profound soliloquy ["To be or not to be—"] [. . .] the tremendous social and moral advantages enjoyed by him who lives in an unquestioning reality and, submitting himself to it, submits himself to the current of life, meeting obstacles perhaps, but undeterred by any of them. He will be shattered when he winds up his dizzy career, but he will have lived, because to live, in the social sense of the word, is to move, to act, to fulfill oneself, diffuse oneself in the common destiny of the current generation.²²

In unpacking Hostos's argument, students discuss how and why Hamlet's journey represents an internal birth of consciousness that turns to revolution. They further consider what it means to devote one's life to righting an "oppressor's wrong" (3.1.79). Nevertheless, some students do not altogether buy Hostos's regard for "irresolute Hamlet"²³ as a model social dissenter. They often cite the stronger model in Fortinbras, who eagerly takes action to avenge his father's death and recover his stolen land, utterly steadfast in the righteousness of his cause. Yet, as we note, Hamlet's journey is perhaps more relatable. His diffident spirit, like the current generation's, is terrified to face the social and personal consequences of confronting injustice, but still he, and we, must act.²⁴

My goal with this exercise is not only to acquaint students with the progressive ideology advocated by the celebrated Puerto Rican activist and intellectual after whom our college is named, but also to demonstrate to them how reading Shakespeare through the lens of one's personal experience, as Hostos does, can yield radically transgressive understanding of his works. As Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi observe, far short of universality, Shakespeare's plays

²² Eugenio María de Hostos, "An Essay on 'Hamlet,'" trans. Mariesta Dodge Howland, in *Eugenio María de Hostos, Promotor of Pan Americanism*, ed. Eugenio Carlos de Hostos (Madrid: Juan Bravo, 1953), 263.

²³ Hostos, "Essay on 'Hamlet,'" 268.

²⁴ "There is in every revolution just such a moment," Hostos remarked. "When the unhappy peoples of Spanish America broke forever the chain which for three centuries had impeded their progress, they were launched against a void, and they were startled; they were confronted by anarchy and they were terrified. [. . .] For the peoples of Spanish America, there was a light—that of progress. They drew from it faith in their destiny, and triumphed." "Essay on 'Hamlet,'" 256.

nonetheless “offer moments of historical transcendence alongside moments of maddeningly mundane expressions of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc.” that gear classroom conversations toward larger questions in our social and public orbit.²⁵ Such moments do not establish that Shakespeare must be taught as part of a general education that all undergraduates must master. They nevertheless give cause and occasion for how Shakespeare should be taught in the service of social justice.

In my classroom, promoting social justice through thoughtful critique of Shakespeare means addressing how inequities shape students’ experience of the modern world, a world that was formed in relief of Shakespeare’s own. This work usually involves analytical comparison of the written text to real performance excerpts. My students have referred to performance as a “living museum” that exhibits Shakespeare to a new audience and brings timely questions about (in)justice and (in)humanity to the fore. For instance, in one activity, students must analyze Makram J. Khoury’s performance of Shylock’s “Hath not / a Jew eyes?” speech from the 2015 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Merchant of Venice* (Polly Findlay, dir.),²⁶ in which he rejects his mistreatment by the Christian Antonio, proclaiming:

He hath disgraced me and
hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses,
mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted
my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—
and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. (3.1.53–57)

Students compare this emotionally charged performance to the “stranger’s case” speech that Shakespeare is believed to have contributed to the play *Sir Thomas More*. In it, More condemns the “mountainish inhumanity” (6.156) of a mob of Londoners committing violence against the immigrant population.²⁷ I ask students, “Is Antonio guilty of ‘mountainish inhumanity’ in his treatment of Shylock?” “Yes!” they usually answer, elaborating their responses with references to modern-day border disputes, violence against

²⁵ Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 7.

²⁶ Royal Shakespeare Company, *The Merchant of Venice*. Polly Findlay 2015 Production, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-merchant-of-venice/past-productions/polly-findlay-2015-production> (accessed October 26, 2022).

²⁷ John Jowett, ed., *Sir Thomas More*, Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Latinx/e immigrants, and the Muslim ban.²⁸ Students typically empathize with Shylock, who has been marginalized and dehumanized, proclaimed an enemy and outsider, and yet forced to bear the brunt of his society's economic needs. They observe that Shylock's Venice seems a lot like modern-day New York City, a metropolis built by banking and corrupt money, even down to the maintenance of a ghetto for a despised underclass. Hence, to the question, "With whom would you like to share Shylock's speech?" a student once replied, "With everyone who hates us, and doesn't understand the struggle."

Understanding—At a Cost

One of the most distressing struggles that minoritized students confront in the classroom is economic insecurity. I observed this firsthand on my first day teaching at Hostos, which is situated within New York's fifteenth congressional district, the poorest in the country.²⁹ At the end of my first class, a student approached me to discuss the textbook selection.

"We are using [X] anthology this term," I related. "It costs twenty dollars new and fifteen dollars used. The second and third editions cost five to ten dollars."

"What if," he said slowly, "all I can afford is zero dollars?"

My face flushed with mortification. When my mother had arrived in this country as a teenager, she could not afford to buy books for school, and she had relied on the New York Public Library, along with her Spanish-English dictionary, to resource her education, including a bachelor's and two master's degrees from CUNY. She often relates how free access to books made the difference for her to ultimately climb out of poverty. I therefore should have anticipated that some students would not be able to buy the textbook. I had failed to recognize their struggle in my course design by placing the burden of access on them rather than on me.³⁰

²⁸ They read Ruben Espinosa's essay, "Shakespeare and Your Mountainish Inhumanity," *The Sundial*, August 20, 2019, <https://medium.com/the-sundial-acmrs/shakespeare-and-your-mountainish-inhumanity-d255474027de>.

²⁹ The poorest congressional district since 2010, NY 15 was fused with wealthier Riverdale starting in 2023.

³⁰ Textbook costs can impose serious hardship on families in the South Bronx; even five dollars will cost some students their next meal.

This initial pedagogical misstep not only inspired me to craft courses with zero textbook costs, and to adopt Open Educational Resources (OER), but also implanted in me a firm awareness of how higher education's traditional structures create and sustain inequities that reinforce a culture of elitism. For years on the academic job market, I fielded the question, "Which Shakespeare textbook do you assign?" as if my answer would demonstrate my belonging to a prestigious inner circle of teacher-scholars of Shakespeare. As a doctoral candidate, I typically assigned the Norton or Bedford editions because these were assigned to me as an undergraduate. But when I shared a dissertation chapter draft with a mentor, this person bristled at my citation from Bedford, writing in a marginal note, "serious scholars cite the Oxford or Cambridge editions." Who makes these rules, anyway?

In my courses, I am free to assign Oxford, Cambridge, Norton, Bedford, or any other Shakespeare edition, but all these editions carry costs. Granted, earlier and used editions of these books are ubiquitous in public and university libraries, but these are bound to library operating hours and course reserve time limits. And why should the under-resourced student have to struggle to access the textbook while the fully resourced student can simply buy the new, full-priced copy from Amazon.com™ with two-day shipping?

These days, I typically assign the Folger Digital Texts edition of Shakespeare's plays. I applaud Folger for offering free versions of its printed plays, along with audio versions and other articles and resources. It is one of the best free editions for undergraduates anywhere. I do wish, however, that Folger Digital Texts could freely offer the notes and glosses that appear in the print and e-book copies. As with virtually any publisher, such tried-and-true tools for comprehension are provided only through the mechanism of purchase, with the material protected under copyright. Timothy Lee Wherry explains that by issuing a new edition of a creative work out of copyright, such as a Shakespeare play, a publisher claims copyright of "the reedited or changed book [. . .] with all the contents, including the text that was in the original publication, protected by a new copyright."³¹ Ample labor by academic publishers, in concert with

³¹ Wherry, *The Librarian's Guide to Intellectual Property in the Digital Age: Copyrights, Patents, and Trademarks* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2002), 23. As Wherry explains, in educational settings, distribution of creative works is subject to "fair use" guidelines, which consider the use's purpose and character, whether for commercial or nonprofit educational purposes; the nature of the copyrighted work; the proportion used; and the effect of use on potential market or value of copyrighted work (18–20).

leading scholars of Shakespeare—many of them insufficiently compensated for their efforts—and investments by funding institutions, frequently goes into the production of new editions of Shakespeare. These factors together determine the cost. Nevertheless, given that notes and glosses significantly aid students’ understanding, doesn’t this also mean that understanding itself is predicated on cost? For students receiving financial aid, which typically doesn’t cover “variable costs” like textbooks, cost and copyright barriers not only imperil their chances of success but also further underscore the idea that, all claims to Shakespeare’s universality notwithstanding, this material is emphatically not meant for them.

How can an elite literature be universal? And if a literature is truly universal, why isn’t it free? When it comes to the Shakespeare textbook industry, the tacit buy-in of faculty, in conjunction with academic institutions and publishers who collectively produce and promote these editions, places minoritized students at odds with the privileged practices informing not only the traditional Shakespeare classroom, but also the college experience itself. There is already a growing movement for open access scholarly books like this volume, *Situating Shakespeare Pedagogy in US Higher Education*. There are moreover several free online editions of Shakespeare’s works, though generally suited for more advanced readers.³² What Shakespeare studies needs, therefore, is more widely available, open access editions of these and other works specifically targeted for undergraduates. Higher education and funding-granting institutions, in cooperation with academic publishers, need to recruit and adequately compensate faculty for producing OER editions of Shakespeare’s works. And faculty at two- and four-year colleges, public and private, must embrace zero-cost materials. Until these measures are implemented, the unspoken divide in the college experience will remain firmly rooted, perceptible especially to those students experiencing the material plight of academic precarity.

³² For example, Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE) offers contextual essays and annotations, but these are generally too complex for beginning study; the line glosses are helpful. University of Victoria, *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, <https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/>. Open Source Shakespeare of George Mason University does not offer notes and glosses: <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/>. The MT Shakespeare and 1914 Oxford Edition do not offer line numbers, word glosses, or footnotes: Jeremy Hylton and MIT, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/>; W. J. Craig, ed. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press: 1914; Bartleby.com, 2000), www.bartleby.com/70/ (all accessed May 31, 2022).

Organize to Revolutionize

Not all students identify with what their peers call “the struggle,” but economic need cuts deeply across CUNY. One moral imperative that must be heeded by the current generation is to confront this historic struggle that minoritized students have had to endure to access a quality education. Students in lower-income communities may lack necessary financial resources to attend college, but they may also lack other pivotal resources like time and attention to devote to their studies. For these students, online learning has been an especially vital, life-changing opportunity that allows them to better balance college with uncompromising work schedules and significant personal and family obligations. And yet, in spite of the equity gains made by this movement in recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, online education is still widely regarded as an albatross to a traditional liberal arts education—the kind where students sit in a circle to discuss a text. Some faculty remain deeply skeptical of remote learning, which ostensibly depersonalizes the learning experience, especially in asynchronous courses.³³ This has not been my personal experience of online education, where asynchronous instruction has promoted sustained student engagement rather than impeded it.³⁴

When CUNY transitioned online in spring 2020, I had originally planned to teach my classes synchronously; it was only when I realized how utterly students’ lives were being shuttered by the pandemic that I shifted modalities. While the bulk of New York’s white-collar workforce was safely isolating at home, many of my students were working full time at the frontlines. A good number did not have personal computers or high-speed Wi-Fi connections. Others were sharing bandwidth with members of their households. Parenting students were educating their children at home while attempting to keep up with their own studies. In light of all this, I determined to teach my courses in an asynchronous and mobile phone-friendly format. Students would be able to access the material on their own time, whenever and wherever their temporal, technical, and

³³ Remote learning technologies are not unproblematic, however. For instance, many learning management systems employ in-built automatic grading programs like SafeAssign™ and Turnitin™, which have drawn criticism for archiving students’ intellectual property to police for plagiarism.

³⁴ Nevertheless, online learning obviously does not suit everyone. Designing curricula to offer a mix of modalities will go a long way to meeting each student where they are.

emotional bandwidth was strongest. This equitable course design did not ultimately eradicate the additional cognitive load students were carrying, but it did work to ensure that they were not immediately disadvantaged by an uncompromising course design.

Given the knottiness of Shakespeare, however, my asynchronous course required ample planning and preparation to keep students informed and engaged through their self-paced work; much of my preparation time involved collating and producing materials. To serve the diverse student body, which also includes many English language learners, I practice differentiated instruction. This means meeting students exactly where they are with appropriate resources, whether they're grappling with vocabulary and plot, looking to visually process the drama, or seeking more advanced theoretical engagement with the material. During the pandemic, I differentiated my instruction to students by augmenting my personally recorded, closed captioned mini-topics lectures³⁵ and other resources with freely available, high-quality learning supplements produced by such venues as the Globe Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Folger Shakespeare Library, British Library, Bodleian Library, National Archives, Library of Congress, National Library of Spain, National Library of Mexico, and PBS Learning. Fortuitously, following CUNY's return to mostly in-person instruction in the 2022 spring, I have been able to adapt this asynchronous sequence for my in-person classes. All the collected lectures, resources, and activities now essentially serve as my Shakespeare course's in-built zero-cost textbook. This positive result indicates one way that the COVID-19 pandemic, during which institutions like mine were training and supporting faculty to implement OER materials and asynchronous instruction, could be leveraged to elicit equitable changes in higher education.

As a result of measures I gradually implemented throughout the pandemic, my Shakespeare course is now more equitable. The work involved has been extensive, but one of the benefits of my working for a teaching-centered institution within the larger research network of CUNY is that pedagogical development has never been undervalued or regarded as some kind of soft academic labor. I have been supported, in the form of reappointment and positive evaluations by my department chair, senior colleagues, and higher administrators, in all the educational initiatives I have undertaken to serve students. Still, I could not have accomplished so much if my work had not also

³⁵ A best practice is to parcel online asynchronous lectures into focused, mini lectures of less than ten minutes.

been compensated and/or counted for tenure. Hence, by far the most extensive support that I have had to innovate my teaching has been my representation by the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), CUNY's employee union. PSC has secured tangible safeguards for faculty like compensated pedagogical development/training and grants for conference travel/research, along with credit load reductions (from 27 to 24 annual credit hours for community college faculty) and course releases for research (24 pre-tenure hours). PSC has also produced invaluable symbolic safeguards in promoting a culture of institutional accountability that affords me considerable security to be able to innovate and experiment in my teaching, even as an untenured professor.

Yet a majority of institutions lack employee unions or other bodies empowered to hold administrations accountable; some institutions altogether bar formal unionization. This can and should change to truly remedy deep-seated inequities in higher education affecting workers and students. As Andy Crow, who participated in the graduate students' unionizing effort at Columbia University, puts it, "unions are democratic in character, [. . .] they are a means to real power, and [. . .] they enable you to turn ideals of justice and equity into material improvements in people's daily lives."³⁶ Our community never forgets that Hostos was once nearly closed by a city that deemed it unworthy of educational investment. But the community organized to protect students and workers, and won. This story, among many across CUNY, animates the union's continued struggle to improve conditions for all.³⁷ Such examples may also spur faculty nationwide to organize to revolutionize the curriculum, beginning with tackling the unspoken inequities built into their own courses.

As proposed in this essay, equity-building has the potential to reform not only the elite discipline of Shakespeare studies, but also the institutional assumptions that structure academic life and praxis. But in order for faculty to be able to meet minoritized students where they are, institutions must also meet faculty where they are. They must come to regard pedagogical development as hard academic labor worthy of investment in the manner Hostos fought for. Likewise, for faculty to teach Shakespeare against his imperialist

³⁶ Andy Crow, "How to Win Your Grad Union," *Politics/Letters Quarterly*, February 27, 2017, <http://quarterly.politicsslashletters.org/how-to-win-your-grad-union/> (accessed June 19, 2022).

³⁷ This legacy informs the currently proposed "New Deal for CUNY." See PSC CUNY, "Fight for Full State Funding of CUNY FY 2023," <https://psc-cuny.org/issues/state-budgetcampaign2022/>.

legacies, they require access to resources that disclose his “living museum” to students’ remaking. And for the Shakespeare curriculum to become more equitable, it must first address the unique situations of minoritized struggle. Then the heavy work of grappling with Shakespeare can begin.