

“Ògún Yè Mo Yè!” Pathways for institutionalizing Black Theater pedagogy and production at historically white universities

by Omiyemi (Artisia) Green
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“Ògún Yè Mo Yè!”

Ògún lives! I live.

E ku O?sè? Ògún! At the time of this writing, it is a day to venerate the Òrì?à of iron, mystic vision, destruction and creation. Ògún, the adaptable, force of will, and road-opening energy, commits to doing difficult but necessary work to bring about transformation. Ògún pursues justice, fairness, and equity in the distribution of resources. As Ògún opens the way, options, opportunity, and expansion becomes possible. Wole Soyinka describes Ògún as “the truth of destructiveness and creativity in acting man;” the one who surmounts “annihilation.”^[1] Practitioners of Ìs?è?s?è? L’agba are known to venerate Ògún and empower themselves through a call and response invocation of “Ògún Yè! Mo Yè!” Ògún lives! I live! Through this potent force, a way will be made.

Ògún—the metaphysical power and display of heart—has seen me through the forge that historically white universities (HWUs) can be for Black faculty. This past decade of my career has been shaped by hard work, trailblazing, radical changes, and indefatigable attempts to make pedagogical and production interventions in the face of systemic and cultural challenges within the Department of Theatre, Speech and Dance (TSD) at William & Mary (W&M). Like Ògún, I have been a tireless proponent for operationalizing the possibilities for Black Theater pedagogy and production informed by the highest possible standards in pedagogy, practice, and spirit. As I reflect on the oríkì epigraph above, Ògún becomes a theory for thinking through and characterizing the means and circumstances through which milestones in Black Theater pedagogy and production have occurred at W&M, as well as a meditation for considering how to chart pathways for Black Theater through systemic challenges in similar settings.

In Yorùbá creation stories it is the strength and dedication of Ògún’s pioneerism which enabled the gods to subsequently travel across the abyss of transition and reunite with humanity. Thus, Ògún is the force and energetic link which bridges the distance between effort and accomplishment. My W&M career has been marked by achievements. I am the first African American to be tenured and promoted in Theatre. Despite systemic challenges I have earned some of W&M’s highest awards for my teaching, research, and service activities and I now serve on the College of Arts & Sciences, Arts Visioning Committee at the invitation of my dean. Pioneerism highlights milestones, but also requires illuminating the context from which the landmarks emerge, and in this case, the labor of predecessors who dared to establish visions of excellence for the successful pedagogy and production of Black Theater.

W&M was founded by James Blair in 1693 with profits of slave labor.^[2] It is the second-oldest university in America and boasts several firsts, theatre related and otherwise. In 1702, W&M students

performed a “pastoral colloquy” for the Royal Governor, the first recorded theatrical performance in America. Adjacent to campus, the first theatre in America—the Play House—was constructed in Williamsburg in 1716, and on the campus proper, the Bray School—the oldest standing schoolhouse in America—educated free and enslaved Black children from 1760-1744. In 1926, W&M became the first liberal arts college in Virginia to offer a “Play Production” course under the instruction of Ms. Althea Hunt, also credited with incepting the dramatic program.[3]

1964 was the earliest attempt to include Black students in mainstage productions.[4] Howard Scammon, directing Saroyan’s *The Time of Your Life*, cast Oscar Blayton, the first Black undergraduate admitted to the college. Blayton returned to the mainstage, under Scammon’s direction, as the Third Madman in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. However, although admitted to the university for study, segregation laws prevented Blayton from residing on campus. Disenchanted, he withdrew in his sophomore year and enrolled in the University of Maryland.

While the college supported extracurricular Black Theater performances in the ‘80s (*Ain’t Misbehavin’* (1980), *For Colored Girls* (1981), the next two decades would see focused attempts by Theatre faculty to draw Black students to the Theatre department as well as the advent of curricular milestones. During his term as department chair Richard Palmer hired Omi Osun Joni L. Jones in 1982. Black Theater, as an institution at W&M, began under her leadership as she “successfully established and directed the [department sponsored] Black Thespian Society.”[5] It was “birthed from the will of the students” and her “desire to build Black institutions.” [6] One of their major public performances included *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited*, performed before Gwendolyn Brooks.[7] However, Jones left for Howard after just one year where “discussions of Africa and the African Diaspora” were “just a natural part of everyday talk.”[8]

Jones also worked with Bruce McConachie on an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, called *Goin’ Home to Freedom*. But “he did not like what he saw,” said Jones.[9] Due to creative differences, McConachie completed the adaptation. In the *Colonial Echo*, Fitzgerald writes, “*Goin’ Home to Freedom* proved to be an all too rare opportunity to appreciate the wealth of black thespian talent at William and Mary.”[10] From 1995-1996, McConachie collaborated with the Grass Roots Theatre Project and Hermine Pinson to collect oral narratives and write *Walk Together Children*; the play explored race relations in Williamsburg during the Civil Rights Movement. Pinson, a creative writer in the English department, would be the first Black book writer produced on the mainstage.

Pinson joined professors Susan Chast and Jacquelyne McLendon, in developing and co-teaching African American Theatre History and Performance. When I took the course as an undergraduate in 1996, I was inspired to attend graduate school for theatre rather than law school as planned. This ideation was further cemented by my participation in DeVaux’s *The Tapestry: A Play Woven in Two*, in my senior year. *The Tapestry* became the first Black play on the mainstage. While meeting with the cast on opening night, DeVaux told us, “You need to be doing what you know in your heart you need to do. In not doing so, you dishonor all of those who came before and showed the way which made it possible for you to choose.” DeVaux affirmed what my own Orí spoke and intuitively introduced me to what would later become the ritual, ancestral, and aesthetic elements in my research to come.

I returned to the “Alma Mater of the Nation” in 2010 as the seventh Black faculty member hired by the department since 1982. In diasporic formations of Ìs?è?s?è? L’agba, seven holds significance for Ògún.

For example, in *Candomblé*, seven symbolizes the “multiplication of *àshe*” in the iron tools found in Ògún’s cauldron, as well as in oríkì such as, “seven iron signs of the god of iron.”^[11] As “the seventh iron,” I returned to my undergraduate kiln with the expressed goal of revitalizing and more importantly, sustaining Black Theater pedagogy and production so it could be engaged on its own terms. The African American Theatre History and Performance course was offered sporadically, not at all, or aspects of it were included in other courses (e.g. Multicultural Theatre, Feminist Theatre, and Theatre and Society in the twentieth Century America). Several Black faculties with varying teaching appointments had come, labored, and left the university: Femi Euba, Martin Fonkijom Fusi, Marvin McAllister, and Jasmin Lambert. Some of these colleagues were former professors and colleagues and I knew some of the circumstances surrounding their departures. Yet, when I opened the doors of Phi Beta Kappa Memorial Hall, I was determined not to be disturbed by ghosts and experiences I had yet to encounter.

And though challenges came, based on my curricular interventions, the TSD curriculum has expanded radically. In collaboration with Africana Studies, the department now offers courses on single author playwrights such as Katori Hall, August Wilson, *Black Approaches to Acting*, survey courses in Post-Racial Theatre, African American Theatre, Black Drama, and a course on theatre and community engagement called *Reimagining Communities*. Two or three of these courses have been in operation every academic year since 2016. However, the milestones in Black Theater production have been a much taller mountain to scale. By the time COVID-19 interrupted formal mainstage production, W&M had produced 366 shows since the founding of the program in 1926. Nine (less than 2.5%) of these shows came from the genre or methodological praxis of African American or Black Theater, respectively. I directed five of these shows, including Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*, the last production of the pre-COVID season. *Gem* represented the first time in the producing history of William & Mary Theatre that a collective of Black and award-winning leadership sat at the helm of a mainstage production. Our Scenographer was Patrice Andrew Davidson, the Scenic Charge Artist was Christopher Cumberbatch (who brought two Black professional scenic painters with him, Charles Mickens and Angel Smith), the Sound Designer was Mahmoud Khan, and the Stage Manager was Shawanna Hall.

Overcoming the challenges of mounting this production demonstrate Ògún’s leadership and capacity to gather the forces in service of hewing passages through chaos.^[12] The first audition pool for *Gem* was shallow despite my efforts to cast a wide net. Five women showed up for two roles and no men auditioned. As a result, the Director of Theatre advised the producer to cancel the show. Subsequently, I proposed an alternative work (for which we could not get the rights). However, although a limited number of Black students initially auditioned, the threatened cancelation of the show caused a stir among them. An Africana Studies major, Ashley Casey, through a cell phone—a modern science of Ògún—spearheaded a casting campaign via a social media app for Black students at William & Mary. One of the messages distributed read:

The theater department already doesn’t believe this can be pulled off because it’s basically an all-black cast of men which hasn’t been done since 2012. We can’t allow this play not to be shown, this is significant to our community and changing the way black theater and approaches to acting are respected here at W&M.

Casey’s leadership encapsulates the dual capacity of Ògún’s destructive/constructiveness. A (true) statement which could negatively impact the department’s reputation, became a productive intervention

which inspired more student participation. What originally was meant to be a cast of seven became twelve, because I cast every student who responded to Casey's advocacy and political labor, and because despite the departments' priority in limiting production opportunities and resources to William & Mary undergraduates, my chair, Laurie Wolf, was willing to extend production opportunities to students of other universities and the community. Thus, I cast a Black alum and a Black theatre major from Christopher Newport University, looking for production opportunities in Black Theater.

As a priest, I cannot help but think that ancestors and *Òrìṣà*, convened and interceded to ensure that a production on the verge of complete "annihilation"—one centered on themes of citizenship, self-rediscovery, and ancestral reconnection—could be reassembled. As a scholar, I recall of Harry Elam's critical assertion that "the spirit of Ogun . . . suffuses and infuses the world of August Wilson."^[13] Thus, I am not surprised that at the height of my own enervation "in the face of forces inimical to individual assertion,"^[14] *Ògún*, interceded, demonstrating that pathways for Black Theater education and production in historically white universities can occur within a humanizing and supportive structural arrangement.

I do not advocate a ritualized manipulation of *Ògún* energy by non-practitioners of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀ L'agba*.^[15] However, *Ògún* as a philosophical concept—the idea of concerted will towards carving a path towards justice, equity, and inclusion—can dismantle "diversity regimes" or "meaning and practices" that fail to "make fundamental changes."^[16] A pathway to institutionalizing Black Theater pedagogy and production cannot be singlehandedly carved by Black faculty, nor can it be done without systemic shifts and resources. While educational theatres reimagine the possibilities for the field and simultaneously determine where to begin in actively and thoughtfully doing the work of equity and inclusion, HWUs looking to engage in sustainable Black Theater pedagogy and production, might reflect on how to create pathways through:

1. **Barriers to student participation:** Sometimes Black students are anxious about being singled out (as Black) in historically white settings. Their exhaustion with being the "representative" in their classes extends to their involvement in the production season. The nature of the play risks labeling the student as political or puts them in the position of having to educate white faculty and students about Blackness. Black students also fear that auditioning is a waste of time as they will be limited to servants and sidekicks and/or will be cast "blindly" with no regard for their race or ethnic status.
2. **Barriers created by how new hires in Black Theater are conceived within the curriculum:** Is the plan to position them primarily at the center of existing courses in the major? Or, will Black Theater courses be featured among major requirements *and* integrated throughout other classes?
3. **Barriers created through lack of understanding:** There is a difference between African American Theatre and Black Theater (see Dominic Taylor's "Don't Call African American Theatre Black Theatre: It's Like Calling a Dog a Cat" as a starting place: <http://massreview.org/node/7537>). Distinguishing between the two means differences in show selection, production methodology, and student learning outcomes. White faculty and students must surrender their tendency to locate and define African American Theatre and Black Theater within their understanding of whiteness and colorism.
4. **Barriers created by show placement within the season:** Forgo limiting Black Theater production to the pressure points of the season (e.g. when the rehearsal period is five weeks or less and/or ghettoizing it within Black History month). First, this is a sure way to earn the distrust of

the students the department hopes to attract as this is an obvious diversity act, unattached to any sustainable effort to institutionalize Black Theater making. Second, if underserved populations are new to the department, more time may be needed for acculturation into departmental practices. Third, in February, the entire campus is ablaze with Black programming and casting may be nearly impossible as students are busy being ambassadors for Blackness.

5. **Barriers created by isolation and a limited talent pool:** Cultivating relationships with theatre departments at HWUs and any nearby HBCUs to leverage resources and talent can prove a productive strategy. Many HWUs suffer from the same maladies: a dearth of Black students, and an even smaller population of those interested in theatre (HBCUs have neither of these challenges). How might universities build pathways that cross among one another in mutually beneficial ways, towards institutionalizing Black Theater and engaging new stakeholders?

Theatre educators limit the range of stories we tell as well as our artistic reach if our student population is not diverse, if our pedagogy and production is obligatory to upholding whiteness, and if our systemic praxis creates barriers to equity and inclusion. May Ògún support our efforts of systemic transformation. Ògún Yè! Ògún lives! May Black Theater pedagogy and production in historically white institutions live too. À??.

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[1] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 28.

[2] Ibram X Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 64.

[3] Althea Hunt, *The William & Mary Theatre: A Chronicle* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1968), xvi.

[4] Howard Scammon, *The William & Mary Theatre* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1978), np.

[5] Ronald L. Jackson and Sonja M. Givens Brown, *Black Pioneers in Communication Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 195.

[6] Joni L. Jones, Personal Interview, Zoom, 17 March 2021.

[7] Jones, Personal Interview, Zoom, 17 March 2021

[8] Ronald L. Jackson and Sonja M. Givens Brown, *Black Pioneers in Communication Research*

(Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 195.

[9] Jones, Personal Interview, Zoom, 17 March, 2021.

[10] William & Mary, *Colonial Echo 1986 Yearbook*, Swem Special Collections (Williamsburg: Graduating Class of 1986, 1986), 88.

[11] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 57.

[12] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 27.

[13] Harry Elam, Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 172.

[14] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 33.

[15] For further reading on Ògún see, Barnes, Sandra, *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[16] James M. Thomas, "Diversity Regimes and Racial Inequality: A Case Study of Diversity University," *Social Currents* 5:2 (2018): 140–56.

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