
**HowlRound
Theatre Commons:
Essays and
Conversations
from the
First Ten Years
(2011-2020)
Lesson Plans**

Decolonizing the
American Theatre

Decolonizing the American Theatre

Tags for Courses

Intro to Theatre Playwriting
Directing Arts Administration
Acting Arts and Equity

Focus Questions

- ▶ What dominant narratives exist in the United States that have shaped our understanding of what storytelling is?
 - ▶ How might decolonizing storytelling unveil our creative capacity?
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Objectives/Goals

- ▶ Students will analyze alternate shapes of storytelling.
 - ▶ Students will interrogate three articles relating to decolonization in theatre.
 - ▶ Students will analyze dominant narratives and values in United States history and theatre.
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Room Setup

Hang three large poster-sized papers on the wall with enough space for students to access each poster comfortably. (If your classroom is virtual, use the JamBoard function instead.)

Materials

Bag of assorted household objects (for example, a whisk, a spoon, a candle, yarn, cloth, spatula, sunglasses), three sheets of poster paper, markers. On each poster, prep one of these topics and questions ahead of time:

Poster #1: What dominant narratives exist in the United States that have shaped our understanding of this country?

Poster #2: How might decentering Shakespeare in American theatre unveil this country's creative capacity? Or, what happens if we decenter Shakespeare in the American theatre?

Poster #3: What values exist in your family or community that you wish to see reflected in the American theatre?

Check-In

Invite participants to share their name, pronouns ([what's this?](#)), and one question the reading sparked for them.

1 min per participant

Pre-Reading

- ▶ *Decolonizing Creation Processes by Reclaiming Narratives*
by Mary Kathryn Nagle and Robert Goodwin
 - ▶ *Interrogating the Shakespeare System* | by Madeline Sayet
 - ▶ *Why Hamilton is Not the Revolution You Think It Is* | by James McMaster
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Pre-Assignment

Read the assigned articles ahead of time and come ready to discuss.

Engagement: Object/Metaphor (25 min)

Instructions

Assemble a large assortment of objects where all students can see them. (If your classroom is virtual, create a slide with pictures of assorted objects.) In an agreed-upon order, invite students to go one-by-one and select an object and explain its significance in response to the prompt.

Think about stories you saw, heard, or read growing up. These can be from TV, movies, books, music videos, or oral stories. Choose a story that you're super familiar with or that you feel comfortable enough to explain.

Prompt

Students put the object back after sharing their explanation. Take turns with each person sharing an object and response until the activity is complete.

You are invited to select an object and explain: How does this object model or reflect that story?

Group Work: Interrogating Dominant Narratives (20 min)

This activity should be non-verbal so as to allow participants to read and write with focus. Playing instrumental music in the background is optional.

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1. Provide time for participants to access each poster and record a response. Participants may also “affirm” other responses by placing a checkmark or underline at or below resonant responses.
2. After everyone has had the opportunity to record a response on each poster, return to the big group and share out each group's findings. Spend time reflecting with the whole group on each poster.

Helpful Hints

- ▶ Notice which responses have the most “heat” (repeated, affirmed, reiterated).
- ▶ Notice where there is dissonance in each set of responses.
- ▶ Notice what questions come up from these responses.

Individual Work: Solo Reflection (7 min)

This is an individual reflection activity. Each student can return to their chairs and grab three sticky notes and a writing utensil.

Note: sticky notes can be written anonymously/without names.

Prompt

- ▶ **Sticky Note #1:**
Which dominant narratives do you want to see left behind?
- ▶ **Sticky Note #2:**
Which narratives do you want to uplift, affirm, or make more visible?
- ▶ **Sticky Note #3:**
Write down one question you are left with following the group activity.

Closing (20 min)

Invite participants to post their sticky notes on the board and take a different person's question from the board to share aloud (Sticky Note #3). Go around the room and have each person verbally share the question that was written by their peer.

Following the close of class, the facilitator should take the remaining sticky notes (#1 and #2) from the board for use in future discussions.

Extension: Coding Opportunities

Place all the sticky notes from the previous class (Post-Its #1 and #2), back on the board, or in a place they are accessible by all. Invite participants to work collaboratively to organize the reflections into categories. (Note: if the class is larger than 30 students, invite students up in groups to take a turn at categorizing). Students should feel empowered to categorize based on shared ideas across sticky notes, commonalities, differences, themes, or discoveries. Once the sticky note groups are established, title each category.

Assign each category of sticky notes to a group of students. Invite students to use the reflections to plan a season, write a play or story, or collaborate on a creative response. Participants should use the categories to identify gaps and opportunities in the American theatre that can inform future work.

Decolonizing the American Theatre

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