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The Changing Face of Shakespeare

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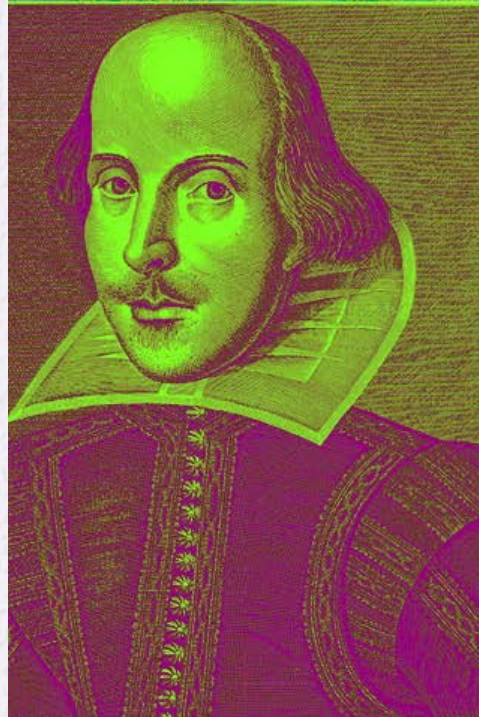
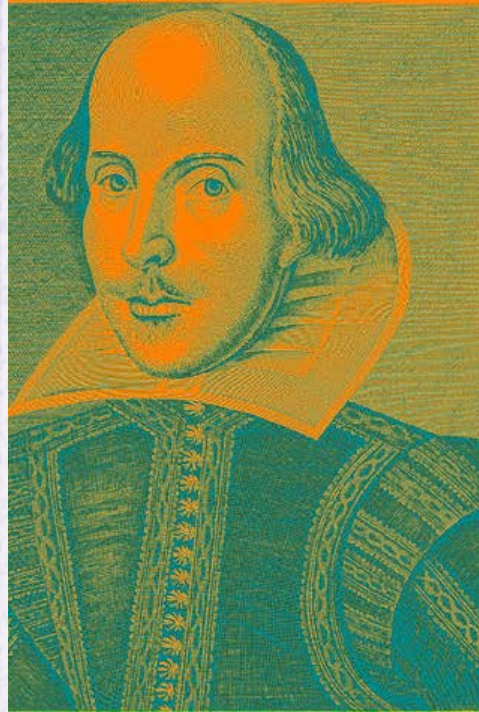
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“The Changing Face of Shakespeare”

Florida International University
October 13-15, 2016

Ruben Espinosa
University of Texas, El Paso



“He was not of an age, but for all time!”

–Ben Jonson

To engage with the idea of Shakespeare’s enduring relevance, the predictable place to begin is by invoking Ben Jonson’s famous declaration of Shakespeare’s timelessness. But to take such an idea for granted – that is, to assume that Shakespeare is timeless and universally relevant – is a disservice to a wide array of readers and consumers of Shakespeare. Ayanna Thompson, for example, argues in *Passing Strange*, “most people will assume that an avowal of Shakespeare’s universality is universally applicable, encompassing, timeless, and, well, good. The tensions arise, however, when race enters into Shakespeare’s universe.” When attending to racial difference in Shakespeare, Thompson explains, “students often abandon their espousals of universality for those of historical specificity: that these portraits are products of Shakespeare’s age.” In these situations, Shakespeare’s universality gives way to particularity, and thus the issue of race is comfortably couched in historical circumstances. However, it is in the tensions and discomforts surrounding race where the important conversations about Shakespeare’s value to our understanding of race and ethnicity begin. (And you lucky folks have Ayanna there with you, so you can ask her all about this!)

“A New Scholarly Song”

In “‘A New Scholarly Song’: Rereading Early Modern Race,” the introductory essay for the recent *Shakespeare Quarterly* (67.1) issue on race and Shakespeare, Kim Hall and Peter Erickson scrutinize recent studies on Shakespeare’s universality (namely, Kiernan Ryan’s *Shakespeare’s Universality*) because it often results in the “erasure of race.” Hall and Erickson write, “Believing in universality makes it unnecessary to consider race seriously because Shakespeare has already demonstrated how to solve the problem.” The truth is, the problem persists, and it is imperative, then, that we invite students to scrutinize this issue while attuned to their own culture, identity, and place in society.

Where to begin?

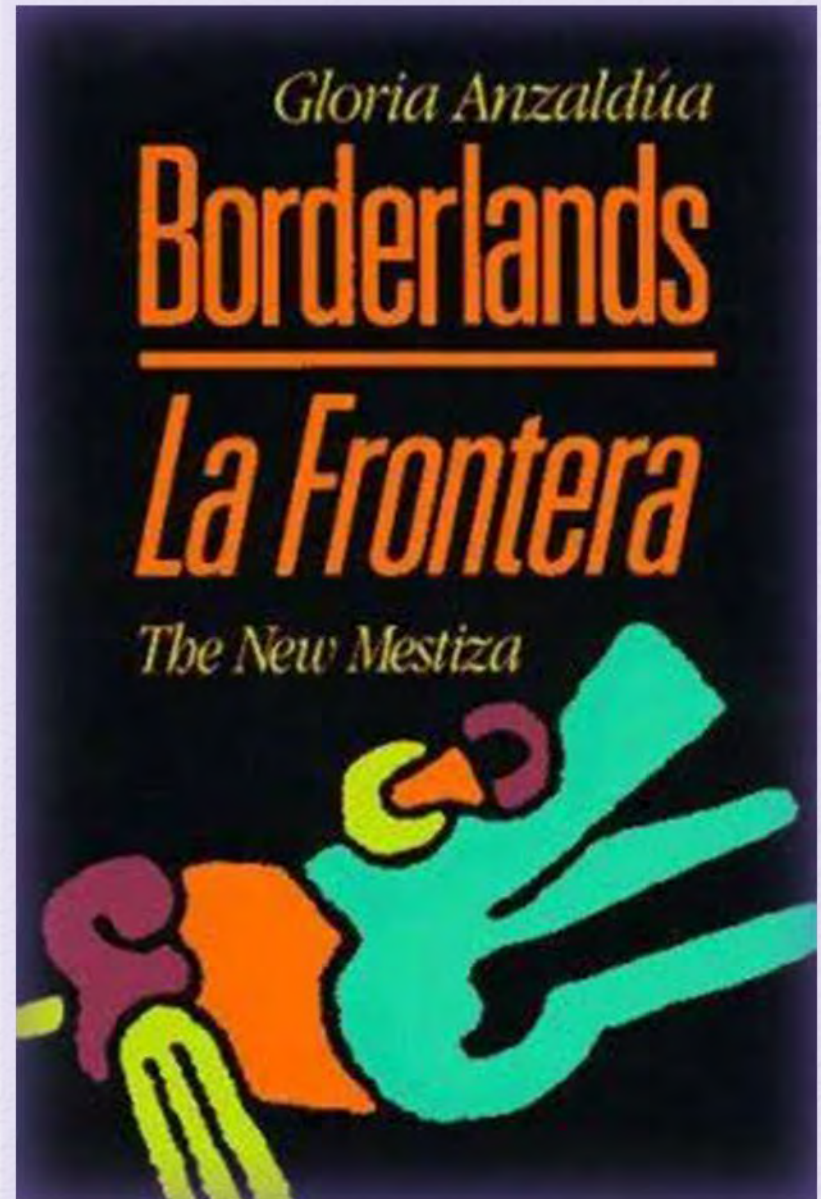
For my students at the University of Texas at El Paso – an HSI located on the U.S. Mexico border, with an 80% Latinx population – making the global local is key. We often begin by scrutinizing Chicanx identity, and for this I employ theory, cultural studies, and popular culture before arriving at Shakespeare’s cultural relevance on the border.

Here, I’ll offer brief excerpts from the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, María Teresa de la Piedra and Juan Guerra, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, and Arturo Islas to offer entry points to discussing how apprehensions surrounding linguistic, bi-national, and bi-cultural identities might be engaged before attending to Shakespeare.



Gloria Anzaldúa,
Borderlands/La Frontera

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (81)



María Teresa de la Piedra and Juan C. Guerra
“The Literacy Practices of Tranfronterizos
in a Multilingual World,” *International
Journal of Bilingual Education and
Bilingualism* 15:6, 627-34.

The border is a 2000 miles fringe between the USA and Mexico, where multiple identities and experiences convene in, across, on, and around an imaginary line that separates two seemingly separate linguistic and cultural sites that meld into one another. . . . Cities along both sides of the border have for generations been home for large numbers of tranfronterizos (border crossers) who belong to families in and are residents of both nations. Tranfronterizos live their lives in two languages as they travel continuously back and forth between Mexican and USA locales and live their everyday lives on both sides of the border. The frequent movement of bodies, experiences, language practices, and texts makes the border a prime space to observe the fluidity of languages, literacy practices, and knowledge across national borders. Border regions are also privileged places to observe the ‘multiscalar processes’ of globalization, the interplay between the local and the global. However, the border is also a site where tensions surrounding linguistic diversity and biliteracy come to the fore. (628)



From “He Has Gone to be with the Women” in *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*

The narrator, Juan Carlos, an El Pasoan, describes meeting Javier, a native of Ciudad Juárez:

“His voice was deep and friendly. It was nice – his accent. I wanted to keep talking. But there was never anything to say when it mattered to say so much to say something. ‘You like newspapers,’ he said.

‘Yes’

‘They’re in the past. An they’re all lies.’

I help up my newspaper. ‘It’s not *El Diario*.’

‘Are you one of those?’

I looked into his smiling face. ‘One of those?’

He laughed. ‘One of those Mexicans who hates other Mexicans?’

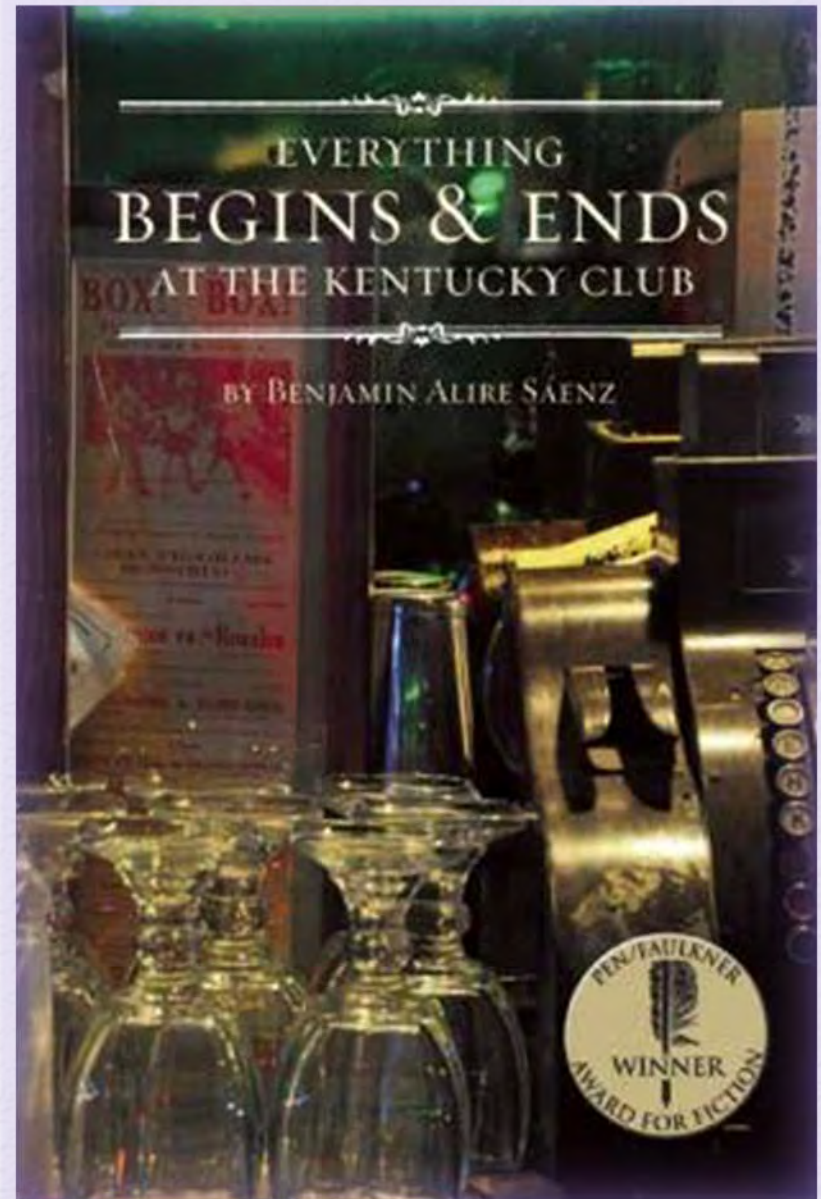
‘No. I don’t suffer from that disease.’

‘What do you suffer from?’

I didn’t say anything. I looked into his chocolate eyes. I think I was looking for *suffering*.

‘You’re not really Mexican,’ he said.

‘Not Mexican. Not American. Fucked. That’s the disease I suffer from.’” (13)



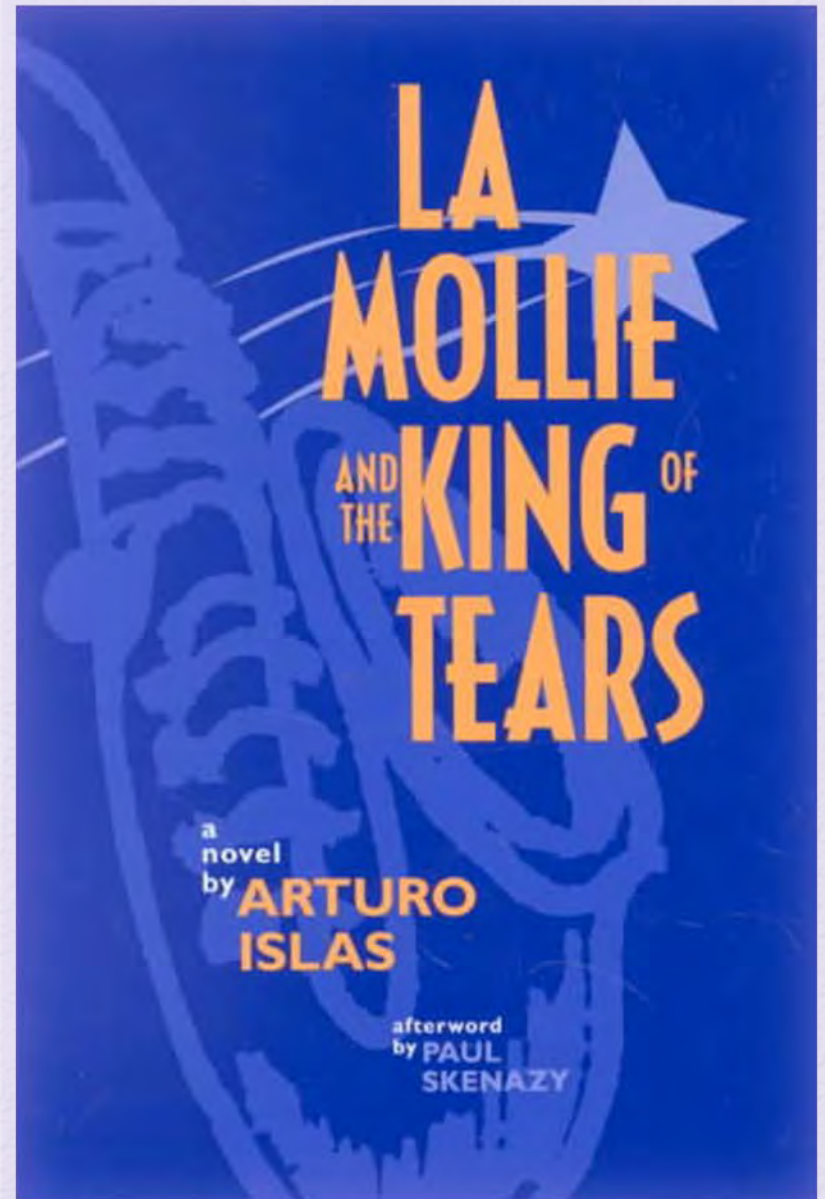
Benjamin Alire Sáenz – author of the Pen/Faulkner winning collection, *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club* -- in an interview with Joseph Rodriguez (“‘A riot in the heart’: A Conversation with Author Benjamin Alire Sáenz,” *Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature* 1.1: 254-75):

“This is the situation: Mexicans hate us for not being Mexican enough; Americans hate us for not being American enough. We don’t know English; we don’t know Spanish. We’re disloyal to the United States; we’ve betrayed Mexico. It goes on and on. Although I am proud of my ethnic culture, history, and identity, I am every bit as American as the guy watching Fox News in Indiana.”



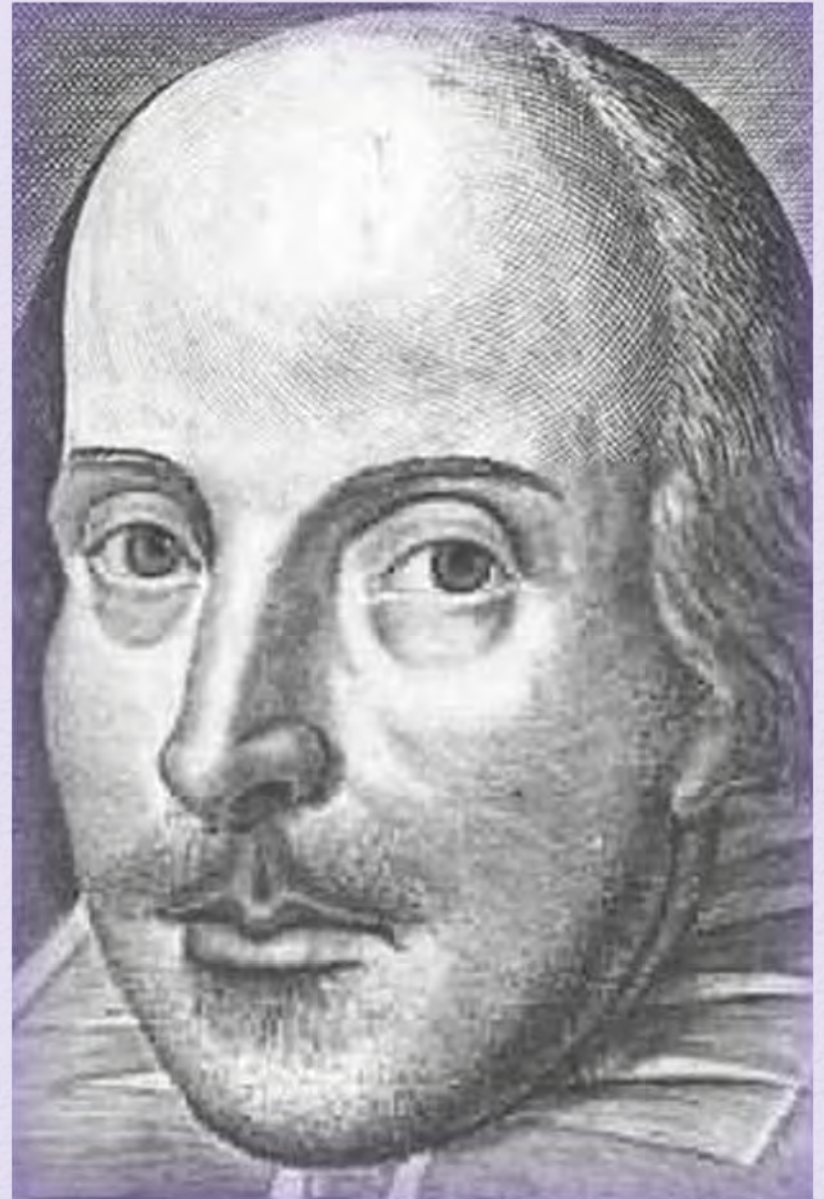
Arturo Islas, *La Mollie and the King of Tears* – In this novel, the narrator, Louie Mendoza, draws on Shakespeare, both implicitly and explicitly, throughout his long narrative. Often reflecting on early encounters with Shakespeare, Louie lingers on the way his teacher, Ms. Harper, presented the bard. Here is one such example:

“She even showed us that Chandos portrait of Shakespeare, which she said probably wasn’t what the guy really looked like. Too bad, cause he looks kinda like a Chicano in that painting, man” (159).



Will the real Shakespeare please stand up?

Undoubtedly, Ms. Harper's perception of Shakespeare is a bit more traditional than the Chandos rendition she shows her students. However, to pause and consider what Shakespeare looks like, and on whose terms, is to consider the larger implications behind the act of defining him. Much is lost in the process of delineating what Shakespeare should look and sound like. Do we all have access to Shakespeare, and – if so – how do we negotiate his iconic status and standing as one of the greatest influences on the English language?



Be like me. It feels good.

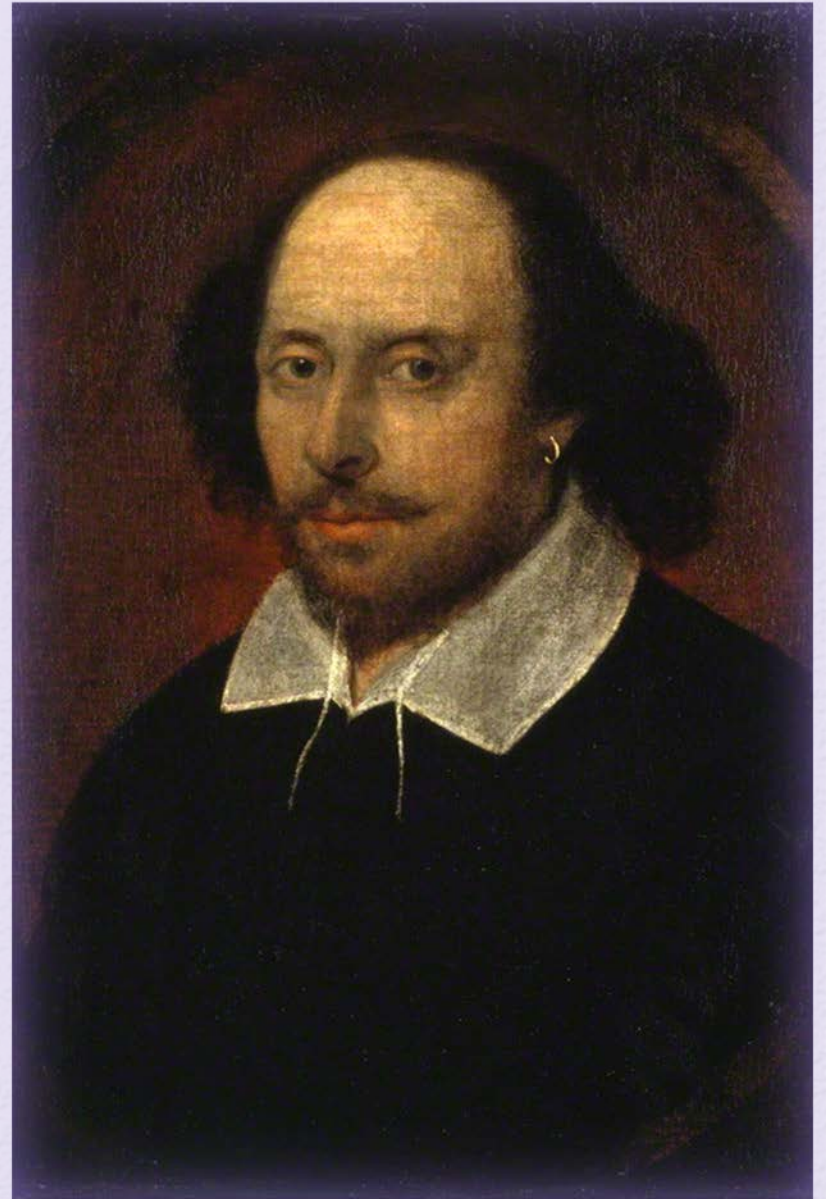
Former London Mayor Boris Johnson penned a piece in *The Telegraph* (8 March 2015) to explain how he found himself seeing red (his words) upon learning that many immigrants in London have satellite access to television programs in their respective languages (they must be watching “Turkish cookery,” he says, “or Blind Date in Serbo-Croat”). He goes on to write, “The question is: what sort of society do we want – a society that is integrated, or one that is balkanised? Do we let people live and work in mutually segregated sub-cultures? Or do we insist on the primacy of the English language?” He advocates for the latter, and explains why: “the final reason why I think we should insist on English is unashamedly emotional, atavistic, and culturally conservative. This is our language, the language of Shakespeare, the King James Bible, the language that has been spoken in London for centuries; and in the face of the vast migratory influx we have seen, we must insist on English if we are to have any hope of eupenic absorption and assimilation.”



Chicano Shakespeare

But I, too, think Shakespeare looks kinda like a Chicano.

For so long, we've been told how Shakespeare should look, sound, and what he should mean that our own perception of his meaning is often lost before it even begins to take shape. Shaping that meaning with borderland experiences in mind is an important place for my students to begin.



Shakespeare on the Border

By leading students to consider how notions of race, ethnicity, immigration, assimilation, alterity, and xenophobia are registered in plays as varied as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, to name a few, they are attuned to the way these issues inform their own lived experiences on the border and beyond. This cross-historical approach situates Shakespeare in our historical moment. They, then, are invited to create Shakespeare as they see fit.



The Assignment: iMovie Production

Students collaborate to perform and film a rendition of a scene from any of the Shakespeare plays we cover during the semester. These films should not be more than five minutes in length, should employ some of Shakespeare's original dialogue, and should find a way to speak to contemporary/regional social issues. Beyond these guidelines, students have absolute creative license for the production of these films. We meet with IT during the semester to learn about iMovie, and students have access to technology through the University Library. All students submit a written "reflection" about the cultural significance of their production (600 words), and the groups present their film near the end of the semester (see Schedule below). Students are encouraged to upload videos on YouTube for ease of access and to contribute to the ongoing making of Shakespeare.

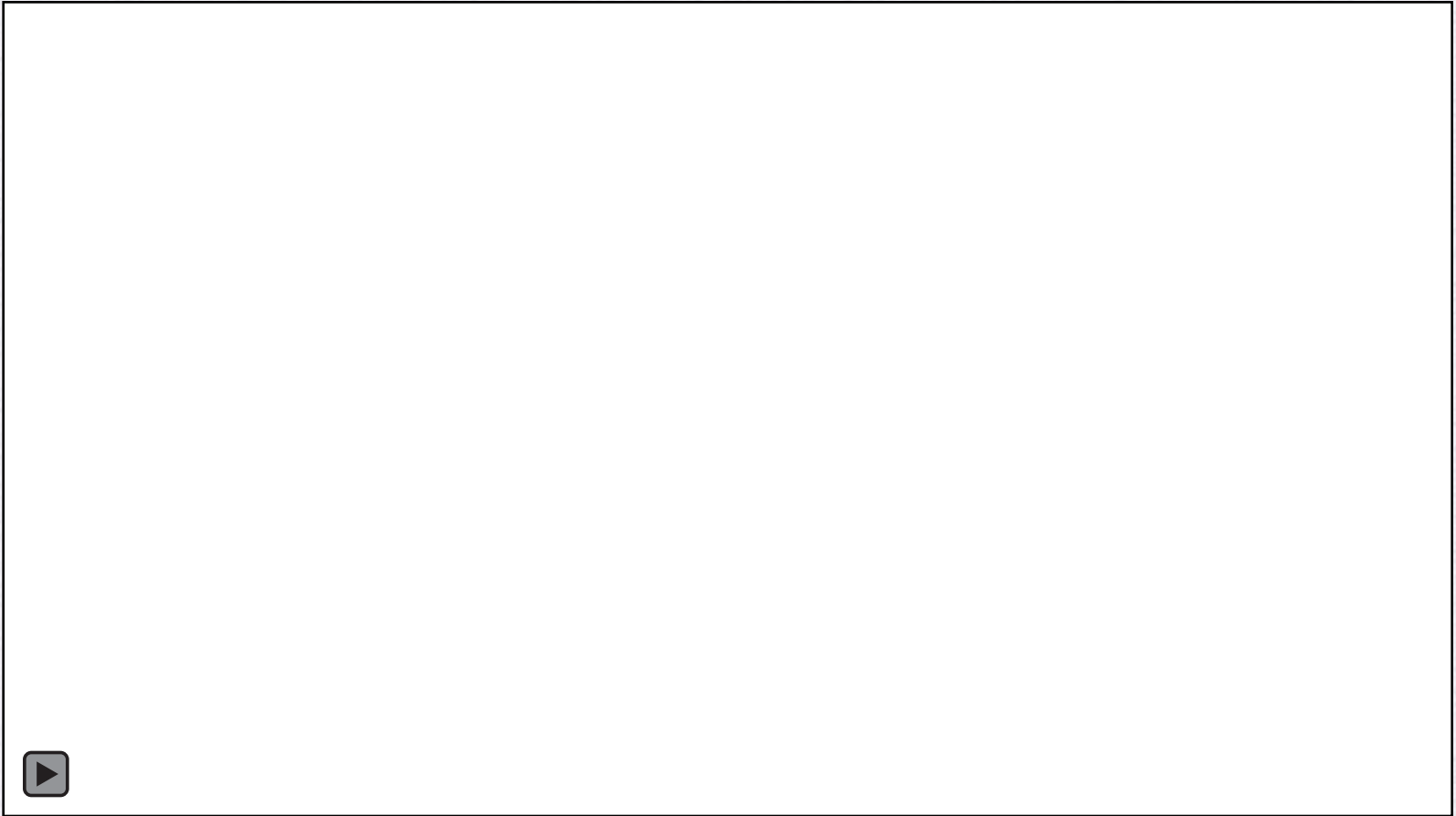
Sample Videos

(Both videos can be found on YouTube)

I offer two examples, then, of videos that my students have produced. Not surprisingly, when students engage local energies of the borderlands, the issue of language often comes up – often to varied success.

The first video, “La Muerte de Ofelia,” is less polished than the second, but it engages interesting aspects of linguistic identity on the border. This video adapts Ophelia’s suicide in *Hamlet*, and imagines her feeling of alienation as stemming not from the pressures of patriarchal expectations and/or a disengaged lover, but instead from an absence of knowledge of the Spanish language. Three things bother the Ofelia of these students’ imaginations: death, deficiency of the Spanish language, and redundancy. The role of language – both in its knowledge and in its use – is put on par with the desire to die.

“La Muerte de Ofelia” (2012)



“La Muerte de Ofelia”

As you can see, the role that race and ethnicity play in this video is also of significance, as the student playing Ofelia is the sole white actor. Her estrangement not only stems from being a monolingual English speaker living in the borderland, but also from her view of journalistic inadequacies when it comes to use of language. Language is central.

Shakespeare’s relevance is explicitly engaged in the closing moments of the video, as is the perception of language in these borderlands. Ofelia’s parents are imagined to lack an understanding of Shakespeare, and people in the borderland community – the police officers of Ofelia’s imagination – have incomplete command of the English language. She is isolated in her English linguistic identity, but it is hardly seen as a deficit, as she – even in suicide – gets the last laugh at those who do not know nor completely understand Shakespeare or his English language.

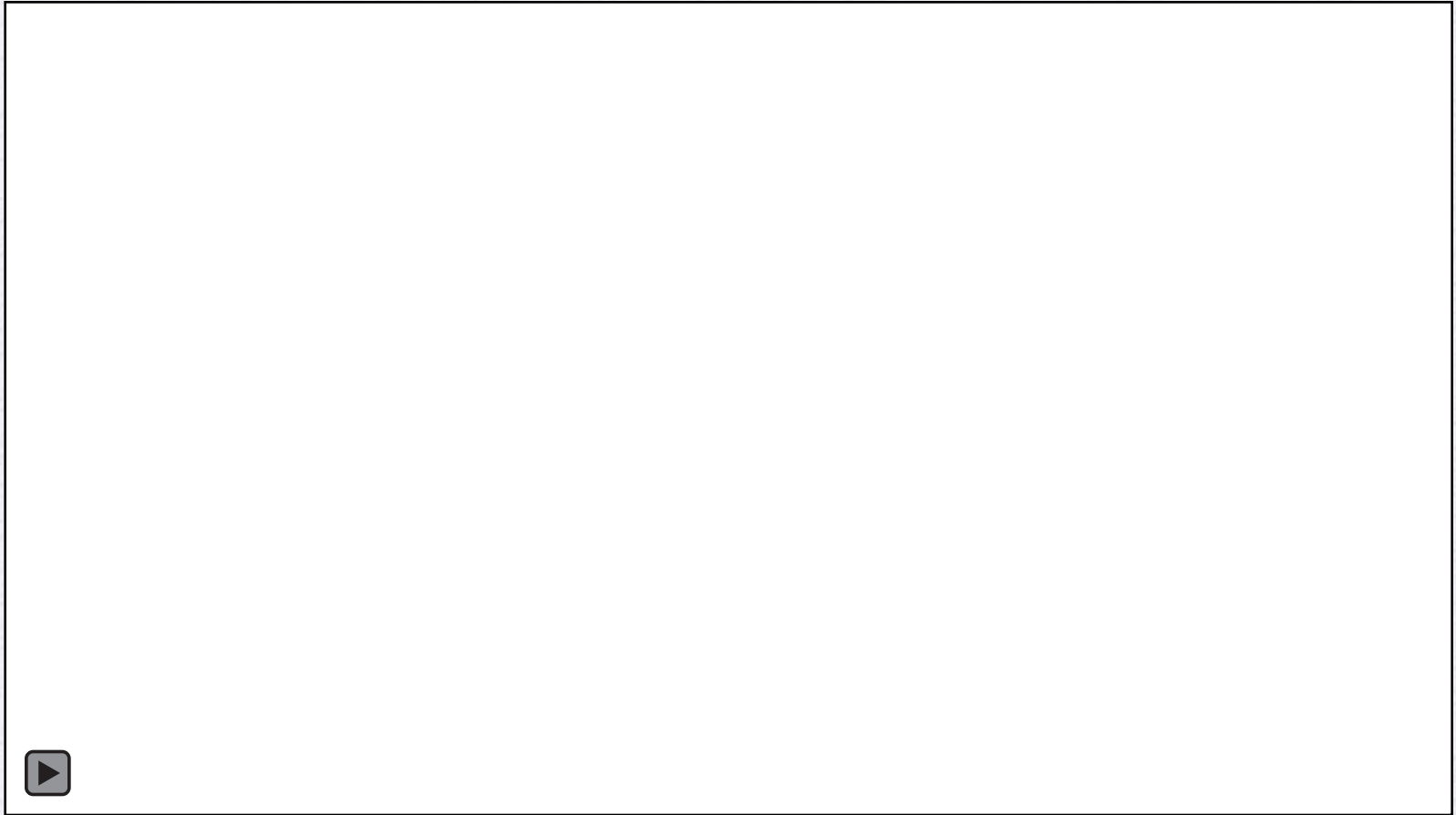
Of importance to note, I think, is that Andres, the young man who wrote the script is, himself, a *transfronterizo* – a student who straddles life on both sides of the border. His unique engagement with Shakespeare’s language and perceived capital is – from where I stand – pretty compelling.

Video 2: “Foul and Fair”

The second production, “Foul and Fair,” employs material from *Macbeth*, and was produced at the tail-end of the worst period of cartel violence in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico (for a period of time, the average was eight murders per day). These students – two Latino, bilingual actors, and one Latina actor who spoke only English – drew on an actual incident in Juarez where sixteen people (mostly teenagers) were gunned down at a house party. Because some of our students are *transfronterizos*, the exposure to this type of consistent violence often resulted in PTSD. This video, then, utilizes the haunting violence of *Macbeth* and its ghosts, and the language of inhumanity, to explore the almost surreal experience of traversing from the violence in Juarez to attending school at UTEP.

As in the first video, though, the issue of language also enters the equation in this production as a means to explore just how alienated Mexican nationals might feel in America, even in a city that is primarily Mexican American. The video opens with a Mexican-American student standing on the UTEP campus and looking out at the *colonias* of Juarez in the near distance, speaking the words of Shakespeare in Spanish (which are translated for the viewer on the screen): “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.”

“Foul and Fair” (2015)



“Foul and Fair”

For me, the use of Spanish throughout is provocative, as Shakespeare’s poetic voice is not lost in the Spanish words, but instead carries a distinct valence for this borderland perspective. More importantly, the deliberate decision to translate only Shakespeare and to keep the classroom experience for English-only / Spanish-only speakers is keen, for the issue of language carries with it an alienating perspective that must weigh on so many students who reside in *la frontera*.

Independent of each other, and years apart, these students on the border locate in Shakespeare culturally relevant energies. What strikes me as most compelling is that they use the bard – they engage with the literature and translate the language of Shakespeare, of the King James Bible, no less – to address their experiences with the linguistic and cultural divide within their own borderlands. They are confident users and makers of Shakespeare.

Coda

In his recent, stunning work, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates lingers on the implications of Saul Bellow's question, "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?" (2015, 43). Given the exclusionary and dispossessing nature of the question, Coates explores his internalization of attitudes like Bellow's. But influenced by Ralph Wiley's confident response to Bellow, "Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus," Coates ultimately recognizes that "Bellow is no closer to Tolstoy than I was to Nzinga" (2015, 56). The sentiment is certainly material to Shakespeare. No one, and this certainly includes Boris Johnson, is closer to Shakespeare than anyone else, and it is this particular issue of legacy – the legacy Shakespeare leaves, and the legacy being made – that infuses Latinx engagement with Shakespeare with so much value. In the every changing demographic of America, one where Latinxs are quickly moving to become the majority, the face of Shakespeare, too, will undoubtedly change.

Thank You!

Thanks to Vernon Dickson and Jamie Sutton not only for their gracious invitation to participate in this wonderful project (I'm only sorry I could not be there in person), but also for finding value in this project. I am also humbled to be included alongside the likes of Ayanna Thompson and Carla Della Gatta, who, I am sure, are knocking your socks off.

Should you have any questions, comments, and/or suggestions, please don't hesitate to contact me via email at respinosa2@utep.edu

Thank you so much for your time!